

Exploring opportunities for transboundary water cooperation through basin development planning¹

Abstract

Today's increasing demand of water resources for development has caused a lot of tension, particularly among the countries which share the same rivers that flow across political borders. Efforts have been made by many international river basin and positive moves towards multilateral and regional cooperation have appeared. However, concrete outcomes particularly water sharing arrangements, strong legislative arrangements, demand management, and agreement on whole basin management for the economic, environmental, and social needs of all riparian nations have not generally occurred.

The Mekong River, its water head is located at Mount Tibet, flows across China, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam where it joins the sea. Established since 1957, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) involves the four countries downstream and covers lower part of the Mekong Basin (LMB). MRC has long history of cooperation and has tried to work hard to involve other two countries in the sustainable development of the river and its water resource. Agreement on the cooperation for the sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin was established in April 1995 by the four countries. Up to date, MRC has involved China and Myanmar as observers during important MRC meetings and regional workshops, and China has agreed to exchange information with MRC.

MRC defines transboundary impacts as *a measurable impact originating from a place in another country* (Water Utilization Program, 2002). *It is important to note that not all transboundary impacts are necessary negative.*

Many MRC works have been carried out for identifying transboundary impacts. These include the Transboundary Analysis (MRC 2002b) and Working Paper No. 4 (MRC, 2002c) on transboundary issues by the Water Utilisation Programme, Environmental Conflicts in the Mekong River Basin Prevention and Resolution by RMIT University and Environmental Programme (Buxton et al., 2003), and other works on transboundary environmental governance. These works have arrived to useful outcomes such as identified major issues, approach of transboundary analysis, learning about approach to conflicts prevention elsewhere, and Policy Making Mediation in the Mekong River Basin.

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¹ Prepared by Solieng Mak, Environment/Natural Resources Planner , Basin Development Plan, Mekong River Commission

This paper attempts to demonstrate that if the transboundary issues are dealt from the onset of the basin development planning, there will be possibility to cooperate among riparian countries for a socially just, economically prosperous and environmentally sound development of the river. An experience from the MRC Basin Development Planning (BDP) Program will be presented.

The Basin Development Planning (BDP) Programme will look at “how to manage and develop water and related resources in an optimal, equitable and sustainable way for a basin wide benefits and reduced transboundary impacts”. In fact, *BDP will be as one way of the conflict mediation in the River Mekong Basin as the transboundary issues will be dealt from the onset of development plan.* Transboundary issues will be analysed by transboundary sub-areas/all sub-areas and integrated into basin as a whole. BDP will enable opportunities and possibilities for reducing conflicts as the four countries will learn to cooperate along the BDP process.