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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 & Dialogue* provides:

- lead article on the key topic of the issue
- responses to the lead article
- news of current developments in the region
- news from the AMRC
- information on Mekong-related conferences and events in Australia

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READER CONTRIBUTIONS

The Mekong Update & Dialogue welcomes the comments of its readers on issues raised in the Feature article and in the Responses to the Feature. If you do wish to make comment please email us at mekong@geography.usyd.edu.au. Comments should be sent by the end of January and should be limited to 1-2 paragraphs.

EDITORIAL - Land reform revisited

“Land-to-the-tiller” campaigns marked rural political and social struggles of the 1950s, 60s and 70s in Southeast Asia. Land reform movements took on both leftist revolutionary and rightist counter-insurgency roles, at a time when most rural people’s livelihoods were intimately bound up with control over land for subsistence cultivation and when Vietnam and China had seen fundamental post-revolutionary social change enacted through land reform and collectivisation.

Clearly the socio-political agenda around land has moved on in an industrialising, urbanising and post-socialist Mekong Region. Land and other resource tenure reforms nevertheless remain very much on the agenda, as the majority of the region’s inhabitants continue to live in rural areas and derive significant parts of their livelihood from land-based resources. However, the development context of such reform has changed fundamentally, raising important questions about the progressive and regressive roles of the state in mediating land rights.

What is clear from the three commentaries in this issue of Mekong Update and Dialogue is that revisiting land reform some 30 years after its political apogee raises questions about the equity considerations that were originally the rationale for land-to-the-tiller campaigns. Land tenure reform that both formalises rights and commodifies land as a saleable resource can have simultaneous progressive and regressive impacts. Programs with a history of redistribution of quasi-feudal land access arrangements for the benefit of landless and near-landless classes have transformed into land settlement on public forest lands and fixing of village and farm boundaries in localised processes of what Peter Vandergeest terms “territorialisation”. The environmental and livelihood rationales for such programs as the Land and Forest Allocation Program in Laos appear compelling and the decentralised process innovative, yet the exclusions, rigidities and bureaucratic detail of implementation can also have regressive effects.

Each country of the Mekong Region has a different context for land and land-tenure reform. In Thailand, the Agricultural Land Reform Office has long been a public land tenure reform agency that is now part of the post-facto rationalisation of “forest land” without trees into agricultural smallholdings. In the post-socialist countries of the region, the decollectivisation agenda has placed emphasis on individualisation of private landholdings, but re-emergent problems of land concentration in the Mekong Delta suggest that old problems have not disappeared. However, urban and non-farming rural livelihood options have blunted the land question. In Laos and Cambodia, where non-farming opportunities are harder to find, land concentration is still quite low. As a result, the reform agenda has shifted to clarification of property rights rather than socially and politically engineered resource redistribution. An outstanding question is to what extent property rights clarification responds to local needs and agendas, and to what extent it is driven by foreign investment requirements that may threaten quite different sorts of resource appropriation from the rural poor.

FEATURE

Comparing Land Tenure Reform in Laos and Thailand.

by Peter Vandergeest

A comparison of land tenure reform policies in Thailand and Laos since the 1970s shows some surprising similarities in how these policies have changed over time. In both countries, the most striking has been a shift from land reform as the redistribution of land to land reform as the clarification of property rights. Both agendas have been justified partly in terms of their potential for alleviating poverty. However, a lack of attention to inequality means that current land tenure reforms may in fact often produce the opposite result: increased polarization and impoverishment of already marginalized people.

Before discussing land reform, I should note that until relatively recently neither country has had significant areas of land under large or absentee ownership. At the same time, landownership within villages is often highly skewed, with just a few families controlling a disproportionately large area of agricultural land. Reforms which attempt to redistribute land therefore need to find ways of expropriating land from these local landowners. Land redistribution policies can thus produce intense conflicts within villages, and be resisted and derailed by local opposition. At the same time, relatively dispersed landownership can facilitate the formation of a common front against external threats to a village's access to land. This helps explain why programs to redistribute private land have generally failed in the face of local opposition, while rural mobilizations to defend the village's land rights as a whole have achieved some success.

There is considerable evidence that the level of absentee control of rural land has been increasing in both countries in some, but not all areas. In Thailand, this has occurred through a combination of land speculation during the economic boom years plus the industrialization of agriculture. In Laos, external investors have taken control of some village lands through contracts with villagers through which they take over village common lands for growing cash crops. Both of these processes are facilitated by programs aiming to clarify property rights to land, either household-based or collective. In Thailand, increased absentee control of land has recently led to renewed demands for the redistribution of idle land held by absentee owners to poor farmers, and even some land occupations (Bangkok Post, 2001).

In both Laos and Thailand the context for the redistributive land reform efforts of the 1970s was the regional struggle between US-supported governments and their communist opponents. In Thailand, land reform efforts initiated in the 1970s were a response to growing rural support for the insurgent Community Party of Thailand, and rural mobilization during 1973 to 1976. Important legislation included the Land Rent Control Act of 1974 and the Agricultural Land Reform Act of 1975. The former act contained a variety of provisions regulating and limiting land rents, but opposition from landlords and local officials prevented widespread enforcement (Ganjanapan, 1989). The latter act established the Agricultural Land Reform Office (ALRO), with a mandate to allocate land to poor farmers. This

land was to be obtained in one of two ways: first, by expropriating land from private owners holding in excess of a legally prescribed limit; and second, by making public land available for allocation. Some land was purchased from private landowners and redistributed (Tongroj, 1990). But any possibility of significant redistribution of private land or enforcement of land rent controls were effectively ended by the right wing coup in 1976. The ALRO has instead become an agency for allocating public land to farmers.

In Laos, the revolutionary government made a more serious attempt to redistribute access to agricultural land, primarily through the collectivization campaigns initiated in 1978. Collectivization was intended not just to eliminate rural class inequalities (which were arguably not significant in Laos—Evans, 1995), but also make it possible for farmers to become more productive. But most landowning farmers were not eager to transfer some of their wealth to land-poor villagers through participation in these cooperatives. Collectivization was never made mandatory, and by the mid-1980s, less than 40 percent of farmers had joined cooperatives. Many or most cooperatives, moreover, existed in name only (Evans, 1995:58-63). The government gradually lost its commitment to collectivization, and by the late 1980s all cooperatives had dissolved, with the original landowning families retaining control of their family lands.

In both countries a new approach emerged during the 1980s which played down the redistribution of land in favour of the clarification of property rights and increasing tenure security. In the lowlands, clarification has been pursued through initiating or accelerating the granting of land titles for privately-controlled land. Accelerated land titling was justified by studies conducted in Thailand which claimed to provide empirical support for the idea that secure and clear land rights will induce cultivators to make productive investments in their land (Feder et al, 1988). These studies have not to my knowledge been replicated elsewhere, while research both in Thailand and other countries has shown that land titling may not be all that important for increasing productivity. A recent World Bank review of its involvement in land policy admits as much, and agrees that collective or customary rights are not necessarily an obstacle to productivity improvements (World Bank, 2001). Nevertheless, the Thai studies have helped justify the acceleration of land titling around the world, including Thailand and to a lesser extent, Laos.

While land titling has improved tenure security for some farmers and may have facilitated productive investments in Thailand, it has also facilitated speculation and the purchase of village land by outside investors. In addition, land titling clarifies individual or private property rights, with no attention to providing corresponding protection for common property resources. Even in the lowlands there are many important common property resources—for example, surface and ground water, collective pastures, and fisheries. In the case that I happen to know well, large areas of land near the coasts were purchased by urban speculators during the economic boom years. Some of these lands were later converted to industrial shrimp farms, at great cost to local common property resources. It was the poorest villagers who often were most impacted by the degradation of these resources. These villagers, however, often cite the landowners' right to do as they please with their private property as a reason for not trying to stop or regulate shrimp farming. In this situation the exclusive focus on the clarification of individual/household property rights without attention to local inequalities and the common property rights of communities may have harmed rather than helped the rural poor.

The other major program to clarify property rights involves the resolution of conflicting claims on resources in the uplands. In both countries large numbers of farmers occupy land that is claimed by state agencies—most importantly, the forest departments—as forest land. In these areas, the clarification of property rights has meant resolving these conflicting claims to land and forest resources. Both governments have devoted a lot of attention to this problem, although their approaches differ.

The current approach in Thailand is basically to divide this land into that which can be taken away from the Forest Department and allocated to farmers by the ALRO, and that which will remain under the control of the Forest Department. Very large areas of land have been allocated to farmers in this fashion, although in some areas influential people have been able to use the process to gain ownership of land—most infamously, in Puket. Nevertheless, the allocation of former forest department land remains the single major form of land reform in Thailand today. Forest Department land which remains under the control of the Forest Department is being classified as protected areas and/or being remade into tree plantations. These policies are being contested by the many villages who occupy or use these lands. Their central demand is that they obtain collective rights to forest lands through a process enabled by a proposed community forest bill. Conflicts with the forest department over this issue have often taken on a racialized character in that it is often upland ethnic minorities (the so-called hilltribes) who are most vulnerable to expropriation through the department's attempts to consolidate control over land. In other words, and reform as the allocation of household land rights in former forest reserves may help many farmers, but its collateral—the consolidation of forest department control over remaining forest land—has the potential of further marginalizing those who are already most marginalized.

The Lao approach to resolving these problems is a national program to formally allocate both agricultural and forest land to village collectives—in some ways exactly what has been demanded by the community forestry movement in Thailand. The Lao approach, however, has its own problems, similar in many ways to those in Thailand. Like the current upland land reform policies in Thailand, the Land and Forest Allocation Program in Laos not only allocates land to villagers, but also creates large areas of state land outside of the village territories defined by the program, although much of this land is being used by rural people. In addition, the allocation program includes regulations which force villagers to stop practising swidden cultivation. The justification is that swidden cultivators are also the poorest people in Laos. This argument, however, fails to put poverty in the context of inequality of access to agricultural land. In many areas there are some longer-term residents—often ethnic Lao—who control most land suitable for permanent cultivation, and who thus stand to gain most from the land allocation process. There are also many recent migrants, often upland ethnic groups, who have been forced to move by war and government restrictions on land use in upland areas. The recent arrivals often find that most land suitable for permanent agriculture has already

been claimed, and are thus forced to rely on swidden agriculture, livestock, and forest product collection. Upland ethnic minorities have often found that the restrictions on swidden which come with the land and forest allocation process provides them not with tenure security but new insecurities as their agricultural practices are rendered illegal. As in Thailand, land allocation has helped some farmers through providing increased tenure security, but inattention to inequality means that it has also caused increased marginalization and impoverishment.



In Thailand, as in other Mekong countries, cash crops such as cassava are being planted to supplement rice crops. Photo by Phil Hirsch.

Land reform has recently been put back on the agenda in Thailand, with particular attention to the way that absentee owners often leave their land unused while millions of rural people have insufficient land to cultivate. It seems unlikely that the current government would violate the sanctity of private property by turning back to the land reform agenda of the 1970s, especially given the increased leverage of multilaterals like the ADB and IMF over government policy. Proponents are making a series of sensible suggestions which are manageable in the current political context—for example, a

progressive land tax, zoning, and sustainable land use criteria (Ganjanapan, in Bangkok Post, 2001b). I would add that programs to clarify land tenure could pay more attention to how current land tenure reforms might intersect with rural inequality, and look at changes which would help these reforms achieve the objectives of decreasing rural poverty. One step might be more emphasis on improving the resource tenure security not only for those farmers who already have relatively secure access to fertile land, but also for the rural poor who do not have access to land suitable for permanent cultivation. It might also mean more attention to the clarification of common property rights, as it is often the poor who rely most on these resources. Provisions in the 1997 Thai constitution guaranteeing communities rights to participate in the management of local resources are a promising step in this direction.

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Peter Vandergeest has been writing on land and forest issues in Southeast Asia for the past ten years. He currently teaches environmental sociology at York University in Canada.

RESPONSES TO FEATURE

Comments on Peter Vandergeest's Article "Comparing Land Tenure Reform in Laos and Thailand"

by **Khamla Phanvilay and Yayoi Fujita**

In his article, Vandergeest offered a general comparison of land reform policies since the 1970s in Thailand and Lao PDR. In this, he raised an important question of whether the current changes in land reform in Laos may polarize social classes and further impoverish the rural population who are already socially marginalized. In particular, for the Lao case, he referred to the Policy (or process) of National Land and Forest Allocation. This began in 1996, and imposed constraints in upland areas where "poor" households and ethnic minorities, mostly reliant on swidden cultivation, live. These are often the very people who are deemed as victims of the policy, as their customary agricultural practices become restricted to limited area and acceptable activities in a given area are prescribed. An important suggestion made by Vandergeest in his article is that the process of improving resource tenure security should thoroughly consider the conditions and situations of rural poor who have limited access to permanent agricultural cultivation.

Contrary to Vandergeest's claim that land in Thailand and Laos followed a phase of re-distribution to institutionalisation of clear property rights; land was never fully consolidated and distributed (or re-distributed) under the state authority in Laos throughout the period before and after the emergence of the socialist state. The French-influenced land ownership system, which was applied in the urban areas, was dismantled in the period after the mid 1970s (Kirk, 1996). However, post-revolution land reform in Laos was minimal, as feudal land relationships never gained a stronghold given the topographic conditions, which isolated communities, and low population density. In addition, urban migrants have also resettled in rural areas during the post-war aftermath, which meant that agricultural land was naturally distributed without significant government intervention (Evans, 1995). In the meantime, agricultural collectivisation was practiced across the country during the period between the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, most rural farmers retained their customary rights over land in Laos.

On the other hand, transition to an open market economy from the mid to late 1980s instigated a significant shift in land property relations in Laos. Decollectivization of agricultural production was called forth, and private incentives were promoted. In the meantime, intensity of resource conflict and resource degradation reached its peak in the late 1980s and the first National Forestry Conference was convened in 1989 to address the problems of forest management and environmental degradation in Laos (Tsechalicha and Gilmour, 2000). Following

this, rapid development of resource management institutions began in the 1990s with extensive assistance provided by western donors and aid agencies.

The National Land and Forest Allocation Policy initiated in 1996 was instrumental in promoting government policy on the eradication of shifting cultivation in the upland areas. Initially, it also aimed to ensure equitable access to land resources, while prohibiting consolidation of land by a few individuals and private entities. The underlying principles of land allocation are to provide a system of secure and tradable land use rights, which provide incentives for individuals as well as for community groups or villages to manage particular land categories in a sustainable manner. Unlike in other Southeast Asian countries, local participation became a substantial part of the land allocation and zoning process in Laos. At the same time, as village boundaries were mapped, and land certificates were authorized by the state, the government role in land zoning and management was also strengthened.



Khamla Phanvilay (left) and Yayoi Fujita (right) with colleagues in Laos.

Vandergeest showed concern that the recent institutionalisation of property rights is being pursued at the cost of poor rural households. A study conducted by the State Planning Committee (2000) also indicates that land allocation has incurred further hardships to households in "poor villages", as households have been forced to stop pioneering new swidden, and reduce fallow cycles. This particularly threatens household rice sufficiency, and in some cases instigates further deterioration of forest resources (SPC, 2000). However, the key question here is not whether land allocation is at the source of rural poverty. Instead, inequitable access to land is caused by problems in the land allocation implementation process as well as a lack of adequate extension services in upland

areas, which are highly vulnerable to social and environmental changes.

While incidence of class differentiation on the basis of landholding is less evident in Laos, economic discrepancies between urban and rural areas, as well as lowland and upland areas are rapidly increasing. This is largely due to villages in lowland plains transforming their agricultural production in response to the market economy. In the meantime, agricultural production in upland areas remains subsistence oriented, with predominant reliance on swidden rice cultivation. To cope with uncertainties, rural households in the upland areas often divest their labour and time to a wide range of activities including horticulture, animal husbandry, hunting and gathering, forestry, and so forth.

Pravongviengkham (2001) notes that this highly diversified livelihood system of upland communities, which revolves around swidden cultivation should be carefully placed under consideration in the current government policy on land allocation. This should include gaining a better understanding of customary tenure and agricultural land use practices. In particular, he calls attention to the need to improve productivity and stability of existing swidden-based livelihood systems so as to increase the present carrying capacity of land and secure greater ability for households to cope with various endogenous and exogenous factors (Pravongviengkham, 2001). The same point is also emphasized in the current agricultural sector policy, which is a significant

transition from past government approaches on upland agricultural development.

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A Response to Peter Vandergeest's "Comparing Land Tenure Reform in Laos and Thailand".

by Anan Ganjanapan

In general, Peter Vandergeest is justified in his observation that land tenure reform policies in Thailand and Laos since the 1970s have shifted from redistribution of land towards the clarification of property rights. But to assume that the shift, in the case of Thailand, was due mainly to the failure in land distribution policy may miss the real problem. Although the concentration of land in the hands of large or absentee landlords before the 1970s may not have been significant in all parts of the country, the problem of land concentration has long existed in the central region and some areas of the north, especially the area around the city of Chiang Mai. Land redistribution projects were to be specifically implemented in those few areas of land concentration. Local opposition and resistance to land reform in other areas were thus only used as an excuse by the military dictators to overthrow the elected government in 1976. It may be true that many villages formed a common front against external threats to their access to land, but this should not be confused with local resistance to land redistribution, because their action was aimed more at keeping their land away from the pressure of the land market at a time when there were very few alternatives for villagers other than farming.

However, in the late 1980s when rural villagers' farm incomes were falling below off-farm incomes, more villagers were under market pressure to sell off their land to speculators. This process, together with the clarification of property rights and especially the acceleration of land titling, have contributed significantly to the recent increasing level of absentee control of rural land. I agree with Peter Vandergeest's observation on this point because empirical research clearly shows that land titling, supported by the World Bank, has helped raise the price of farm land and has encouraged the expansion of land markets into farm land. I also agree that land titling is contradictory in the

sense that it may improve tenure security for some farmers and facilitate productive investment in Thailand but also exclude villagers from their farm land.

Such a contradiction is Vandergeest's major criticism of the land titling. He is right to call attention to local inequality resulting from the focus only on private property rights without any protection of common property resources on which the poor largely depend. But I would also like to add that the increase of absentee owners as well as unused land contributed greatly to the recent economic crisis in Thailand where those idle lands underwrote much of the non-performing loans. Without any check on this kind of increase there can be no guarantee for the productive use of and the better redistribution of land.

In his view on the renewed demand recently in Thailand for the redistribution of idle land held by absentee owners to poor farmers, Vandergeest is skeptical that Thai government will make any move on the land redistribution reform. I think he is quite right because the Thai government is, instead, reinforcing its policy on the clarification of property rights in other areas, especially the forest and upland areas. Such policy does not resolve conflicting claims as intended but rather instigates more conflicts because of its contradictory nature which, as Vandergeest pointed out, has the potential for further marginalization of the marginal groups who are upland ethnic minorities.

In response to such policies, Vandergeest focuses only on the protest by the forest settlers who demand collective rights to forest lands by proposing a community forest bill with the support of local NGOs and academics. But local villagers in other areas are, in fact, contesting the policies more often. The most prevalent move can be seen in the cases of local villagers' protest against the encroachment of their common property resources, for example, the planned buildings of several electrical power plants, which will use lignite. The landless poor villagers, in some areas of the north, are also making a more radical move to occupy idle land held by absentee owners and propose that they will hold the land as collective property and redistribute those lands among themselves for productive use.

Against those recent movements, I do not think that Vandergeest's suggestions for reducing rural inequality are enough, even though they are heading in the right direction. He focuses mainly on improving resource tenure security for the poor and more attention to the clarification of common property rights. The fact is that even the community forest bill as it stands today is still full of biases against the poor as it only put restrictions on the poor's access to their common property while leaving the urban rich free to continue speculating on land. I think a progressive land tax should be adopted to check land speculation and improving the productive use of land. In addition, diverse forms of property rights should be seriously considered, especially collective property rights for certain types of land as proposed by the landless poor of the north. Another big step in a right direction would be the strengthening of local control of land use which can offer better protection of common property rights, rather than relying only on the state protection that so often fails.

Dr Anan Ganjanapan is an anthropologist based at the Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University.

NEWS FROM THE REGION

The AMRC website www.mekong.es.usyd.edu.au now has a Mekong News page which contains news received via email on various topics of current concern. The topics listed at present are: Samut Prakarn Wastewater Treatment Plant, Ethnic Minorities, Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Dam, NGO Campaign for ADB reform, Logging in the Mekong, Wildlife Trade and Transport Infrastructure. Any feedback on this web page would be welcome please email: mekong@mail.usyd.edu.au

Vietnamese villagers stage protest over land

A rare public protest was staged in Hanoi on 5 December. About 20 people from southern Vietnam gathered near Vietnam's National Assembly in Hanoi claiming that their land had been stolen. The banners they held complained of land lost in dispute with local authorities in several provinces in the south. One woman from An Giang province claimed to have lost her house due to a road construction project.

The response of the government was to play down the event claiming that it was a 'normal event' and denying that it was a protest. Land is a common source of friction in Vietnam.

source: David Brunnstrom, Reuters, Wednesday December 5

Cross-border agreement signed by lower Mekong countries

A landmark cross-border agreement was signed by the four lower Mekong countries at the end of November to facilitate the flow of people and goods. It is anticipated that both China and Myanmar will join the agreement in the near future. The agreement is considered complementary to free trade among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China.

The agreement is the initiative of the Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Subregion program which was created in 1992. The agreement will clear the way for transborder infrastructure projects such as the North South Economic Corridor, East West Economic Corridor and Southern Economic Corridor. These are three of the ten flagship projects included in the detailed action plan covered by the agreement. Other priorities are the development of a telecommunications network, a regional power inter-connection and trading arrangement, enhanced private sector investment, human resources development, flood control, water management and a strategic environmental framework.

sources: Ian A Gill (igill@adb.org) ADB News release December 5; AFP December 1

A BOT hydropower plant for Vietnam

Construction of Vietnam's first BOT (build-operate-transfer) project funded by foreign investment began on November 29. The gas-fuelled thermo-power plant, Phuy My 3, is being constructed in the southern coastal province of Ba Ria-Vung Tau.

Funders are BP Holdings BV of the Netherlands, SembCorp Utilities of Singapore and Kyushu Electric Power Co and Nisho Iwai Corp of Japan. These companies will operate the plant for the first 20 years before transferring it to Electricity of Vietnam

Corporation (EVN).

sources: Vietnam News Agency, Monday December 3; British Broadcasting Corporation Worldwide Monitoring, November 30.

Cambodia likely to lose a generation to HIV/AIDS

Despite reports that Cambodia, along with Thailand and Uganda, has reported a fall in the number of people living with HIV, there are concerns about the anticipated rise in the number of 'AIDS orphans' over the next few years. A spokesman for the international aid group, Friends, said that the number of AIDS orphans was expected to leap from 30,000 to 140,000 by 2004. He claimed that the young generation needed to rebuild the country is being devastated by AIDS.

Foreign aid workers have built Cambodia's first Condom Cafe to mark World AIDS Day (December 1). The project is similar to those in Australia, Thailand, Vietnam and elsewhere in the region. It will contain a clinic and a counsellor.

source: South China Morning Post, December 1

Cambodia opens bridge over Mekong

The Kizuna Bridge has been opened to connect to a road network into Vietnam and Laos. The Prime Minister Hun Sen hopes that the bridge will encourage both foreign investment and tourism. The bridge, which cost US\$57 million, is the second major Cambodian bridge funded by Japanese aid, the first having been built in 1995 to link two sides of the Tonle Sap river in Phnom Penh. The name of the bridge "Kizuna" is Japanese for "bond". Prime Minister Hun Sen has claimed that the bridge will be a gateway for the development of the Mekong Basin.

source: Agence France Presse, December 4 2001.

AUSTRALIAN MEKONG NEWS

Global International Waters Assessment Southeast Asia Workshop

AMRC Associate Fiona Miller attended the Global International Waters Assessment (GIWA) Southeast Asia Sub-Regions Workshop in Bangkok in early November. The Global International Waters Assessment is a UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) initiative, with funding primarily from the GEF (Global Environment Facility). The aim of GIWA is to produce a comprehensive and integrated global assessment of international waters, the ecological status of and the causes of environmental problems in 66 water areas in the world, and focus on the key issues and problems facing the aquatic environment in transboundary waters. GIWA will primarily assist GEF and other donors to identify future program support in the area of international waters.

The Mekong Sub-Region was one of five sub-regions from Southeast Asia subject to scaling and scoping exercises at the workshop. The other sub-regions discussed were the Bay of Bengal, South China Sea, Indonesian Seas, and Sulu and Celebes Seas. The scaling exercise defined the geographic boundaries of the sub-region and principal features of the aquatic systems, as well as key demographic and economic features of the system. Once this was complete the scoping exercise identified the relative importance of different impacts on the aquatic system,

and assessed present and most likely future environmental and socio-economic impacts on the aquatic system with the aim of identifying priority areas for further analysis.

The Mekong Sub-Regional team involved a number of natural science and policy experts from Region (with the exception of Burma), although social scientists were not as well represented. Discussions identified the high level of suspended solids, loss of ecosystems, over-exploitation of fisheries and other living resources, destructive fishing practices, and impacts on biological and genetic diversity as major present concerns. Major future ecological concerns identified by the team included the modification of stream flow, further habitat and community modification, and unsustainable exploitation of fisheries.

GIWA is one of a number of international initiatives focusing on the assessment and discussion of global water priorities. Two other major initiatives include: UNESCO World Water Assessment Program, which focuses on building capacity in management policy and practices (see <http://www.unesco.org/water/wwap/>); and the World Water Forum, a series of events and forums broadly discussing the nature of the international water crisis and methods by which to address it (see <http://www.worldwaterforum.org/>).

Regional Workshop on Trans-Boundary Analysis

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) recently held in Phnom Penh, as part of the Water Utilization Programme (WUP), a regional workshop for the National Mekong Committees (NMC) on the analysis of transboundary environmental issues in the Mekong Region. AMRC Associate Fiona Miller attended the workshop as an observer. The workshop included presentations by each of the NMCs on a transboundary issue of priority concern to them. These included presentations by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam on fisheries production, river bank erosion, sedimentation and low flow, respectively, providing a transboundary analytical perspective on resources and impacts. Other presentations were made on the issues of environmental flows, environmental governance, and transboundary impact assessment. Considerable discussion and debate was generated by the concept of environmental flows, and the challenges it poses to the MRC Agreement and WUP process, as well as the possible roles of the MRC in addressing transboundary issues.

NEWS FROM THE CENTRE

Overview of Current Projects

AMRC works in partnership with research institutes and NGOs in Australia and throughout the Mekong on a number of research projects. The following is a list of current projects, further information is available on the AMRC website:

Toward Ethnic Women (TEW) Exposure Tour:

Towards Ethnic Women (TEW) is an indigenous Vietnamese NGO which will visit Australia in 2002 for an exposure tour to be hosted by the AMRC and the Koori Centre of University of Sydney.



AMRC staff and associates with MSEAN participants from Can Tho University, Chiang Mai University, National Economic Research Institute and National Institute for Science Technology Policy and Strategic Studies.

MSEAN (Mekong Social and Environmental Analysis Network)

The MSEAN project is aimed at strategic capacity building through a regional network. The goal is to enhance the capacity of member institutes to engage in policy based research on the links between infrastructure development, environmental governance and sustainable development. The AMRC has been requested by the network to facilitate and coordinate operations, to provide capacity building resources through joint research initiatives and a program of training workshops, and to develop funding proposals.

Scales of Water Management in Yunnan and the wider Lancang-Mekong River Basin

This exploratory research project is documenting formal and informal institutional aspects of water management in Yunnan Province, China. It considers basin-specific, national and international aspects of water use, and management in the context of major plans that China has for energy development and other engineering works on the Lancang.

Small-scale Wetland Indigenous Fisheries Management

The focus of the work is management and stock enhancement of seasonal backswamps in eight villages of two Districts in Laos' southernmost province. A secondary focus is stream fishery management. Small-scale and indigenous fisheries based on common property resources have previously been neglected in favour of larger scale fisheries.

Research Training at NUOL

The NUOL (National University of Laos) research training project takes 12 staff in four departments at NUOL through the research process, from formulating research questions, through designing a proposal, carrying out fieldwork to analysis and writing. Research themes are: the impacts of irrigation development on resource tenure and access; the implications of forest land allocation on food security; and links between forest land allocation and changing agricultural patterns.



Rural women are responsible for half of the world's food production, however women are often 'invisible' when it comes to land tenure and land management. Photo by Fiona Miller.

SOME RELEVANT WEBSITES

www.worldbank.org/networks

The land policy network page of the World Bank website contains information on the land titling program in Thailand to which Peter Vandergeest refers in the lead article of this issue. It provides an outline of the Thai government's land titling program as well as a page on land titling in Lao PDR.

www.fao.org/gender

The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) website has a section devoted to gender issues including agriculture, environment and population. Within the agriculture section there is a section on women and land tenure and land management. The population section also contains a paper which addresses gender and land tenure.

www.eastwestcentre.org

East West Centre is an internationally recognised education and research organisation established by US Congress to strengthen understanding and relations between the US and Asia Pacific. A current research project, outlined in the research section of the website is "Mapping Resource Tenure in the Mekong Basin, Yunnan, Laos and Northern Thailand".

UPCOMING EVENTS

Modern Vietnam : Transitional Identities

28 - 30 May 2002, EUROVIET V Bi-Annual Conference, St Petersburg

Contact: Dr Vladimir Kolotov, Faculty of Oriental & African Studies, St Petersburg State University

Email: orient@vk4589.spb.edu

<http://www.orient.pu.ru/conferences/EurovietV/index.htm>

Conference on Economic Recovery and Reform

28 - 29 October 2002, Bangkok

Contact: Ms Wannah Vejbrahm

email: intconf@econ.tu.ac.th

fax: 66 2224 9428

The events listed above are changed with each issue of Mekong Update & Dialogue. 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



Land reform in upland areas of Laos has involved the allocation of agricultural and forest land to village collectives. Photo by Andrew Wyatt.

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