

Stakeholder Engagement Practice: An Experience in IWRM-Based Mekong River Basin Development Plan Forum

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Abstract

Extensive population growth and usage have led to increasing unplanned development pressures within the basin and these have caused many direct threats to valuable ecosystems in the region. This poses a significant threat to biodiversity and environmental sustainability, and thereby to the livelihoods of the Mekong communities. Stakeholder participation is an integral part of integrated approach on water resources management, which the Mekong River Commission (MRC) adopted in its Strategic Plan 2006-2010. Likewise, stakeholder participation is particularly important for the Basin Development Plan (BDP), the umbrella programme of the MRC to promote the joint planning function as an inter-governmental river basin organisation for sustainable development of the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB). This paper aims to provide overview of lesson learned for the BDP practice which was held during 15-16 October 2009 in Chiang Rai, Thailand. Mekong River Basin is international trans-boundary basin and has spanned up to six countries. The development issues have international implications and can only be resolved through the effective regional coordination and cooperation framework. MRC has demonstrated a series of stakeholder engagement activities for the region such as forum, special meeting and online forum. Nevertheless, it should not become the symbolic activities to fulfill the engagement and participation process.

Key words: Mekong River Basin/ stakeholder engagement/ integrated water resources management, lesson learned

1. Introduction

The Mekong is the largest river in South-East Asia and the twelfth largest in the world. From its source in the Tibetan Himalayas it flows through six countries China, Myanmar, Thailand, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Cambodia and covers a distance of more than 4,400 kilometres before reaching the South China Sea (Pantalu, 1986). The river basin covers an area of

nearly 800,000 square kilometres and enters its lower reaches at the border-point between China, Lao PDR and Myanmar, some 2,380 kilometres from the sea (MRC 2001). This point also marks the entry of the river into the boundary of the Mekong River Commission (MRC), an organization set up in 1995 to promote and coordinate the sustainable management and equitable development of water and related

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resources for the mutual benefit of all countries and peoples involved.

People in the Lower Mekong Basin rely on water resources of the river system to provide their main source for livelihood. This biodiversity in Mekong River Basin is fundamental to the viability of natural resource-based rural livelihoods of a population of 55 million people living in the Lower Mekong Basin - equivalent to more than 90% of the population of the entire Mekong Basin, and about one-third of the combined total population of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam.

Since rapid population growth and urbanization process, the vital water resources will be threatened. As a consequence, this basin needs to look for economic development opportunities and options. Four keys were used for Mekong development which is domestic use, for hydropower, for navigation, for irrigation and drought management. It is important keys to overcome community poverty and increase people's welfare. In effort to safeguard Mekong Basin water resources, a joint management body-Mekong River Commission (MRC) was established in 1995 by an agreement between the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. The Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin was signed by the four countries that agreed on joint management of water resources and development in Lower Mekong basin. This was one of the significant milestones towards sustainable development in the region. The 1995 Agreement charges the Mekong River Commission Joint Committee with the formulation of a Basin Development Plan (BDP) "to promote, support, cooperate and coordinate in the development of the full potential of sustainable benefits to all riparian States and the prevention of wasteful use of the Mekong Basin waters, with emphasis and preference on joint and

basin-wide development projects and basin programmes". The purpose of the BDP is to identify, categorize and prioritize development projects at the basin level (MRC, 2009a). Furthermore, Mekong BDP adopts concept of Integrated Water Resources Management as management guideline to ensure the sustainability of water resources in Mekong basin. Global Water Partnership (GWP) defined IWRM as an approach to coordinate and develop water, land, and other related resources for more effective and sustainable way in order to maximize economic efficiency and social welfare without compromising vital ecosystems (GWP, 2003). Other definition has been made by USAID that IWRM is a participatory planning and implementation process, based on sound science that brings stakeholders together to determine how to meet society's long-term needs for water and coastal resources while maintaining essential ecological services and economic benefits (Merrey, 2008). Torkil (2004) stated that some developing countries have started to implement IWRM by putting its components into their national development policies. Uganda and Burkina Faso have gone through IWRM planning processes resulting in new national policies, strategies and laws for their water resources development and management (Petit and Baron 2009). Integrated Kedah River Basin and Integrated Selangor River Basin in Malaysia are the pilot projects on IRBM practices (DID 2003). Community based management in Northern Thailand is an important model to demonstrate a holistic approach on wetland management.

An effective management of water resources requires full participation from the various stakeholders. Mekong BDP secretariat organised two days stakeholder engagement event - The 2nd Regional Stakeholder Forum on Basin Development Plan. This paper aims to

provide overview of lesson learned about this event which was held during 15-16 October 2009 in Chiang Rai, Thailand.

2. Background of the Stakeholder forum

Active participation and the dialogue were conducted among stakeholders. The 2nd Regional Stakeholder Forum of the Mekong River Commission Basin Development Plan Programme Phase 2 (BDP2) was held as an annual forum for riparian countries in the Mekong River Basin namely Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam, China and Myanmar to discuss challenges and opportunities in water and related resources development and management, and provide directions for sustainable basin development. According to Forum Secretariat, total 258 participants attended these two days dialogue and they were delegates from government, MRC secretariat, research institute and universities, media, NGOs, civil society organisation, dialogue partners and private sectors.

This stakeholder engagement practice which was applied by Mekong River Basin Commission to share emerging knowledge of the water resources development as well strengthens the partnership between stakeholders. Besides, it was a platform to seek the inputs from stakeholders on economic, environmental and social implications at different levels of water resources development in the MRB (MRC, 2009b). The valuable suggestions and comments from delegates are useful to propose basin-wide development scenarios assessment approach as well as strengthen the IWRM-based Basin Strategies Development process. Under the theme “*Unfolding Perspectives and Options for Sustainable Water Resources Development in the Mekong Basin*”, a total 26 technical papers were presented in four sessions. These sessions were (i)

The Mekong River Basin: Emergence of Knowledge on Development Challenges and Opportunities, (ii) Cumulative Impact Assessment of Trans-boundary Economic, Environment and Social Implications of Water Resources Development, (iii) Understanding the Distribution of benefits and costs, the potential winners and losers, and (iv) Strengthen Partnership and Stakeholder Engagement.

Sharing the emerging knowledge which generated by different stakeholders and MRC regarding critical water-related themes in MRB. This session served to share the emerging knowledge generated by different stakeholders and the MRC regarding critical water-related themes in the MRB. This promotes a better understanding of the water related issues and well-informed discussions of the development challenges and opportunities in the LMB. This session seemed to be succeeding for promoting understanding and encouraging stakeholders to share their ideas of development challenges and opportunities in the LMB. The projects on hydropower development, irrigation for agricultural activities, and the understanding of climate variability and climate change were presented.

Feedback on planned approach to carry out the cumulative assessment of the economic, environment, and social impacts of different levels of water resources management was also a key objective in this forum. MRC has received number of suggestions from stakeholders which are necessary for strategic environmental assessment (SEA) of mainstream hydropower dam projects. The presentation on the approach and tools for projection future water availability and hydrological changes was focused as a key objective. The SEA approach is recommended to be adapted and adopted for the improvement of the basin development planning.

Approach and tools for economic impact assessment was stated as a key

objective. The various researches on economic impact assessment, assessment methodology, and the approaches to assess economic impacts by local were presented. The case study from Cambodia indicated clearly that hydropower dam development projects have significantly impact on economic and biodiversity in Cambodia. Besides, assessment of environmental implications was put in the forum. In this session, various approaches and tools were presented as well as available data and information which MRC conducted to assess the impacts of water resources development on the wetland and aquatic resources. However, the environmental impact assessment is still needed more suitable approach and tool.

Social implications of water resources development was an issue for discussion and sharing ideas in this forum. There were valuable ideas and feedback through brainstorming approach. The solutions came up with assessment of social implications might be differed according to context, population groups, and social patterns. This forum provided the dialogues in which stakeholders openly shared their ideas regarding the directions for the development of the MRB. The process and initial approach towards an IWRM-based Basin Development Strategy was undertaken by four countries in order to provide joint statement for suitable and equitable development. An update on key assessment and planning processes of interest to stakeholders in the region was announced in this forum. The processes included (i) the BDP process and progress in the implementation of the Stakeholder Participation and Communication Plan (SPCP), (ii) other regional processes toward shared visions on MRB development and management; and (iii) the upcoming process for the preparation of the MRC Strategic Plan 2011-2015. Final key objective of this forum was to

take stock of key views and recommendations brought forward during this forum to share these recommendations incorporated in the basin development plan and other MRC processes.

3. Lesson learned

The aim of basin development planning is to increase demand for an integrated basin perspective against which national plans and proposed projects that can be assessed to ensure a balance between economic, environmental, and social outcomes in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB), and mutual benefits to the LMB countries (Thanh Hang, 2009). The goal of basin development plan is for water and related resources in the Mekong River Basin management and development as an integrated, sustainable, and equitable manner for the mutual benefit of the riparian states.

It should be indicated that an integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) approach is not latest the approach that to manage and coordinate water, land and related resources within a river basin in order to achieve desirable objectives for economic development, environmental protection and social equity. Water is a dynamic resource and its management needs to adopt a river basin or watershed focus (Tan and Mokhtar, 2009). "Manage river basin as a whole unit" was highlighted by the Thailand pioneer supporter of IWRM. Based on the concept of IRBM, the management of the river basin as a whole unit which based on the hydrological boundary is also needed.

Water can be used as a powerful instrument for economic development for example hydropower generation, fish resource and clean water supply. So, we need to assess the economic and social benefits that will be derived from hydropower projects against, reduction in

fisheries resource and ecosystem services. Hydroelectricity is widely seen as a source of sustainable economic development when planned and managed properly (Tira, 2009). However, if the economic interests of one group take too much precedence over to other less powerful group such as local community, the benefit that derives from water resource would be hijacked. Consequently, social livelihoods and the ecological integrity maybe disturbed (Han, 2009).

Nowadays, the topic of proposed hydropower dams among the people of China, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, has been highly discussed and debated especially during the 2nd MRC stakeholder forum. Number of NGOs, CBO and human rights groups stated out their concerns over the eleven hydropower schemes planned for development on the Mekong River. They concerned over the value of biodiversity and rights of the local communities. However, the government's representatives had explained about the considering building dams as part of their development planning and the measures to address those identified environment and social impacts. Experts also gave presentations in positive side for the proposed hydropower projects, including market opportunities for electricity supply and national poverty reduction. To stop the hydropower development is almost impossible. The argument lays not only on the long term economic benefit but environment and social impacts as well as restoration costs that may higher few times than the benefits are gained from hydropower development. Understanding impacts of socioeconomic and environment must not be neglected. It is not just about to generate energy by using water as source but also have to consider those benefits and impacts that will be gained from hydropower development as

well as including ecology integrity (e.g habitats for flora and fauna).

Therefore, views of stakeholders need to be reflected in the Mekong Basin Plan to balance hydropower; fisheries; irrigation; navigation; and flood management. "To solve this issue, participation from different levels of stakeholder must be included into management policy that can ensure the potential impacts are determined and maximize the benefits from water resource development" a sociologist for the Mekong River Commission (MRC). The stakeholder's engagement process which is practiced in Mekong Basin is an effort to maximize values and functions of ecosystems in lower Mekong River in order to address the poverty issue in member countries. A lot of forums were organized by MRC for governments, donors, NGOs and developers who come with different interests. Stakeholder engagements methods have been adopted by MRC such as stakeholder forum, focus group meeting and workshop in order to gain the input and perception from different parties. In addition, the online forum has been launched on November 2009, where public can submit their comments or opinions regarding planned hydropower developments. The disadvantage of this method seems is only for people who able to access internet and log into the online forum that can add some inputs and voice for River Basin Plan development process. The effectiveness of these methods needs to be monitored and evaluated with proper indicators system to avoid the undesirable objective and achieve the sustainable sound Mekong development and management. Besides, working group is requested to conduct field survey on Mekong Basin rural area in order to ensure grassroots participation.

In addition, local knowledge or indigenous knowledge was mentioned by the participants from Northern and North-

eastern of Thailand. Study of the most suitable for different contexts in each community or riparian state was concerned. The result from this study should be integrated with indigenous knowledge which useful to develop the strategy plans. The participants also mentioned about the failures of “Top down” approach in the past. This has indicated that the new approach named “Bottom up” should be considered by decision maker.

At last, “Do we need IWRM in Asia region?” this question posed by a senior professor from Mahidol University, Thailand. The answer for this question is still ambiguous. Sustainable water resources development is cross many sectors and need integrated approach on water resources management. The integrated approach on resources management is being practicing in local level since past few decades in different forms such as community based management. Nevertheless, due to the uncertainty and complexity element in water sectors, the formal and documented practices to provide guideline to water manager and authority in sustaining water resources for economic and social development is needed. Moreover, learning by doing is essential step for implementing IRBM to deal with uncertainty.

4. Conclusion

Mekong River is international trans-boundary basin and has spanned up to six countries, all of these development issues have international implications and can only be resolved through the effective framework of regional coordination and cooperation. Past one decade, MRC has demonstrated a series of stakeholder engagement activities for the region such as forum, special meeting and web based forum. Nevertheless, it should not become the symbolic activities to fulfill the

engagement and participation process. The meaning of MRC will be more significant if every member countries have common agendas to ensure the fair benefits sharing and development. This highly depends on the state of national development of economy and the availability of natural resources.

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