IWRM Action Hub

CASE STUDY

Transboundary: Mobilising grassroots engagement and facilitating high-level dialogue for transboundary water management in the Mekong River Basin

Summary

In the Mekong river basin and its riparian states, policy reforms to adopt integrated water resources management have been initiated, but major gaps in supporting knowledge about basin characteristics persist. IUCN has developed a practice called villagers' research that enables villagers to conduct research on "their" ecosystems. This case study documents the efforts to expand this approach to fill the knowledge gaps. Case Studies illustrate experiences gathered with implementing IWRM.

Background

The Mekong is the longest river in Southeast Asia, beginning its 4,200 km journey in the mountains of the Tibetan Plateau, passing six countries and reaching the South China Sea. The river and its numerous tributaries, backwaters, lakes, and swamps support many unique ecosystems and a wide range of globally-threatened species.

The productivity of the Mekong River Basin is dependent on a dramatic process of flooding and recession, which endows the basin wide range of habitats. The timing, extent and duration of floods, and the regular inundation of habitats are all important factors in determining the productivity of the river. This ecosystem 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 total population of Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand and Viet Nam combined.

Policy reforms to adopt integrated water resources management had been initiated and water related laws had been developed. However, there were still major gaps in the supporting knowledge and information. Appropriate institutional arrangements corresponding to the policy directives and legal frameworks were not always effectively put in place, resulting in lack of coordination between the various agencies related to management of water resources both nationally and regionally across the basin. Within the Mekong Basin there are areas which are predominantly low-level subsistence systems and vulnerable to shocks such as climate variability. A lack of adequate knowledge about basin characteristics and water management coupled with a centralized water governance

system meant that the management of the Mekong River Basin as a whole was fragmented with conflicting priorities.

Actions taken

The Mekong basin is one of the most studied basin and enjoys the attention and support of many international financial mechanisms. One of the supports comes from IUCN and its program Water&Nature Initiative (WANI). Some other program on Wetlands Biodiversity (MWBP) aimed to sustain livelihoods by improving the management of wetlands.

WANI supported to scale up so called Tai Baan research (villagers' research) that enabled local communities to represent their own social reality and through media and public forum, this knowledge can be mainstreamed into water management research and implementation. Local villagers comprising farmers and fisherman decided to undertake their own research (an example of Songkhram Basin) to compile information and indigenous knowledge on local ecosystems and to assess environmental flows. As a result of WANI support, the Tai Baan research has been transferred to other parts of Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia and Viet Nam. For example, people from the three communities in Lao People's Democratic Republic worked on a determination the nutritional value of their wetland resources.

Another important action taken by WANI was to develop a toolkit FLOW to demonstrate environmental flows. This action led to an initiative of high level dialogue in the Upper Mekong. In additional to national dialogues in each Mekong basin countries, and resulted in influencing water policy development (Lao People's Democratic Republic and Viet Nam).

Outcomes

A lack of adequate knowledge about basin characteristics and water management coupled with a centralized water governance system meant that the management of the Mekong River Basin as a whole was fragmented with conflicting priorities. This impeded responding to development challenges such as environmental degradation and conflict between water users over diminishing resources.

WANI and partners have attempted to tackle these challenges through supporting knowledge-based approaches and emerging dialogue and consensus building between diverse interests and voices. Although the impact on such a complex river basin is difficult to assess, the Tai Baan and multi-stakeholder approaches and support to national governmental approaches have gained traction in the region and are ongoing.

National governments continue to be supported and linkages to regional institutions facilitated. The emerging issues identified in the early years of WANI continue to be relevant and to resonate across the region.

Lessons Learned

The valuable compilation about environmental flows is now being used as the basis for developing a training manual and extension efforts to promote the replication of Tai Baan approaches in additional areas both within Thailand and in neighbouring countries.

Multi-stakeholder participatory processes are needed to mobilize partnerships and relationships. This is a complex and time consuming process that evolves over many years, but is vital to establishing actions to tackle large, complex issues.

Size and complexity of Mekong are major issues as it is difficult to generate longer term impacts at basin scales. Mobilizing grassroots stakeholders to advocating and facilitating high level dialogues requires years of ground actions with an array of partners.

Widening the scope of environmental flows from a scientific concept to a tool for water management is challenging. There is a need for a step-by-step approach that gains in-country ownership over time.

Environmental flows applications help to mobilize partnerships and relationships that are the basis for developing longer - term water management strategies.

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Related IWRM Tools
Policies with Relation to Water Resources, Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

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