T09P03 / Space for Dialogue: Policy Network and Multi-level Governance of the Mekong River Basin

Topic : T09 / Governance, Policy networks and Multi-level Governance

Chair : Huijuan Wu (Institute of Water Policy, LKY School of Public Policy)

Second Chair : Leong Ching (Institute of Water Policy, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The Mekong River traverses six countries and over 4,300 km, with diverse stakeholders holding multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing interests, often yielding tensions and conflict over the priorities and processes of river governance.

The repercussions of various development choices on social equity and environmental sustainability have been extensively debated. Resolving these requires high capacities to assess complex problems, modes of ensuring credible commitment, and the application of broad knowledge sets. At the same time, extreme climatic conditions, and the rapid development of the Greater Mekong's water resources are challenging existing governance structures in the region; and leading to the emergence of new governance forms.

For all that is unresolved in Mekong governance, one thing is clear: in order for decisions to be perceived as binding and legitimate, intense deliberation and negotiation is required. Current barriers to consensus have been documented, including a deficiency of productive dialogue; the marginalization of important stakeholders; and limitations to the legitimacy of agreements.

The panel will include following contents:

1. mapping the local narratives of the river, hydropower, and developmental efforts. It confounds the dominant thinking that local populations are pro or anti-dam, and instead presents a more complex struggle, including the possibilities provided by growth and electricity.
2. Map the local policy network, identify the major influencers and links of knowledge within the community, arguing that narratives are construction along two axis – cognition and social meaning
3. Use an economic model for quantitative assessment of the high costs for resettlement and adaptation.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We would like to invite you to participate in a panel at the 2017 International Conference of Public Policy, Space for Dialogue: Mekong River Basin Policy Network and Multi-level Governance.

This panel will focus on policy network, multi-level governance and integrated water resources management of Mekong, with a special attention to the Lower Mekong Basin. It will discuss the policy network and good practices of multi-level governance in the Mekong River Basin, further explore new architectures of Mekong Governance in the context of rapid development and increasing climate uncertainty.The panel will be organized in the form of interdisciplinary presentations by both scholars and practitioners.

All manuscripts should be submitted to by email to the chairs for initial peer review by Jan 2017. Selected articles will be considered for publication in a Special Issue of International Journal of Water Resources Development on Governance in Mekong. Publication of the issue is planned for mid-2017.

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Session 1Space for Dialogue: Policy Network and Multi-level Governance of the Mekong River Basin

Thursday, June 29th 08:15 to 10:15 (Li Ka Shing LKS 1 - 1)

Discussants

Huijuan Wu (Institute of Water Policy, LKY School of Public Policy)

Leong Ching (Institute of Water Policy, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore)

What about the tributaries of the tributaries in the Mekong Basin? The political ecology of hydropower, irrigation, flooding and fisheries along the Sebok River

Ian G. Baird (Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Madison)

The Pak Mun Dam is one of the most studied, well-known, and controversial hydropower dams ever built in the Mekong region. Constructed in the early 1990s on the Mun River just upstream from the Mun's confluence with the Mekong River with World Bank support, the serious impacts of the dam was particularly important for raising awareness about the potential implications of dams with regard to fisheries in the Mekong region, an issue that was of little concern to activists, governments or researchers prior to the period when protests against the dam intensified in the later 1990s. However, oddly enough, the voices of people living on nearby tributaries of the Mun River that have been negatively impacted by the dam have hardly been heard since the Pak Mun dam was built over 25 years ago. There have been no formal studies conducted along these rivers, and no advocacy networks or other serious dialogue has apparently occurred regarding the Pak Mun dam in these communities over the years. Neither has there been much attention paid to how the Pak Mun dam and Mun River tributary dams, especially those projects which were conceived as part of the Khong-Chi-Mun dam system, are interlinked when it comes to considering fisheries impacts and management. Therefore, between 2014-2016 we engaged fishers living in three villages located along the Sebok River, a major tributary of the Mun River, located just upstream from the Pak Mun dam, to collect fish catch data, which they did continuously for 24 months. After phases of data collection, data validation and data analysis, the complex relationships between hydropower dam development, irrigation, and fisheries along the Sebok River are becoming increasingly evident to us. This paper presents preliminary research findings of our research, which combines biology-based data collection through recording fishing catches, institutional and community analysis in the Mun and Sebok River Basins, and fisher observations, analysis, and recommendations. Through taking a political ecology and collaborative management approach to this research, a complex picture of the circumstances along the Sebok River can be discerned. Future dialogue related to this research has the potential to be lead to improved natural resource management, including the protection and revitalization of important wild-capture fisheries in the Mekong River Basin.

The Constructivist Turn in IPE and Policy Studies: Global Ideas in Local Context in Cambodia

Farhad Mukhtarov (International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Leong Ching (Institute of Water Policy, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore)

This article investigates how rules change in political economy, within the "constructivist turn" of international political economy theory, using an example from the Lower Mekong river basin. It has two theoretical aims. The first is to join the effort to build a typology of constructionist approach to International Political Economy

(Abdelal et al, 2010). We argue that with a narrative approach, we conjoin four apparent separate paths of construction into a simple matrix which allows each branch of scholarship a vantage point from which to view the others. Second, we see narrative as a possible bridge between IPE and policy sciences. International Political Economy seeks to explain the relationship between international capital flows and international politics. In the context of Sesan 2 Dam in Cambodia, international capital finances building a dam which however would see the relocation of thousands of people, damage fisheries, and cause conflict at the local, national and regional level. These conflicts however, can be resolved through public policy efforts at multiple levels. This paper provides an empirical test of our theoretical aims based on a case from Cambodia. Our data shows that villagers, local NGOs and government representatives translate the global into the local through different narratives. Based on interviews with more than 120 villagers, commune heads and local community leaders, we find a diversity of narratives which transcend the “pro or anti” dam narrative. Instead, we find a complex mix of support for some of hydropower’s aims and promises, along with claims on local resources and way of life.

The material politics of the Mekong River: Implications for water governance analysis

Carl Middleton (Center for Social Development Studies, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University)

Carl Grundy-Warr (National University of Singapore)

Since the early 1990s, the Lancang-Mekong River has transition from a largely free-flowing river to one increasingly engineered by large hydropower dams and an expanding cross-border electricity transmission network. As a consequence, hydrological and ecological properties of the Lancang-Mekong River have been transformed, in the process reordering various socio-political relations around the river, at scales ranging from individual riparian communities who may be directly or indirectly affected by hydropower projects, to within national and regional arenas where debates unfold between the proponents and opponents of further hydropower dams. In much water management/ governance analysis there is an implicit assumption that the Mekong River and this increasingly extensive technological infrastructure is the passive stage upon which this primarily human drama takes place.

In this paper, we put forward a materialist analysis of the Mekong River, conceiving it as socio-techno-nature assemblage. Through this materialist lens, we show how hydropower dams and the electricity systems that they are embedded within are products of society, and how in the process of their creation and operation “loop back” to transform society – oftentimes in complicated and unforeseen ways – including via the river’s changing hydrology and ecology. From this viewpoint, the physical river and its ecology, and the hydropower dam/ electricity network technologies, can be understood as ‘actants’ that are in relationship with human actors and their interests, intentions, and actions.

We demonstrate our argument through discussing contemporary hydropolitics flashpoints through a materialist politics lens including: China’s hydro-diplomacy during the 2016 regional drought when water was released from reservoirs of its Lancang cascade; the construction of the Xayaburi Dam on the Mekong mainstream, and plans for further projects, enabled by river modifications upstream in China; and both of these events destabilized existing institutions, in particular the Mekong River Commission, and opened the possibility of new ones, namely the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Framework. Overall, we suggest that a material politics analysis offers new insights necessary to explain how inter-governmental geopolitics, hydro-politics and socio-nature relationships along the river are unfolding.

A Framework for Analysing Trans-Boundary Water Governance in the 3S Basin

Sithirith MAK (Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI))

Abstract:

Water governance is complex when dealing with trans-boundary river basins, given power asymmetries and the hydro-hegemony that drives cooperation and competition in trans-boundary water governance in favour of the hegemon. Dams have made trans-boundary water governance more challenging, and climate change makes trans-boundary water governance even more complicated. While there is considerable literature on dams and trans-boundary water governance, there has been little on how climate change complicates the asymmetric power and hydro-hegemony of the riparian states in addressing trans-boundary water governance. Hence this paper addresses the research question: How can trans-boundary water governance be improved in the context of increased hydropower development and climate change? To answer this question, the study uses a literature review and two case studies, one of the Yali dam in Vietnam and the second of the Lower Sesan 2 dam in Cambodia, to illustrate the complexity of trans-boundary water governance in the 3S basin in the context of increased hydropower dam development and climate change. It

concludes that power asymmetry, hydro-hegemony, dams and climate change shape trans-boundary water governance in the 3S basin, and that institutionalisation of cooperation among the riparian states is key to addressing trans-boundary water governance by securing flow, volume, quality, ecosystem services and livelihoods.

Key words:

Trans-boundary water governance, asymmetric power, hydro-hegemony, hydropower dam, climate change, cooperation.

Water-Energy-Food Nexus: rethinking hydropower development in the Lower Mekong Basin

Huijuan Wu (Institute of Water Policy, LKY School of Public Policy)

Water, energy and food (WEF) are intricately connected with many trade-offs between them. The WEF Nexus provides a new perspective on integrated river basin management. In Cambodia, hydropower development although meets the crucial demand for energy, there are mounting concerns about its impacts on the river ecosystem, renewable water resources, and food security in terms of fishery and rice farming. There are 14 potential sites in Cambodia for hydropower projects whilst the Lower Sesan 2 (LSS2) Dam is the largest. The 2009 Environmental Impact Assessment report for LSS2 estimated that this project will displace 5000 villagers in about 1100 households from seven villages in Steng Trung by 2017.

This paper examines how hydropower development in the Lower Mekong Basin affects its WEF Nexus. A case study on the LSS2 Dam is undertaken. A System Dynamics Approach is employed to set up a framework for analysing the WEF Nexus with a focus on the LSS2 Dam. The paper will first discuss the engagement of a broad range of stakeholders through semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions. This process helps identify the emerging issues and to clarify priorities/perceptions. Following that, quantitative analyses based on the System Dynamics Approach will be conducted to reveal the trade-offs within the WEF Nexus.

The paper conclude that an integrated assessment from a WEF Nexus perspective is crucial for developing hydropower in a river basin. Understanding the dynamics in a WEF Nexus is helpful in underpinning policies to deal with the trade-offs and to enhance collaborative management. It demonstrates how a WEF Nexus review help identify the priorities, trade-offs in order to plan effective remedies.