

MEKONG UPDATE



VOLUME 3, NUMBER 2, APRIL - JUNE 2000

ISSN 1441-8355

The Australian Mekong Resource Centre was established at the University of Sydney in 1997 to promote research, discussion and debate on development and environment issues in the Mekong Region. The AMRC is a focal point for information, dialogue and activities in support of an equitable and sustainable development path for the Mekong Region.

The **Mekong Update** provides:

- news of current developments in the region
- news of research activities
- regular information on Mekong- related conferences and events in Australia
- an update on the activities of the Centre

Subscription Details

Subscription to the **Mekong Update** is AUS\$15 for four issues. Regular information on the AMRC's publications and electronic summary updates are also provided.

Publication Schedule

The **Mekong Update** is published quarterly. Issues are released in: January, April, July and October each year. Submissions are welcome. Please contact the Centre for details.

Contact Details

Australian Mekong Resource Centre
c/- Division of Geography
School of Geosciences (F09)
University of Sydney
NSW 2006 Australia
Tel: +61-2-9351 7796
Fax: +61-2-9351 3644
Email: mekong@geography.usyd.edu.au
Web: <http://www.usyd.edu.au/su/geography/mekong>

EDITORIAL *Scale in the Mekong*

In this issue of Mekong Update we take a somewhat abstract departure from our usual focus on a specific debate or institution in the Mekong Region. In organising the issue around the idea of scale, we take a critical look at three main aspects:

- the significance of the level at which decisions are made and influence wielded
- the size of project as a material influence on its relevance to intended beneficiaries
- different perspectives on development based on the position of the observer

Development debates in the Mekong Region often revolve around top-down versus bottom-up directions of initiative. They also pit gigantism in the form of large-scale dams and other infrastructure managed by bureaucratic or, increasingly, corporate actors, against small-scale projects managed by those who directly benefit from them. While in many instances debates are unnecessarily polarised, there are nevertheless real differences in approach reflecting real alternatives with real implications in terms of outcomes for local people and environments.

A current Community Aid Abroad campaign leaflet shows a Cambodian fisherman with his catch and suggests the following:

Give him a fish and he'll eat for a day.
Support his fishing livelihood and he'll eat forever
Destroy the river he lives on and what was the point?

This campaign message encapsulates a history of evolving non-governmental development discourse. The original aphorism was that if you teach a man to fish, he will eat for ever. The CAA leaflet has superseded the patronising notion that an Australian development agency has better fishing skills than local fishers in a developing country, if not the implication that only men fish. It has moved further to vent the frustration of dealing only in the local arena when decisions taken at higher levels impact on livelihoods, reflecting the types of development that have brought NGOs increasingly into the policy advocacy arena.

The world has moved on from the days when the main concern about central authority was that it neglected local communities. Today, inter-penetration of local and wider agendas in a physically and economically connected world means that the main focus is on terms of engagement. The scale at which development agendas are set is a crucial point of contestation. No longer is the local exclusively concerned with the small-scale initiative, leaving far-away government and development agencies to decide on the big projects. Big projects impact on the local, and powerful agencies set the policy agenda impacting on the smallest scale intervention. Scale is thus about influence, hence about power over events that affect one's own and other people's lives, livelihoods and environments.

Inside . . . • Points of View from Fiona Miller and Michael Simon on scale • Profile of a small CAA project in Laos • News on the People's Forum in Chiang Mai • WCD reports on Pak Mun • Upcoming Events

NEWS FROM THE REGION

People's Forum Challenges ADB

The Manila-based Asian Development Bank held its 33rd Annual General Meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in early May (4-8 May). This significant international event has been countered by protests organised by human rights activists, environmentalists, farmers' organisations, labour organisations, etc. in order to draw attention to the disastrous social and environmental outcomes of ADB sponsored development projects and to force the ADB to listen to those most affected by its policies. Two major issues arising from ADB loans are: the mega-infrastructure and hydropower projects which impact severely upon local communities and ecosystems; and the pressures upon the



Protesters make symbolic gesture by burning ADB flag

Thai government to privatise state enterprises and make other changes which adversely affect the lives of the poor and marginalised (Yindee Lertcharoenchok, 2000).

The protests in Chiang Mai have taken two forms. Firstly, a People's Forum was held which coincided with the ADB Meeting. On the first day it was attended by some 700 people from South Asia and elsewhere (TERRA, 2000). Secondly, there has been street action. On Saturday, 6 May, more than 4,000 villagers and NGO representatives marched through Chiang Mai to the Chiang Mai University where the opening session of the ADB AGM was being staged. They presented a petition that demanded cessation of all ADB loans to Thailand (Pahlman, 2000). On the Monday the protest outside the ADB Meeting ended peacefully with one of the speakers saying: "The Thai government is like a phee baan [ghost in the house] and the ADB like a phee paa [ghost outside the house]. Thai people are now in a very tough situation due to both ghosts cooperating to eat us silently" (Kamol Sukin, 2000)

Yindee Lertcharoenchok, "Anti-globalisation activists to answer the call", The Nation, 15 Apr 2000
TERRA, "People's Forum 2000", 3 May 2000

Pahlman, C. "ADB street activities", 6 May 2000

Kamol Sukin, "ADB protest concludes peacefully", The Nation, 9 May 2000

"People's Forum 2000" website <http://jump.to/adbinthaili Falls Dam Accident>

WCD Reports on Pak Mun

The World Commission on Dams has completed its study of the development effectiveness of Pak Mun Dam. Its main findings are summarised in the following table:

Promised/predicted by EGAT/World Bank	Realised
Cost: \$135m	Cost: \$233m
Mitigation and compensation: \$11m	Mitigation and compensation: \$32m
Dry season HEP: 136 MW	Dry season HEP: 40 MW
Economic Internal Rate of Return (EIRR): 12%	Economic Internal Rate of Return (EIRR): 5%
Irrigation: 29,500 ha	Irrigation: none
Displaced families: 241 households	Displaced families: 1700 households
Reservoir fisheries: at least 100kg/ha/yr	Reservoir fisheries: 10kg/ha/yr
Natural fisheries: fish ladder, first for a Mekong dam	Natural fisheries: fish ladder ineffective; 169 of 265 species upstream of dam disappeared

The report can be found at <http://www.dams.org/docs/th_final_execsumm.pdf>

Affected people are pressing for the dam to be opened to allow upstream fish migration during the early wet season migration from May to July.

Yali Falls Dam Accident

The new Yali Falls dam on the upper Se San river, which flows from Vietnam into Cambodia, was reported to have discharged a large volume of water in early March, flooding three districts in the Cambodian province of Ratanakiri, killing at least three people and flooding hundreds of farms.

The Se San is an important river for the people of Ratanakiri, and its flooding has the potential to affect the freshwater fishery, which would have an added impact on the livelihood of people in this remote province. Until recently, Tonle Se San has had relatively slight flooding influence on the surrounding plains because of sloping topography. However, three floods occurred in the wet season of 1996. Cambodian government officials believe the operation of the Yali Falls hydro-electric dam in Vietnam, completed in 1995, has caused the flooding, but cannot establish an effective flood warning system for villagers or compensation for flood victims due to cross-border miscommunication. The Cambodian government has called for the Mekong River Commission (MRC), an intergovernmental organisation, to look into the situation.

The Yali Falls dam and initial generating plant (due for comple-

tion this year) are part of the Yali Project, which is the first of a succession of four hydropower projects planned for the Se San basin in Vietnam. To add to this, the ADB looks to develop three potential hydropower sites on the Se San in Cambodia. Mekong Watch of Japan has commented that this disaster should be regarded as a crucial lesson for future dam developments.

Agence France Presse, "Three Cambodians drown, farms submerged, after Vietnam dam opened", 4 Mar 2000

AMRN, "Cross-border flooding in northeast Cambodia", Mar 2000

Anti-dams Activism

World Bank lending for large dams is in decline, partly due to the rise of anti-dam movements worldwide. These movements are reacting to the effects of large dams on people, communities and small-scale farming systems. There has been a number of campaigns in Asia to demand compensation and reparation from the World Bank.

In India the World Bank was forced to withdraw from the Narmada Dam project by grass-roots action. Thailand has witnessed anti-dam protests too. In March 800 villagers walked for 8 days in protest from Rasi Salai Dam to Sri Sake Province, a distance of some 40 kilometres. Their campaign aimed to decommission the dam and to increase public awareness about salinization problems created by the dam.

Elswhere in Thailand activists recently held river rituals to draw attention to the devastation of fishing villages along the Mun River in Ubol Ratchathani, as a result of the construction of the Pak Mun Dam ten years ago (see article below). More than 3,000 people attended to perform the Sueb Chata Maenam, which is a modern version of a traditional river fertility ceremony.

IRN Briefing Paper, "When the rivers run dry: the World Bank, dams and the quest for reparations", Apr 2000

SEARIN, "800 villagers rally to decommission the Rasi Salai dam", 14 Mar 2000

Prasittiporn Kan-Onsri, "Rituals and rivers", Bangkok Post, 4 April 2000

Nantiya Tangwisutijit & Pennapa Hongthong, "Activists fish for solutions to conflict over Pak Mool dam", Bangkok Post, 21 Apr 2000

NEWS FROM THE CENTRE

New Format for Mekong Update

Following a reader survey, the ARMC has decided to adopt a new format for the *Mekong Update* beginning with the third quarterly issue (i.e. vol.3, no.3). The Update will remain thematic as in the past, however the new format will replace the profiles and the points of view with an invited lead article on a given development issue in the Mekong Region. Two respondents will then be invited to critique, question or provide a comparative case study to this lead article. Our hope is that this format will provide the opportunity for a dialogue and more analytical presentation of key development issues by key observers in the

Mekong Region. The title of the *Mekong Update* will be changed to *Mekong Update and Dialogue*.

In keeping with the past the *Mekong Update* will continue to provide a source of news from the Mekong region, Australia and the Centre. Profiles will continue to be produced, but will be a student-based initiative that will be posted on our ever-growing website. It is also a hope that as the new *Update* is developed, we will be able to accommodate a reader contributions section for feedback on past issues

New Administrators at the AMRC

After advertising the new full time Administrator position in March the AMRC has opted for a job share arrangement with the appointment of Doug Bailey and Helen Gunning-Stevenson. Doug Bailey comes to us from recent work with the Association for Research and Environmental Aid Ltd. (AREA) and Quaker Service Australia (QSA) where he worked on projects dealing with conservation and sustainable agro-ecosystems in Southeast Asia. Doug has a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Sydney with his area of research focusing on Indonesia. He has also had a long-standing affiliation with the permaculture movement. Helen recently completed three years with Community Aid Abroad in their Sydney office. She has a M.Phil. in Anthropology from the University of London where she studied the impact of education on traditional culture in Northern Thailand. Both bring to the AMRC experience in issues that closely relate to the Mekong Region and the interests of the Centre.

March also saw the departure and arrival of AMRC Associates. Premrudee (Eang) Daoroung finished her MSc and returned to Thailand. She will however continue to be closely affiliated with the AMRC through TERRA in Bangkok. In her place we welcome Georgina Houghton who begins her PhD looking at community forestry and participation in Vietnam. Georgina comes to us from Vietnam where she has lived and worked for the last 10 years. Simon Bush also commenced his PhD after finishing up as the interim Administrator. His PhD work will investigate the linkages between aquaculture and wildcapture fisheries in the Mekong basin.

Accounting for Development Conference

On June 23-24 leading researchers, members of NGO's, politicians and ADB representatives will gather at the University of Sydney to explore the linkages between Australia, development in the Mekong Region and the ADB.

Registrations for the Conference are now open. Please see our website www.usyd.edu.au/su/geography/mekong/conference or call the AMRC on 9351 7796 to secure your place.

Teachers, journalists, students and interested members of the public are also invited to attend a special 'primer session' on the day before the Conference to explore some of the broader issues. Please register before 16 June.

AMRC Annual Report 1999

This report, which details the Centre's activities for 1999, is now available on request from the AMRC

Phone: (02) 9351 7796

Email: mekong@geography.usyd.edu.au

AUSTRALIAN MEKONG NEWS

Australian Company buys up Mining Concern

Australian-based mining company, Oxiana, has acquired a major share (80%) of Rio-Tinto's Sepon copper and gold exploration project in Savannakhet province in south-eastern Laos. (Oxiana also operates in the Philippines and Cyprus.) First gold production is expected to be in 2002 and first copper in 2003. It is planned to use conventional open-cut methods of mining. The capital cost of the project is estimated at US\$153 million, excluding working capital and finance costs. The life of the mine is expected to be 14 years. Average annual gold production is predicted at 120,000 oz.; that for copper should be 40,000 tons.

Oxiana maintains that the environmental impact of the project will be modest. They believe that water contamination due to spillage or accidental discharge is, potentially, the main environmental issue. But the Sepon copper-gold mining operation raises concerns in the light of the well-publicised cyanide spill in Romania by the Australian gold-miner, Esmeralda. In the case of Esmeralda, the UN found that there were design deficiencies and poor risk management planning. The Mineral Policy Institute has stated that Australian mining companies are prone to operate by two different sets of standards: one (more stringent) for Australia and another for elsewhere.

Australian Stock Exchange and Media Release, "Oxiana to acquire a major copper-gold resource", 20 Dec 1999

Market News Publishing, "Oxiana Resources NL - Sepon Mine, Laos", 18 Apr 2000

Mineral Policy Institute, "Esmeralda and the United Nations", 20 Apr 2000

Oxiana website

www.oxiana.com.au

PROFILE

Community Aid Abroad, or Oxfam Australia, is one of the best known non-governmental development organisations working both at the community and policy levels. While any NGO straddling these levels faces certain dilemmas and tensions, CAA maintains an internal and external dialogue that links the local with the global. Below we profile a small scale CAA project in southern Laos.

Disaster Preparedness Capacity Building Program - Laos

At first look constructing around 7000 earthenware jars might seem to be a questionable development activity. And yet on closer examination the merits of this low cost, locally produced and controlled initiative can be the difference between families going hungry for long periods each year, and actually having enough food to feed everyone the year round.

With funding from AusAID, Community Aid Abroad's Disaster Preparedness Capacity Building program in Saravan and SeKong provinces identifies and implements simple, yet effective strategies to help marginal communities prepare for the hard times. Unfortunately, for many subsistence or semi subsistence communities the vagaries of rainfall, river flow and pestilence can lead to loss of expected food sources. This shortfall can come about via a range of factors—be it the impact of unseasonal flooding wiping out river-side gardens, or repeated years of low rainfall or pestilence impacting on rice yields.

On the outskirts of Attapeu town in southern Laos, CAA has contracted a number of villagers to produce simple clay coil pots or jars to store food against less plentiful times. These jars are the product of family labour - with boys, girls and men helping out in different stages of the production. Clay is collected locally from along the banks of the Xe Kaman River and brought back to be stored in cool areas under the elevated wooden houses. It is kept moist under plastic and cloth and worked into short coils when needed.

The throwing of the pots involves one person turning the wheel by hand and the potter quickly assembling the coils into a jar shape. Once the shape is established the coils are then smoothed over to ensure they are waterproof and airtight. Small decorations are then applied and the jars left to be air dried before firing at a later point. The design is that used throughout this region for water and food jars and similar designs can be seen in every household in this area. However, families who have to work fields and forests daily for subsistence survival can not often prioritise the time and energy spent making these jars. As such, in providing these jars as part of the integrated food security program whole communities are able to better plan for the future, planning for harder times and reducing their dependency on external inputs of assistance.

For more information on this and similar projects please contact:
Community Aid Abroad
Email: michaels@caa.org.au
Website: www.caa.org.au/

UPCOMING EVENTS

Conferences, Seminars and Forums

International Symposium II on Montane Mainland Southeast Asia (MMSEA)-Governance in the Natural and Cultural Landscape

1-5 July 2000, Chiang Mai, Thailand

World Resources Institute's Resources Policy Support Initiative (REPSI) is co-sponsoring the symposium and is also helping to lead a session on devolution.

Contact the principal organizers, Drs Uraivan Tan-kim-yong and Jureerat Thomas, at asia@loxinfo.co.th for more information.

International Workshop and Symposium

The Beginning of the 21st Century: Endorsing Regional Autonomy, Understanding Local Cultures, Strengthening National Integration

1-4 August 2000, Indonesia

Research Center, Husanuddin University, Makassar, South Sulawesi

The symposium seeks to promote a more comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of local societies and cultures in a time of increasing regional autonomy in Indonesia.

For more information contact the Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia, Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Indonesia, Depok 16424, Indonesia.

Ph 021 78881032, FAX: 021 78887749,

Email: antrop@centrin.net.id

Chao Phraya Delta Conference. "Historical Development, Dynamics and Challenges of Thailand's Rice Bowl".

12-14 December, 2000, Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand

Website: <http://std.cpc.ku.ac.th/delta/conf/home.htm>

Ninth International Conference of the Greening of Industry Network. "Sustainability at the Millennium: Globalization, Competitiveness and the Public Trust."

21-25, January 2001, Bangkok, Thailand

Hosted by GIN-Asia. Call for Participation and Presentations.

Please note that proposals are due June 1, 2000.

The GIN Coordinators:

Somporn Kamolsiripichaiporn GIN-Asia@chula.ac.th

Theo de Bruijn/Ellis Immerzeel greening@cstm.utwente.nl

Kurt Fischer greening@clarku.edu

Websites: <http://www.eric.chula.ac.th/GIN-Asia/>

<http://www.greeningofindustry.org>

The events listed above are changed with each issue of Mekong Update. For a complete list of upcoming events please go to our website at www.usyd.edu.au/su/geography/mekong/Documents/Events/ For submission of new events please contact the AMRC Administrator at mekong@geography.usyd.edu.au

POINTS OF VIEW

Politics and Practicalities of Scale

The following points of view on the importance of scale deal with two important questions. The first article, by former AMRC administrator Fiona Miller, looks at scale in terms of the level at which development agendas are set. The second article, by Community Aid Abroad's Mekong Advocacy Coordinator, Michael Simon, shows how important it is to work at the local level, but also the necessity of linking localities with one another and to wider questions of rights over resources and to other concerns that require a "scaling up".

The Contested Politics of Scale in the Mekong Region, Fiona Miller

Challenging the Global Scale

Increasingly debates regarding the nature of development have focused on the global scale. The growing dissatisfaction with global economic processes and the institutions that define these processes has been powerfully expressed in recent times by the public protests of an eclectic mix of social justice groups in Seattle and Washington DC. We can be certain that this will result in a new onslaught of language by the targets of their dissatisfaction, the global institutions of the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, that elaborately re-articulates the concerns expressed by these disparate social justice groups in a way that seeks to further maintain the institutions' powerful positions. A continuation of the elaborate discourse these institutions generate will further see a dramatic redefinition of the meanings of basic principles in an attempt to stress just how democratic, accountable, locally-grounded and participatory the institutions really are. But it is the social and environmental implications of the interventions of these global actors at the local scale that reveals the false nature of their discourse.

Constructing the Region

Against the backdrop provided by this debate at the global scale we can see in the Mekong how the regional scale has taken on greater significance since the subsiding of Cold War conflict in the late 1980s. Actors such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) through the Greater Mekong Sub-region program, have increasingly penetrated the national and local scales through the setting of economic and natural resource development agendas and other interventions. Debate regarding the costs and benefits of the regional development model promoted by these institutions promises to become more contested and elaborate as the ADB and the MRC more vigorously seek to redefine themselves as 'progressive, participatory and poverty-focused modern development institutions'.

Yet the ways in which these institutions, and others who share their objectives and institutional characteristics, define the parameters by which local communities are incorporated into the regional scale, economically and socially, demonstrates how their form of engagement with local people is set by outside interests rather than local people themselves.

Local Engagement

Development projects currently on the regional development agenda and receiving investment, whether they be regional electricity grids, dams, roads, or 'good governance' schemes, are articulated in a way that stresses the economic efficiency of large-scale interventions possible only through regional cooperation. There is a certain economic efficiency in the way the usual suspects of development consultants are able to consistently acquire contracts that define, assess and implement these projects, yet ways in which these interventions result in an appropriate disbursement of debt-laden finances in accordance with local peoples' needs and aspirations is highly contested. Regional development has come to define the common good for all local people in the region (Wyatt, 1999). Yet the local social and environmental implications of the development that is being promoted has the potential to undermine regional cooperation by accelerating resource competition and through the inequality inherent in the spatial distribution of development costs and benefits.

Beyond the realms of discourse, the claims of economic efficiency and economic growth through regional cooperation, there are material processes occurring in the context of actual development projects that greatly impact on people's lives. The spaces provided for local people to determine development agendas at regional and national scales are limited, highly constructed and laden with pre-determined outcomes that represent the interests of other actors. The energies placed on development discourse at this regional scale, whether by proponents or opponents, can often obscure the fact that these regional interventions are very much grounded in the local scale through their impacts on people's realities and environments, in the same way a focus on impressive national rice exports can obscure local food security problems.

The same concerns expressed in the protests in Seattle and Washington regarding the undemocratic nature and lack of accountability of global economic actors can also be directed at regional actors (who are joined by the same global actors) in the countries of the Mekong. Regional decision making processes are highly undemocratic and unaccountable for the far-reaching consequences they have for local people and environments. The current tools of assessment and consultation - the main windows available for local people to directly engage with global and regional actors - are useless in the hands of the consultants who apply them, and provide inadequate mechanisms for local people to express their own concerns and aspirations. This space constructs a reactive role for local communities, reactive to plans, agendas and policies defined elsewhere. The full range of development options, responsive to local needs, is never properly investigated.

Representing the Local

The representation of local people and their needs and wants is a crucial aspect of the politics of scale in the Mekong. Processes of consultation, participation and impact assessment are employed by global and regional development actors, including development banks, multilateral and bilateral development agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to represent 'the local' in development discourse and projects.

Debates about contentious development interventions, such as

dams, have seen local people and the representation of their experiences and needs taken to scales beyond their everyday lives. International Banks, and certain NGOs, draw on their own understanding of local people's wants and concerns in the debates about potential and actual impacts of particular interventions in a manner that is often flawed, disingenuous and highly unaccountable. Taking such debates to scales where local people are represented in abstract ways by others rather than by themselves, or their accountable representatives, where they have no control over how their interests are represented and for what purposes their 'interests' are employed, is characteristic of the manner in which the 'local' is manipulated by actors operating at other scales.

Spaces for Local Agendas

The struggle over the spaces for local people to determine their own futures and development paths is an ongoing one in the Mekong Region, as elsewhere. The inter-penetration of the local in broader scales, where appropriate, in a manner whereby local people set the agenda and represent their own interests is one way the politics of scale can be reinvigorated to overturn the processes whereby global and regional actors define, represent and impact on the local. A redefinition of the rules of engagement of local people with processes, whether social, economic or ecological, operating at the national, regional and global scales by local people themselves is necessary if the current power relations affecting development in the region are to be effectively challenged.

References

- Herod. in Crump, Jeff R. and Christopher D. Merrett. Scales of Struggle: Economic Restructuring in the U.S. Midwest. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 1998; 88(3), p. 499.
- Wyatt, Andrew. (1999) "Where is the Collective Good in Private Infrastructure? The case of the Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Sub-Region Cooperation Program in Lao P.D.R." Paper presented at the Institute of Australian Geographers National Conference, University of Sydney, 1999.

Fiona Miller is a PhD student carrying out research on water resources management in the Mekong Delta. She has been the AMRC Administrator in the past. Fiona has also worked for RIAP and spent two years in Vietnam as an Australian volunteer. She can be contacted at:

*Division of Geography, University of Sydney
E-Mail: fiona@mail.usyd.edu.au*

Small scale interventions can have a big impact, Michael Simon

For many communities in Stung Treng province in northeastern Cambodia fish are a vital component of the staple diet - sitting on a par with rice. The Mekong River and its tributaries, the source of the majority of fish catch, are the lifeblood of many communities in these provinces - providing not only food but also the prime means of transport and access to markets, education, and health services. People's lives are integrally linked to the seasonal ebb and flow of the river, and to the seasonal migration of fish up and down the river.

However, over the last ten years there has been a massive drop in the numbers and types of fish being caught in these provinces. This has impacted heavily on communities, both on their subsistence needs and for the small amounts of income they could make from the sale of fish to local and regional markets. This decline is the result of a number of factors, but two of the key determinants are the introduction of large-scale commercial fishing and the use of illegal fishing techniques such as dynamiting and electric shock.

Community Aid Abroad works with small, often isolated, villages in this area. An important part of this work is the bringing together of these communities with local government officials and the police to come up with agreed management principles and approaches for the river and its fisheries. The program is an extension of a successful AusAID supported initiative looking at food security in neighbouring Kratie province that has been operating since the mid 1990s. The program quite deliberately chooses to work at the very micro level, a decision informed by the analysis that it is at this level that long-term gains could be made in successful management, through immediate, relatively simple and low cost solutions.

Community Aid Abroad's approach has focused on the rights and livelihoods of local communities. The starting point has been talking with villagers about their fisheries, and collectively identifying the key issues and priorities for their management. The consistent message arising from this process is that people are aware of the problems and the impact on the environment, and are keen to work to address them, but need some support.

Community management - small scale management; an important first step

While talking with the villagers, Community Aid Abroad is also in dialogue with local government officials on the same issues. They identified the same problems with the fisheries and saw the role CAA could play as one of facilitator - bringing government and villagers together to solve the problems. Village meetings are held with the participation of government, NGO representatives and police. Together, they identify what fishing methods and quantities are allowable. Signs are erected on the riverbank outlining the rules and regulations that the village adheres to. The backing of the provincial fisheries department and the local police is recognised and helps in the implementation of the law. This program has seen a marked decrease in illegal fishing, and the re-vitalisation of fish stocks.

But what about the national level?

One of the key reasons behind the decision to work on small scale, village level interventions was that while the Cambodian Government had a relatively good law at the national level, it was not being implemented consistently, and many of the activities occurring around its fringes were acting at cross purposes to its intentions. A common issue is the lack of resources and policy support being provided to provincial and district level departments - leaving them with no capacity to enforce the laws. And all too often decisions that are made centrally do not recognise management approaches at the local level, and in cases such as the allocation of commercial fishing concessions, can often override rights and programs that are happening lower down the government chain.

As our Cambodian staff have identified "If we worked at a national level, say to help the government to implement the Fisheries Law, we could have spent a lot of money and it might not have worked. Working with the local communities has been a lot more effective."

The CAA program has been dedicated to linking the small-scale interventions at the village community level together. The aim is to have common management approaches for neighbouring villages, and to extend this up and down the river, with the aspiration to extend the management program up to the Laos border, and linking with fisheries management communities there. But to do this effectively there needs to be a sharing of the success of these programs with other districts and provinces. Running awareness raising workshops, and skills exchanges has been one way to begin this necessary process of cross fertilisation.

CAA Cambodian staff have also pointed out that: "The community law is recognised first at the village level, then by the district and provincial authorities. We bring the provincial level officials to come and work with us, to go into the villages. We work with the Fisheries Office, Agriculture Office and the Rural Development Office at a provincial level. There is strong support of the community laws at all these levels."

The big picture

However, both the government and CAA understand that if these initiatives are to be sustained there is a need to make the next step, to "scale up". Without policy support and recognition from national government departments these local, district and provincial interventions can be too easily undermined. The necessary scaling up is really about sharing the lessons learnt, and in trying to advocate for support for this type of approach in other resource management areas as well. There is recognition that by working on the small scale it is possible to have a lasting impact on the bigger resource issues. But also, that there is little point in doing this unless there is a whole systems understanding of the river, the Mekong basin, its fisheries and the rights of those people who live there.

Michael Simon is Advocacy Coordinator at Community Aid Abroad. He is manager of a campaign looking at development in the Mekong and the role of the Asian Development Bank. He can be contacted at:

Community Aid Abroad,

156 George Street

Fitzroy VIC 3065

Tel : 03 9289 9444

E-Mail: michael@caa.org.au

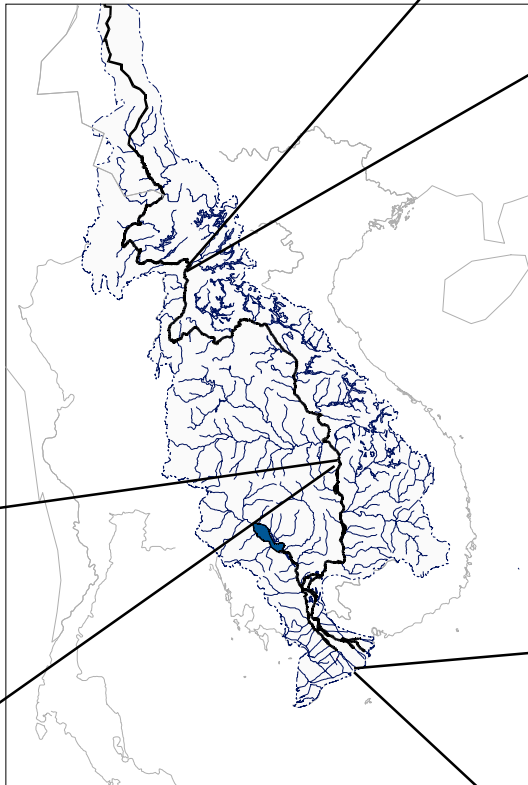
MEKONG MAPS

Mekong Maps looks at two scales of ecosystem:

- **the entire Mekong Basin covering some 795,000 sq.km.**
- **local agro-ecosystems**

Regional Scale: Mekong Basin

This is an ecosystem both conceptually and by virtue of its practically felt inter-relationships. The ADB has stated that “the Mekong river is an integrated system such that the impact from development in one area may be felt throughout the entire system, and rational economic-cum-environmental development planning must take this into account.” (cited by IDA at World Commission on Dams, Hanoi Hearing, Feb 2000)



Highland Swidden Gardens

At their most complex these polyculture gardens mimic the structure of rainforest (ie.they are modelled on a natural ecosystem). Nutrients are recycled by nitrogen-fixing leguminous species, by tree root uptake of nutrients deposited as leaf litter on the soil surface, etc. There is a multi-storied (layered) structure consisting of rhizosphere, ground covers, climbers, understory shrubs and trees. These gardens have diverse uses: food, fibre, medicine, fuel, building materials, forage, etc.



Irrigated Ricefields

These are different from a polyculture garden in their much more radical reworking of the landscape through terracing, water channelling, etc. Management of water, specifically the timing of water to the life-cycle of rice plants, is the key factor in maintaining this human-designed ecosystem.



Delta Shrimp Cultivation

This is a less stable agro-ecosystem than the other two examples. Intensive commercial shrimp aquaculture in the Mekong delta is responsible for the destruction of mangrove ecosystems. On the other hand, salinity affects the growing of rice and other crops on bunds around shrimp ponds.

Australian Mekong Resource Centre
C/-Division of Geography
School of Geosciences
University of Sydney NSW 2006
Australia