

# **Lessons on National Commitment in the Mekong River Basin**

"We know the engineering solutions, we have all the top-down management models, but we have not managed to bring in the political dimension in river basin management. This is where we need to put much more."

Torkil Jønch-Clausen, Brisbane International Rivers Symposium, 2005.

# Analysis of a Small China Case

A low-level technical cooperation initiative with China did not succeed because:

Water is a red hot political issue in China

The Chinese Government is sensitive to foreign opinion of its management of water

Relations with SE Asia are a major strategic plank in PRC foreign policy & initiatives are scrutinised in this context

Decisions in China are held at very high level, where they are considered in political context

# China Case: Some Lessons for National Commitment

1. One can't ignore the political dimension in TWC
2. One can't start an initiative in a politically difficult and sensitive area in China - or anywhere in this region - without assent from the top
3. One can't engage in international TWC without recognising it's a foreign policy matter
4. If one needed an available high level dialogue for discussion of Mekong issues with China as a political and foreign policy issue, there isn't one

# National Commitment in the Mekong

Some fundamental realities:

1. The dominant expression of national commitment is by government, not complemented by a strong community, civil society or public voice
2. But the people who have the political power to make hard decisions on e.g. water sharing are not engaged
3. There is no good communication or quality dialogue generally between the respective interests and stakeholders

# National Commitment in the Mekong

Some fundamental realities (cont.):

4. The politics of water reform are not analytically examined and debated among stakeholders, and since transboundary cooperation in any sphere is always political in some respect, an essential ingredient is missing
5. The issue is seldom approached as a foreign policy issue
6. Recent moves to give the MRC a role as an instrument of development blur the issue of 'national commitment for what'; national commitment for some could mean for good water governance, or it could mean for development

# Consequences for Getting Deeper Mekong Cooperation

Within the four countries, potential for debate to air and work through e.g. joint water policy development and planning, and national interests and national sovereignty, is severely limited

Between the four, no high-level dialogue to drive more substantial cooperation

# Contrast Mekong with Southeast Asian Regionalism

Mekong four engaged in Southeast Asian/ASEAN high level dialogues on policy cooperation

Across most policy domains

Covers many tough issues

Commands the time and attention of leaders and ministers

i.e. the Mekong four do have the habit of high level political dialogue, but not for the Mekong

# Why not for the Mekong and Water Governance?

Absence of high level dialogue on Mekong a significant indicator of state of national commitment

No sense of alarm over the water resource, therefore no political will to do more

There is the MRC, but MRC's existence in itself does not procure this political will

MRC's existence may even be used by some as a let-out

# Lessons from the Local Political Habitat

MRC an introduced model among local political cultures that have certain dynamics in common:

1. The primacy of inter-personal relationships
2. Relationships take precedence in institution formation and functioning
3. The strength of conflict avoidance in relationships
4. The hierarchical nature of institutional relations & the way this pushes decision-making upwards

# Lessons from these Dynamics in Southeast Asian Cooperation

In Southeast Asia, progress on difficult issues has been made where there has been:

1. Attention by top political leaders
2. Relationship-building on the issue by meetings of these leaders
3. Putting practical cooperation to build relations before structures and forms
4. Moving past conflict issues without immediately trying to solve them

# Can deeper cooperation for the Mekong use these lessons?

Probably yes, if a case is made. However, fact that views of key stakeholders are divided is hardly an encouragement, e.g.:

Some want deeper cooperation and argue local culture is used an excuse for foot-dragging

Some say deeper cooperation might be desirable but the status quo is what countries want, and that is their prerogative

The view that the MRC should be an agency for development seems to hand the MRC a conflict of interests on what its view should be and what is best for water governance

# Can deeper cooperation for the Mekong use these lessons?

There would need to be some accommodation of views among stakeholders

Given the current state of dialogue between them this may be difficult

At the same time, the prevailing view among governments appears to be that the water resource is abundant and there is no crisis, and there is therefore no case

# Making a Case with Governments

Clearly a need for a catalyst or circuit-breaker, to make a case

But excluding business and development, civil society and public interest advocacy groups not strongly developed or engaged

Need continuing engagement by international water governance interests, not to override sovereignty but to assist in addressing it

But some of these interests are also parties principal to the contest over means and goals for the Mekong

Need to go outside water interests and find a solution as a political and foreign and regional policy issue and not just a water issue

# Confidence-building for High Level Dialogue

There is a ready-to-hand process, which Southeast Asians use

There are policy research institutes in all four countries with experience in managing and facilitating this kind of process

Governments know how to work with it

Breaks the circuit by approaching the challenge as an issue in functional regionalism, and brings in relevant experts and sectors

Develops confidence, consensus and a case, and  
credibility for a case

Brings in community representatives

Also stimulates public discussion, to complement  
the political process

A non-contentious, non-threatening way forward

# The Missing Political Debate

There still remains the need for debate among water interests on the politics of water reform

Confidence-building, consensus-building and high level dialogue will have to step around many political minefields

But can only be fully effective with the benefit of good stakeholder debate and the contribution of such debate to public information and advocacy

To complement whatever action may transpire on high level dialogue, this is also a pressing need