

MEKONG REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE: PERSPECTIVES ON OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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1. An Introduction to the MREG Project and Process

The Mekong Regional Environmental Governance (MREG) project is a part of the Resources Policy Support Initiative. REPSI is a World Resources Institute-coordinated collaboration among local, regional and international organizations based and working in the Mekong region. REPSI works towards increasing the capacity and legitimacy of policy-oriented research concerning environment and natural resource management issues, primarily in the upland areas. In order to accommodate the systems perspective inherent in ecosystem management, and to recognize the importance of transborder and regional drivers of environmental change, the MREG project has adopted a broader scope that includes lowland society.

At the June 1999 International Rivers Symposium in Kunming, discussions at a REPSI-sponsored Mekong session identified the need to involve a larger number of regional actors in a program of research and dialogue. The MREG project was conceived with the overall objective of contributing to the development of understanding concerning the many challenges of regional environmental governance in the Mekong region. Between the period of January 2000 and June 2001, REPSI engaged a large number of institutions and individuals from the region in the scoping and implementation of the MREG project. At the outset, staff from WRI, Stockholm Environment Institute, Göteborg University, and the Australian National University conducted consultations in the region with researchers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and officials.

The REPSI MREG process was undertaken with the objective of advancing the discussion of regional environmental governance by convening a group of researchers and practitioners from a wide range of background working in broad spectrum of activities. The MREG group included academics, activists, NGO researchers, and officials from international organizations. The first meeting of the MREG group was held in Chiang Mai in July 2000, directly following the Second International Symposium on Montane Mainland Southeast Asia, and was the start of a 12-month program of research and dialogue activities. (See MREG Participants List for names, affiliations and contact details.) The group was subsequently hosted in Phnom Penh in November 2000 by the Cambodian Institute for Peace and Cooperation, and in Vientiane in April 2001 by the Science, Technology and Environment Agency's Environment Research Institute.

MREG provided an open space for discussion of the broad issues of environmental governance. Through this forum, participants were exposed to a range of perspectives on "regional environmental issues," the current state of governance, the roles of institutions and organizations, and options for enhancement of environmental governance at the regional level. The core activity of the group was to research and discuss a set of Perspective Papers, which illustrates the richness of views regarding the challenges of environmental governance in this region. This work was supplemented by two analytical background research papers, an in-depth analysis of an ongoing governance process in the region, and a thorough examination of the many aspects of institutional performance at the national level. MREG was a learning process in which participants were encouraged to explore the issues in their own context and exchange perspectives on the range of interests and concerns that were voiced.

This volume is a compilation of the research and perspective papers produced in the MREG research process, but as such, is only one part of the MREG project output. Much of the value in carrying out such a project is found within the rich discussion and exchange that occurs throughout the process. Nonetheless, the following introduction discusses the major issues covered in the MREG project. The document is not meant to be a consensus synthesis report, and in fact it perhaps raises more questions than it answers. This is neither surprising nor problematic, given the complexity of the issues at hand and

the relatively new debate arising around them. The MREG group hopes that these issues will continue to be discussed and debated broadly to contribute to enhanced environmental governance.

2. Transborder Environmental Issues and Regional Institutions: Background for a Research and Dialogue Group

Awareness of the interconnections between people and the environment in mainland Southeast Asia is growing. Major changes in the way that people interact—especially the growing scope of economic integration and political cooperation—present both challenges and opportunities to a vision of regional sustainable development. With growing concern for the environment, and particularly increased understanding of the regional and transborder implications of development decisions, it is becoming increasingly clear that the search for sustainability must include specific consideration of equity and livelihood security.

The Mekong River has come to symbolize many of the environment-development dilemmas of the mainland Southeast Asia region. The Mekong is indeed a vital source of resources, whether for subsistence farmers and fishermen or national development agendas. But many of the transborder and regional issues of concern are not limited to the hydrological boundaries of the Mekong Basin. Decisions made outside of the basin, in Bangkok, Hanoi, Manila, and Jakarta, can have a direct impact on the region's environment and the stakeholders that depend upon it. Furthermore, the regional environment is much broader than water and watershed issues. In recognition of the economic and political structures that determine the directions of development, it makes sense to consider the region as defined by the Greater Mekong Sub-region—the five Mekong riparian nations of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma and, Vietnam, and the province of Yunnan in China. The strength of this definition of the region has grown over recent years. Particularly, the inclusion of Yunnan makes it a more coherent unit for considering regional issues.

Many transborder environmental issues—such as upstream-downstream watershed dynamics of water quantity, quality and timing, trade in timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and air pollution—have begun to receive attention as regional issues. Similarly, some actors have begun to consider another set of issues including livestock movements, labor migration and public health, as being of

importance to the regional environment. Some environmental issues imply direct impacts on communities across national borders, such as changes in the hydrological cycles of the Mekong and other international rivers and tributaries, and the supply and demand forces of the non-timber forest product trade. Others are associated with development decisions made at the regional scale—such as the development of transport and energy networks—and may mean localized impacts across the region. These transborder and regional issues involve interaction of many actors along two axes—vertically through the various levels of government administration and inter-governmental cooperation, and horizontally among the range of state-market-community actors.

Why is environmental governance at the regional scale important?

- Environmental change affects communities throughout the region across national borders
- The number of actors and institutional complexity is growing with political integration and economic liberalization
- Existing governance arrangements are being stressed in new ways

Given this complexity, how can we understand and characterize the extent of these challenges? In their paper, “**Development and Natural Resources in the Mekong Region: The Institutional Challenge**” Måns Nilsson and Lisa Segnestam (both from Stockholm Environment Institute) analyze the state of the knowledge base (do we understand the interactions?) and the state of social consensus (do people concerned agree about what needs to be done?) concerning the region's natural resources. It is evident that information and data to support policy-making in many cases are still lacking, while at the same time there is need for more sophisticated methods of deliberation and negotiation within decision-making processes. Thus, a vision of enhanced regional environmental decision-making should include:

- a better understanding the actual linkages between people and the environment, and the ways in which these relationship are affected by development decisions; and
- improved structures and processes that better account for the diversity of interests involved and provide space for the inclusion of these voices in decision-making.

Regional level environmental decision-making and the subsidiarity principle

The complexity of regional and transboundary environmental issues provides a strong case for the application of the subsidiarity principle, which maintains that the authority over environmental decision-making should be located at the lowest appropriate level. This can imply a “downward devolution” of decision-making powers to sub-national institutions or ‘upward devolution’ to national and regional institutions that have a more appropriate geographic mandate. Horizontal subsidiarity asserts that there are roles and responsibilities that should be allocated to non-governmental actors, and implies increased participation of civil society groups and private sector actors in decision-making.

The way in which one conceptualizes “the region” is also important. Aside from the geographic scope, a common understanding of “regional” points to issues handled between nations—bilateral and multilateral relations. Another approach to “regional” is issues that are handled *above* the national or international level, which implies the yielding of some national sovereignty to a super-national body. In practice, it is often difficult to draw a distinct line between the two. Thus, determining the *appropriate* level of decision-making is inherently fraught with controversy, as different perceptions of “who should be doing what” abound. Discussion of these subsidiarity issues was a key theme of the MREG process.

One response to the transborder and regional environmental challenge has been the evolution of regional institutions such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Asian Development Bank’s (ADB) Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and a relatively young group of civil society organizations that focus on regional issues or have become increasingly active at the regional scale.

Each of these institutions represents a fundamentally different approach to regional issues. Within this group of regional institutions, there is a river basin management organization, a multilateral financial institution, a UN agency, a regional political grouping, and loose networks of research and advocacy groups. Nevertheless, a number of critical points are gaining increased currency among all—that the environment should be an integral part of development at the regional scale, and that the ways in which decisions are made have significant implications for the equity and legitimacy of outcomes. This provides a starting point for examining environmental governance.

3. The Regional Environment through a Governance Lens

Governance terminology has assumed a central position within many policy circles. This is true at the regional scale, where the transborder impacts of development interventions have not been an important factor in decision-making in the past. Globally, it is now widely recognized that people affected by development activities should have an active role in decision-making processes. An *environmental governance* perspective entails examination of the “rules of the game” and “who gets to play” in environmental matters, and therefore is broader than just the environmental sector. Environmental governance differs from environmental management, in that it encompasses the range processes and structures that underlie the decision-making processes that affect the environment, however unintentionally. The realization of improved governance proceeds at a slower pace at the regional scale because most of the current structures and processes were not designed to address these issues. The MREG Discussion Paper “**Environmental Governance: Basic Definitions and Key Issues,**” provides a framework and offers some basic concepts to support the MREG analysis.

Through the Rio Declaration, the nations of the region (and world) agreed that environment and development decision-making should be located at the most appropriate level, that the public should have

access to information about the decisions that affect them, and that they should have adequate roles in those decisions. Such principles of environmental governance are gaining acceptance at the regional and national levels. But successful implementation will require concrete and tangible processes, and stronger expressions of political will on the part of national governments and regional organizations. Opinions on how to operationalize these principles—the most appropriate level of decision-making, the minimum level of information access, how to achieve meaningful participation, how to accommodate the diverse interests—vary significantly. At this stage, overarching principles of governance will need to retain some degree of flexibility to meet the region’s diversity.

The state of governance practice may be observed through the various “governance processes” under way in the region. John Dore’s (Australian National University WRI Research Fellow) paper “**Environmental Governance in the Greater Mekong Sub-region**” assumes that the main challenge for environmental governance is to contribute to attaining core goals of ecologically sustainable development. However, there are very different sustainability beliefs and orientations and hence, governance processes need to function despite the often disparate positions of actors. The paper explores the constraining or enabling politics and powers at play in a series of case studies of regional environmental governance processes, including regional NGO formation, Asia-Pacific Preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, regional environment and governance initiatives of the Asian Development Bank, the Tonle Sap-Great Lake Sustainable Multiple Use initiative, the World Commission on Dams, Cambodia’s Governance Action Plan, Mekong River water utilization negotiations, and Lancang Jiang dam building. The analysis asserts that discursive governance processes provide an opportunity for better understanding of actor motivations and more equitable debating, decision-making, and implementing arrangements. Unless institutions demonstrate adaptive attributes the features suggested as desirable may remain theoretically possible, but will not be successfully implemented.

For instance, the Mekong River Commission has begun to open its doors to a broader spectrum of voices, as it pursues a new mandate that includes environmental, social and transborder aspects of basin management. As described by Vikrom Mathur (Stockholm Environment Institute), Mak Sithirith (Cambodian NGO Forum), and Joakim Öjendal (Göteborg University) in their paper “**Assessing Environmental Governance in the Lower Mekong River Basin: A Study of the Hydropower Site Selection Process in the Se San and Sre Pok Basins,**” the 1995 Mekong Agreement has established a broader basis for cooperation among more actors around more issues in the lower basin countries than was previously possible. While the MRC is the only institution with states as members that act under a joint agreement with long-term plans, analysis of the hydropower site selection processes demonstrates how the evolution of regional governance will present difficulties to traditional conceptions of national sovereignty in decision-making. To take regional environmental governance seriously, the institutional connections between regional dynamics and national politics would need to be further strengthened. If not, the regional aspects risk being disconnected from where the important decisions are actually taken.

At the same time, national government structures dominate many of the decision-making fora that operate at the sub-national and regional levels. Often, there are gaps between the national and local levels of governance, which may be replicated within regional institutions. In “**Environmental Governance: A Thai Perspective,**” Dr. Prachoom Chomchai (Thammasat University) links environmental degradation and the rise in environmentally aware political agendas with the general failure of government institutions to handle the complexity of the human-environment relationship. The institutional issues highlighted reflect a number of common governance challenges at the national level throughout the countries of the region. National governments are addressing these issues in different ways. In Thailand, recent developments in the country’s basic democratic structures provide an encouraging setting for further institutional reform. However, how environmental concerns will be handled within the new governance structures is not yet clear. This will be determined largely by how the macro-level policy framework recognizes and incorporates local dynamics into the implementation of governance reforms.

This picture evokes a number of questions that should be high on the priority list of those interested in regional and transborder environmental issues. The MREG Perspective Papers explore many of these questions in depth. Perhaps one overarching question captures the essence of these concerns: *Are current institutions adequately equipped to deal with the challenges that will continue to be presented by development?*

Given the huge diversity in the region – political systems, levels of economic development, ecosystem diversity, ethnic dynamics and the historical context under which this new stage of “regionalism” is evolving—there are almost as many perspectives on this question as there are stakeholders.

4. Research and Dialogue to Promote Regional Environmental Governance

Against this backdrop, it is becoming evident that there is a need for increased space to discuss diverse points of view on regional environmental governance. Development decision-making has traditionally been a centralized, closed process that was not designed to involve the full range of stakeholders directly. How structures and processes should be changed to allow for a greater range of voices to be involved in a larger, more open decision-making is not an easy question to answer. While there is a certain degree of commitment to the improvement of governance practices at the policy level, the structures needed for improved accountability, increased information flows, and broader representation are lacking. Drawing on the analytical material provided in this research and the personal experiences of the participants, MREG discussions addressed:

Diversity of views from around the region: What are the different concerns and issues of stakeholders around the region, and what are the implications for addressing environmental governance? The exploration and discussion of the diverse interests of stakeholders can highlight priority areas for further dialogue. Regardless of whether the topic is upstream-downstream watershed impacts, gender dynamics within a regional development investment, or national development priorities, there is still large scope for building trust around mutual understanding and open exchange of views. It is not enough to refer to the complexity of the situation; stakeholders of the region should be supported to explore in further detail the interactions, interdependencies, and implications of regional governance.

Regional institutions and ongoing processes: How do existing regional institutions approach environmental governance, and what are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each? Many institutions are responding to internal and external pressures to improve their governance practices, which in turn require them to interact with new stakeholders in new ways. While the calls for change are being addressed to some degree, there are still issues of political will and institutional capacity that require attention. There is no consensus concerning the scope and pace of institutional reform.

Evolving norms of environmental governance: How are the principles of good governance, as embodied in the Rio Declaration and elaborated in various subsequent international agreements, viewed in the Mekong context? Are these principles politically acceptable, and is their implementation feasible? Topics of discussion included accountability of institutions to their constituencies, transparency, access to information, and participation in decision-making. There are many articulations of good governance, as reflected in policy statements, but experience in implementation is relatively thin. The MREG group agreed that while most of these principles were agreeable and applicable in the region, “principles need processes” and there must be more concerted efforts to articulate what mechanisms are needed to successfully implement them.

5. MREG Perspectives: Diverse Views on the Present and Future of Environmental Governance

The scope for MREG Perspective Papers was intentionally broad. The objective was to capture the wealth of diversity of perspectives and shine light on the differences in viewpoints, in order to begin to consider the options for environmental governance innovation at the regional level. The Perspective Papers provide insights on real-life governance issues as they play out in specific situations.

In “**Environmental Governance In Vietnam In a Regional Context**,” a team of Vietnamese researchers from three environmental professional associations (Dr. Le Quy An of The Vietnam Association for the Conservation of Nature and the Environment, Mme Do Hong Phan of The Centre for Resource Development and Environment, and Dr. Le Thac Can of The Vietnam Environment and Sustainable Development Center) take a comprehensive look at the national-level governance structures of Vietnam and how they interact with regional institutions and processes. The analysis stresses the important roles

played by the MRC and ADB in promoting improved environmental governance at the national level. It is essential that the regional institutions lead by example in their own operations, provide support to the capacity-building and technical needs of national governments, and increase efforts to promote more efficient and effective coordination that recognizes the comparative advantages of various levels of administration and among sectoral agencies.

In **“Cases Of Local Trans-Boundary Environmental Management In Border Areas Of Mekong Watershed In Yunnan,”** Zuo Ting (from the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge in Yunnan and the China Agricultural University in Beijing) examines several forms of local governance that address transborder environmental issues. The paper points out that the relatively high level of authority provided to the provincial government is passed down to local governments in the form of support to decentralized governance arrangements. This is partly due to the fact that transboundary issues are sometimes marginalized from the attention of national decision-makers because they are too local. Conclusions stress that shared interests in environmental management can be effectively addressed at the local level, and that over-reliance on national or regional initiatives can result in conflicting priorities and slow, inappropriate interventions.

In **“Officializing Strategies: Participatory Processes and Gender in ADB’s Capacity-building in Thailand’s Water Resources Sector,”** a team of three researchers (independent researcher Panadda Pantana, Dr. Bernadette Resurreccion of Asian Institute of Technology, and Mary Jane Real of the Asia Pacific Forum for Women Law and Development) explores the participatory processes of the Asian Development Bank’s (ADB) technical assistance to capacity-building in Thailand’s water resource sector. The research focuses on how participation, as carried out within an ADB TA, has addressed and affected gender issues in the target communities. The research concluded that women have not benefited from, nor have they been successfully included in, the consultation and participation processes because the project has merely extended the gender-biased power structures of the central government to the local level. This experience demonstrates that instead of promoting a broad-based reform to address the underlying disparities in decision-making roles, the TA was focused rather on mobilizing support for decentralized water management. In the final analysis, regional environmental governance is still dominated by gendered structures and processes, and the national-level institutional culture wields considerable influence over outcomes.

In **“Public Participation in Development Projects in Lao PDR,”** the Environment Research Institute of the Science Technology and Environment Agency of Laos assesses the foundations for public involvement in environmental and development issues in Laos. The paper demonstrates the legal and traditional structures for public involvement, and identifies a number of constraints to putting these policies into action. As a government agency charged with providing research inputs to support policy implementation, ERI has highlighted low capacity, insufficient detail to implementing and other supporting regulations, low awareness of the rights and responsibilities of both the government and the public, and the need for flexible plans for public involvement at all stages of decision-making.

In **“NGO Roles in Grassroots’ Rights to Participate,”** Dr. Jamaree Chienthong of Chiang Mai University analyses the recent history of social movement around the interwoven issues of poverty, the environment, and rights of poor people in Thailand. The paper examines how forms of civil society have contributed to, and have been empowered by, the growth in pluralism and expansion of political space for involvement in environment and development issues at the local level. The concluding analysis stresses that there is not one “government” or one “civil society,” and that the involvement of people in public affairs is greatly influenced by the media as a source of information.

In **“The Impact of Regional Integration on Governance Processes in Cambodia: The Environmental Perspective,”** Dr. Kao Kim Hourn of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace elaborates how the political integration provides a framework for enhanced cooperation on environmental issues. The expansion of ASEAN, and the inclusion of Yunnan through the ASEAN +3 process, offer some promising prospects for mobilizing high-level political attention to regional environmental issues. The experience of Cambodia shows that external forces, such as the donor community, can play a vital role in promoting reform of governance structures and practices. The analysis also stresses the importance of internal forces,

particularly the increasingly engaged role of civil society organizations which can advocate for increased political will to deal with tough issues in a more inclusive and open way.

In “**Environmental Governance Mekong Delta Case Study With Downstream Perspectives**,” Dr. Le Quang Minh from Can Tho University in the Mekong Delta, provides a view on transborder environmental issues from the perspective of downstream communities. This analysis demonstrates how perspectives on environmental “impacts” vary greatly depending upon where a stakeholder is located within an ecosystem. Underlying this complexity is the uncertainty of the biophysical changes that can be associated with a development decision upstream. While national structures facilitate the communication and coordination that is necessary to negotiate these outcomes, the importance of the provincial level is often missed. At all levels, the role of increased and improved data analysis should be supported through capacity-building, while officials should support the incorporation of analytical inputs into decision-making processes.

6. Exploring the Cross-cutting Issues

Over the course of three MREG meetings, discussions covered a large number of topics, and considered key issues from a variety of perspectives. This interaction provided insights on the diversity of views on the environment-development balance, and how it should be achieved. Several cross-cutting issues emerged in this dialogue concerning the changing mandates, roles and interactions among regional actors.

Difficulties in implementing meaningful public participation in development projects

What can regional institutions do to promote more effective public participation in projects with transborder impacts, and in debates about issues of regional significance? Governments in the region have voiced commitment to implementing principles of public involvement in decision-making related to projects with environmental impacts. On one hand, environmental and social impact assessments are becoming more mainstreamed, but still fall short of the belief that they should be conducted “early, integrated and always.” Public participation in practice is not always successful in representing the interests of all stakeholder groups, and is particularly lacking in consideration of gender and ethnicity issues. In Thailand, for example, many NGOs have opted not to participate in what they consider to be illegitimate consultation and participation processes sponsored by regional institutions.

Under-represented constituencies in regional environmental decision-making

What can existing regional institutions and processes do, or what new institutions and processes are needed, to ensure that the interests of under-represented groups are genuinely taken into account in regional environmental decision-making? Many believe that a number of stakeholder groups may be systematically under-represented in environmental decision-making. In the case of the Mekong Delta, the extreme dependence of farmers and fishermen on the hydrological regime is not adequately represented by provincial authorities, which lack both the capacity and incentives to address the local problems of flooding and salinity. In Thailand, women’s issues are not making their way into the considerations underpinning the formation of sub-national river basin committees. The demonstrations by affected communities at the 2000 ADB Annual Meeting in Chiang Mai suggest that there are serious gaps in the representation of ethnic minorities in development decision-making at the regional and national scale.

“Public involvement” is often confused with “NGO involvement.” This is problematic for a number of reasons. The NGO situation varies greatly in each country, and a lack of recognition can hamper their involvement in official processes. Direct engagement with affected communities and other stakeholders, such as academics, will be necessary for achieving meaningful public participation. At the same time, representation of marginalized voices could be more effective if the organizational and networking skills of NGOs were improved.

Effectiveness and legitimacy of NGO roles in regional processes

What can NGOs do to be more effective, and to be accepted as legitimate proponents of the public interest in regional environmental governance processes? NGOs are often marginalized from decision-making. But as representatives of certain sectors of the public inclusion of NGOs into decision-making process can greatly enhance the representation of society’s many interests. The development of civil

society to support public policy-making that captures more of the development, environment and equity objectives of society is fraught with challenges. In Thailand, for example, NGOs play diverse roles in their interactions with grassroots groups and with the government. Throughout the region, the legitimacy of NGOs is occasionally questioned by some decision-makers because of the international support they receive or concerns about or the degree of opposition to official policies. In other cases, NGOs have been seen to “officialize” their views through local communities even as they criticize official agencies for doing the same. As actors in governance processes, NGOs should be judged by how representative they are of their constituencies.

Opportunities provided by multi-stakeholder processes to improve regional environmental governance

What can national governments do to improve regional environmental decision-making with transborder or region-wide implications? Significant institutional failure, at the national level, has been raised as a cause of environmental and social problems. A growing number of people would suggest that the public—consisting of NGOs, affected communities, academics and other civil society groups—might be most effective in advocating for government action. Others may see the private sector as an important catalyst, although the concrete roles that business might play are currently not well defined in the Mekong region.

Recently, the idea of multi-stakeholder approaches, such as the World Commission on Dams, has offered an alternative mechanism that brings together government, civil society, private sector and multi-lateral actors together to improve understanding and establish a shared vision for improvement. This approach is largely a reaction to the perceived shortcomings of decision-making process that are dominated by national governments. But how this might be tested in the region is still up for debate, and the challenges to implementation are numerous.

Persistent weakness in information-sharing and public awareness regarding regional environmental challenges

What can policy research institutes, research networks and advocacy networks do to improve the general state of awareness and understanding of regional environmental governance challenges? Although our understanding of the issues is growing, the empirical basis of information and analysis is vastly insufficient. Attitudes and practices of information sharing within and between agencies and countries, coupled with low public awareness of the issues, make addressing environmental issues at the regional level difficult. The information production, exchange, and dissemination tasks of regional institutions and national governments have not yet reached a level sufficient to facilitate informed dialogue among and between the public and policy-makers. In the future, for example, the MRC is hoping to play the role of “clearinghouse” for information related to environmental quality and trends.

Uneven legitimacy, ownership and effectiveness of donor conditionality related to environmental governance

How should multilateral financial institutions most effectively use their influence to promote improved environmental governance at the regional level? There is ambivalence among many actors in the region about the use of donor conditionality by multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank to promote improved governance practices. For example, the World Bank has attempted to use its leverage to promote reform in the forestry sector in Cambodia, in addition to promoting good governance more generally. The donor community has supported the formulation of a Governance Action Plan (GAP), which commits the government of Cambodia to a program of reform, to which it will likely be held accountable within the donor community. There are concerns that there is very little “ownership” of these agendas within the Cambodian government, despite the fact that the GAP, for example, was jointly developed by Cambodian and expatriate experts. The perceived lack of ownership has created concerns about the likelihood of successful implementation on the ground.

7. Priorities for Enhancing Regional Environmental Governance

There is a growing consensus among many actors in the region that principles of good governance should be more actively applied to improve environmental and social outcomes of development decision-making. This is demonstrated at all levels. Regional institutions are adopting policies and strategies to improve governance performance, while national governments have made significant advances in the past ten years to improve the institutional and policy framework for environmental decision-making. A nascent civil

society has begun to call for increased opportunities for participation, greater transparency and improved accountability structures.

Still, principles need processes—processes that increase trust and understanding, establish common ground and identify concrete options—because the systemic changes that governance reform imply will require significant political will on all sides. For example, although the Mekong Agreement is being taken rather seriously by the national governments as a legal document, the degree to which the three “soft issues”—incorporating socio-environmental issues, opening up to outside collaboration and supporting activities under a program approach—will be actively promoted remains to be seen. Similarly, the ADB has endeavored to improve its consultation practices, although some argue that these efforts are lacking in depth.

There are several broad priority areas that are fundamental for supporting the development of improved governance practice in the region. At the same time the MREG research and discussions have shown that there are still many questions concerning what options might prove to be effective, feasible, desirable and equitable. The general sense of the group was that increasing the plurality of actors involved in planning and other decision-making would result in approaches that are more suitable to local conditions and more equitable for stakeholders.

National-level governance structures should be enhanced to ensure that the public is involved at more points, in more significant ways, in national and regional environmental decision-making processes.

Regional institutions may be seen to have significant influence over environmental and social outcomes, but national-level structures and capacities to deal with environmental issues are of critical importance. Two issues surface quickly in most any discussion of environmental governance at the national level. The first is the political will to commit and follow-through on reform. The other is the limitations of human capacity and budgetary resources. Both are conditioned by the existing political space and power structures in which actors can operate. For example, the Mekong River Commission Secretariat could support the National Mekong Committees to more effectively carry out their roles in facilitating public involvement. But effort from the Secretariat would have to be matched with a commitment from national governments to build capacity and provide NMCs more space within their own national planning processes.

The donor community may be well placed to support progress in both of these areas – by addressing governance issues within their country strategies and assistance programs, and by providing technical and budgetary support directly to the areas of most crucial need within the legal and policy framework. At the same time, donors should not lose sight of capacity building needs, and should continue to facilitate public involvement at the project level.

National governments, regional institutions, and civil society should advance the governance principles already embraced through international and regional agreements.

While it is widely agreed that the principles of sustainable development embodied in the Rio Declaration – such as integration of environment and development, access to information and participation – are valuable, the challenge of finding ways to put these into action is huge. In the spirit of existing commitments, the actors of the region should increase efforts to negotiate the form and implementation of these evolving norms might take. International or global commitments can provide legitimacy to advocates of change and reform that can assist in mobilizing political will.

In Europe, the Aarhus Convention has provided one approach to how environmental governance principles can be put into action at the regional level. Another approach is the Espoo Convention, which has secured commitments from signatory European governments to integrating improved governance practices within EIA standards. A less-binding agreement among the American States, the Inter-American Strategy for the Promotion of Public Participation in Sustainable Development Decision-Making (ISP), establishes a common vision for improved environmental governance that recognizes the differences between nations.

Although the global experience may offer some interesting options, Mekong regional actors should continue to engage in discussions about what is appropriate and feasible for this region. There is a sense among some that the existing institutions are appropriate for addressing these and future issues, and that reform should be conducted within the current framework. Others would suggest that formal commitment directly from governments could provide the impetus for governance reforms.

Civil society should lead the way in monitoring and supporting the development of enhanced governance performance

Many aspects of the regional institutional framework are changing. Progress has been observed in some areas of governance, while others have lagged behind. In order to understand these changes, a system to monitor the progress of environmental governance performance could provide both civil society and government with a point of reference for gauging progress. For example, it was suggested at the Vientiane MREG meeting that a periodic regional forum to discuss regional environmental management and governance issues could provide an opportunity for concerned groups to assess progress on a regular basis.

Domestic constituencies for environmental governance reform should continue to address their national settings and engage the relevant government agencies on issues of interest, but may also find value in participating in such a regional forum. The evolution of a group of independent actors to monitor environmental governance issues at the regional scale could help facilitate the exchange of information, analysis and views on national-level issues.

National governments and regional institutions should support an epistemic community that would play a larger role in providing information, data and analysis directly to decision-makers at various levels.

A vibrant regional research community can make a critical contribution to understanding of transborder environmental issues and how they should be addressed. Researchers could play a larger role in supplying high-quality, timely information and analysis to decision-makers, affected communities, and other representatives of society. Increasing collaboration and exchange among researchers is a longer-term investment in the production of shared knowledge base, which may provide an important balance to the comparatively slow-pace of inter-governmental processes. Researchers and scientists from Yunnan have long been involved with colleagues in the Lower Basin countries. Using new communication technologies, exchange and dialogue at the regional level can be advanced regardless of progress on political fronts.

8. Concluding Remarks

The MREG project was an effort to provide a forum for diverse actors to familiarize themselves with a variety of perspectives, exchange research results, and discuss the opportunities for improving environmental governance in the Mekong Region. This volume is just one of the outputs from the MREG group. Other outputs are more difficult to capture in a written report; these outputs are associated with the inter-personal interactions and the dynamics of group learning.

The richness in dialogue and enthusiasm of participants throughout MREG demonstrate the need for more venues for multi-stakeholder interaction around environmental governance issues. As each of the participants takes part of the MREG process back to his or her own work setting, we hope that this type of forum can be adapted and adopted by interested groups around the region to continue on with the dialogue. A truly “regional perspective” on environmental challenges in the Mekong region will only develop if linkages between the actors of the region expand and deepen.

As was seen in the research, the national level of governance is also extremely important, particularly in terms of interactions with regional institutions. Partners stressed the need for support for similar discussions of environmental governance issues in each national context. With the active participation of the many actors of the Mekong region, we hope that innovative mechanisms for dialogue and exchange will contribute ever more to enhancing the structures and processes of regional environmental governance at all levels.