GLOBALISATION, REGIONALISATION AND LOCAL VOICES: THE ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK AND RE-SCALED POLITICS OF ENVIRONMENT IN THE MEKONG REGION

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation is manifested in the Mekong Region both through processes and discourses that reflect the ideology of a borderless world allowing easy passage of capital and commodities, and through resistance to such processes in an increasingly transnationalised civil society movement. However, more immediately significant supranational integrative agendas take the form of regionalisation, a process that has received less attention but which raises analogous concerns of re-scaled governance. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has been a catalysing force for regionalisation amidst a host of regional processes and initiatives; as such it has found itself the object of critique as an institution and through the specific projects it has supported that have impacted on local communities and ecosystems. Meanwhile, local and NGO voices associated with the emergence of a vibrant civil society in Thailand and nascent civil society responses in neighbouring countries have challenged claims on resources made in the name of national development and regional integration.

This paper considers some key issues of re-scaling resource and environmental politics in the Mekong Region, and the extent to which challenges have been recast from national to regional development agendas. Politics of environment are shown to exist as a general rather than exceptional response to the region’s development direction, and it is suggested that equitable and sustainable development increasingly needs to address simultaneously the re-scaling and reconfigurations of power in both environmental politics and the “infrapolitics” of environment. The paper is illustrated with case studies of dams in Laos and Thailand.

Keywords: globalisation, regionalisation, Asian Development Bank, Mekong, civil society, environment

INTRODUCTION

The discursive and material realities of globalisation are often recognised to be out of step with one another. Globalisation is seen as a legitimising discourse for regressive or autocratic decision-making in core (Swyngedouw, 2000) and peripheral (Kelly, 1997) regions alike, buying national decision makers into the ideological convenience that “there is no alternative” (Singer, 1999) and that the neoliberal orthodoxy is now the only...
possible route (Mohan, 2000). In this analysis,
globalisation is manufactured as a discursive
negation of the possibility of nations (and
presumably the social formations of which their
civil societies are a part) defining their own
development futures (McMichael, 1996).

Alternative visions of globalisation look to
a “critical geopolitics” (Dalby, 1999) that
engages from below, but within a global
framework. The parallel process of
supranational regionalisation is less well
considered. When it is raised at all,
regionalisation is often counterposed to
globalisation, either as a threat to the
globalised ideal of free trade through the
emergence of regional trading blocs, or as an
expression of regional identity that is assumed
to be a kind of resistance to global
homogenising forces. Yet, the discursive
construction of supranational regions has
every bit as much to do with expressions of
re-scaled power relations as does

globalisation.

Resistance to globalisation has been
discussed more specifically in the context of
environmentalism (Mittelman, 1998; Norberg-
Hodge, 1999). Specific resistance to
regionalisation is hardly discussed at all. In
Southeast Asia, an embryonic resistance to
supranational processes is evident, but it
raises difficult and sometimes disturbing
issues for equally embryonic – and spatially
differentiated – civil society emergence within
the more conventional nation-state framework.
In some cases, notably in Thailand, what Kelly
(1997) refers to in Neil Smith’s terminology as
a “jump of scale” has facilitated the scaling up
of resistance necessary to address the level at
which impositions on local livelihoods is
generated. However, in other circumstances,
specifically in Laos, the construction of
resistance is poorly articulated with local
processes and is carried out in a surrogate
manner, most notably where local political
economy and cultures of non-confrontation
militate against challenge. This may not
necessarily indicate passivity on the part of
local players, but rather concern that
repressive responses of national authorities
tend to be most severe when local displeasure
is articulated with and by wider players.

On 26 January 2001, the District Officer (nai
ampoe) of Lan Sak District in Uthai Thani
Province spoke to a group of 40 Thai and
Australian students conducting a joint Field
School exchange.¹ Nai Ampoe Wijaan talked
of the push to get 100 per cent of the farmers
in Lan Sak to practise “natural farming” (kaset
thamachaat) within the next five years to
replace their unsustainable chemical-based
farming. He also outlined his ideas – and
differences with other authorities – regarding
the management of Uthai Thani’s World
Heritage area, the Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife
Sanctuary, part of the larger Western Forest
Complex.² The thrust of his argument was that
for too long, local people in villages on the
edge of the Sanctuary have been excluded,
giving them little sense of value, ownership or
participation in the management of the
Sanctuary. Unusually for such a formal and
public occasion, he gave a quite outspoken
criticism, not only of Royal Forestry
Department policy but also, more specifically,
of the 2000 World Heritage Day event held in
Uthai Thani to promote the importance of Huai
Kha Khaeng. The function included invitees
from numerous national and international
organisations, but not a single local
representative from villages surrounding the
Sanctuary. Why, asked the District Officer,
does World Heritage status lead government
and some non-government agencies alike to

¹The Field School is an annual field-based programme
for 20 geography students from Sydney University
who spend five weeks with students from tertiary
institutions in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand conducting
village level fieldwork in the three countries.

²The Western Forest Complex is a contiguous set of
national parks and wildlife sanctuaries that make up
Thailand’s largest remaining area of old-growth
forest. The area has been considered for a Global
Environment Facility project, but Thailand remains
ineligible for such funding as long as it refrains from
signing the Convention on Biodiversity.
alienate the rights and interests of local people in helping to manage such a resource? How can local people be expected to value the Sanctuary if permission from the Director General of the Royal Forestry Department is required to enter without fear of arrest? Why should the foundation set up in memory of the late manager of the Sanctuary assume proprietary rights over the area?

The salience of this episode for a discussion of globalisation, regionalisation, environmentalism and resistance in the Mekong Region is threefold. First, it illustrates an important aspect of globalisation directly related to sustainability, i.e., the way in which global commons management has ironically abrogated rights in local commons, often involving generic "solutions" such as market-based rights and management schemata. The globalisation of the commons is a theme that Michael Goldman has expounded in his book *Privatising Nature* (Goldman, 1998), and which Charles Zerner addresses through the lens of social justice in his critique of over-subscription to universalistic market-based solutions to natural resource management and conservation (Zerner, 2000). These critiques of supranational environmental managerialism apply equally to regional as to global discourses.

Second, the episode shows a fundamental change in thinking and speaking among some government officials, who are increasingly willing to engage in public debate and assert their own approach in direct challenge to the bureaucratic status quo. It highlights alliances of position, if not of open political contestation, between different government officers and different non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As such, it reflects a democratisation in Thai politics that goes well beyond the oft-assumed civil society-state divide (Hewison, 1998), suggesting that sites of resistance do not lie entirely outside the state when supranational governance is at issue.

As such, and third, it shows an interesting reconfiguration in the everchanging politics of environment in Thailand, with its shifting alliances and ideas about relationships between people and nature. It suggests that studies of such politics need to look more seriously at the state as a differentiated entity (cf. Hirsch, 1997) and at global-local issues of scale. The key theme that I wish to illustrate in this paper, through a set of related case studies, is that reconfiguration and re-scaling of environmental challenges need to be examined hand in hand. Specific to this is that the “moment” of supranational challenge in the Mekong Region lies more firmly in regionalised than in globalised processes – at least in the environmental and resource politics arena.

In the discussion that follows, I explore the changing resource and environmental politics of the Mekong Region in the context of regional integration, with a specific focus on the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and its Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) programme. The agenda of supranational regional integration – itself one aspect of post-Cold War globalisation – has simultaneously produced new fora and opportunities for cooperation, but also new pressures and contexts for competition and conflict over resources. These are played out on a regional terrain of highly differentiated civil society and a complex politics of legitimacy and resistance associated with nationalist and internationalising agendas. Brief case studies of dams in Laos and Thailand illustrate some of these themes.

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3The Seub Nakhasathien Foundation was co-host of the World Heritage event. Seub Nakhasathien managed the sanctuary and was co-author of the submission to UNESCO for its World Heritage status. He committed suicide in 1990, and it is commonly assumed that the pressures on the Sanctuary were behind his despair. The Foundation set up in his name initially included a wide range of voices concerned with Thailand’s environmental problems (Hirsch, 1993), but more recently, the Foundation has become aligned with an urban-based environmentalism that often sits uneasily with livelihood-based environmental NGO positions (see Hirsch, 1997; Forsyth, 2001; ).
differentiated. Thailand’s prosperity during the early 1990s was associated with an apparent middle-class ebullience over both the cultural and economic manifestations of globalisation, celebrated with timely coining of the Thai term lokhanuwat (Chai-anan, 1994; Pasuk & Baker, 1998; see also Reynolds, this issue). While the reverse side of globalisation has parodied the phenomenon in the play on words lokhapinat (global disaster), the dominant media, advertising and economic planners’ response was delight in the coming of age of Thailand as a global equal in the stakes of economic development prowess (Jory, 1999).

The financial crisis of 1997 saw a reverse side to this enthusiasm at global interconnectedness. The antiglobalisation movements evinced at Rio (1992), Seattle (1999), Davos (2000), Melbourne (2000) and Quebec City (2001) were reflected in Thailand’s own civil society antiglobalisation/regionalisation event shadowing the ADB meeting in Chiang Mai in May 2001. The agenda at Chiang Mai was somewhat different from the anti-trade liberalisation movement of Seattle, as was the social composition of protesters, but international media represented the movement as out of the same mould. Thai security preparations were informed by what had occurred elsewhere. There is also little doubt that the mode of protest had parallels with earlier shadow events. Ironically, the ADB’s post-Chiang Mai response – to retreat to the insular location of Hawaii for its 2001 meeting – presaged the more extreme suggested ship-based hideaway for future Bretton Woods institution fora in the wake of Stockholm and Genoa.

While Thailand has thus explicitly articulated both with globalisation and antiglobalisation discourses, in the case of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, it is difficult to separate the advent of post-Cold War globalisation discourse from the more general opening of these economies. This opening has been associated with the move from command economies, semi-autarkic in the case of Laos and Democratic Kampuchea in the latter 1970s, toward more open market economies following Laos’ and Vietnam’s reforms of the mid-1980s, and Cambodia’s transition and end to international isolation after 1991. Much of the engagement associated with market-opening has taken a regional dimension, whether it be through accession to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – Vietnam in 1995, Burma and Laos in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999 – through the revival of Mekong River Basin cooperation incorporated in the Mekong River Commission, or through initiatives such as the ADB’s GMS programme (Murray, 1994). Civil society responses to supranational expansion of markets and infrastructure have been cast as much at the regionalisation as at the globalisation agendas, particularly at the environment-livelihood nexus associated with perceived threats of a regional resource economy supported by large-scale infrastructure impacting on local resource bases (Watershed, 2000).

There may seem to be ironies involved in globalisation of grassroots responses to globalisation, or regionalised responses to regionalisation, but there is also a perverse logic to such processes. The January 2001 transatlantic shadowing of the Davos World Economic Forum with a World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, is but the latest in a number of global civil society responses to the international global mainstream (Bello, 2001). However, in thinking about such processes and apparent contradictions more concretely through global/local politics of environment, there is a more general point to be made, which itself raises numerous questions.

In the arena of environmentalism, the key issue is what happens when issues of sustainability are arrogated to a larger scale, whether it be regional or global (Goldman, 2001). Questions we can ask apply to regional as well as global politics of sustainability. Does striving for the big picture perspective involve a qualitative shift that ultimately undermines local sustainability? Are the social justice implications of sustainable development...
discourse and practice transformed across scales? How are local and supranational politics of environment related and played out at different levels? How does the regionalisation/globalisation of environmental politics relate to the emergence of civil society structures and processes that are mainly contained within national spaces? Conversely, how do civil society actions that transcend national spaces maintain legitimacy in an era of nationalism, particularly when first-world/third-world dynamics are involved? As the global and regional multilateral financial institutions, notably the World Bank and ADB, have taken on the rhetoric of civil society partnerships, good governance, poverty alleviation, participation, NGO consultation and so on, what new politics of sustainability are being played out? Can we identify a simultaneous globalisation/regionalisation of localism and the regional/global institutional inroads into the local?

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT, ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES AND REGIONALISATION IN THE MEKONG

In 1988, Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan talked of turning battlefields into marketplaces. Since the early 1990s, the ADB has referred to the “peace dividend” in the GMS’s integrative development agenda, with the ADB playing a role of “honest broker” between former antagonists (e.g. Pante, 1996).4 Japan and Australia have funded bridges across the Mekong that both materialise and symbolise the linking of economies and resource systems in mainland Southeast Asia. With the support of international donor agencies, the four lower riparian governments established the Mekong River Commission under the Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, signed in Chiang Rai in 1995. Whichever way we look, the narrative of integrative development in a new spirit of cooperation and sustainability has marked the mainstream discourse of development thinking and practice in the region over the past decade.

During the early 1990s, a dominant aspect of regional economic integration was the spilling over of Thailand’s unsustainable resource development into neighbouring countries. Ironically, this was a product in part of the very success of environmental politics within Thailand (Hirsch, 1995). As limits to dam construction moved from the physical to the political, particularly in the wake of the Nam Choan Dam protests and cancellation in 1988, so the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) set its sights on newly opening resource peripheries in Laos and Myanmar. As Thailand’s environmental movement succeeded in mobilising for a logging ban in 1989, so logging in Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia expanded rapidly. In other arenas (e.g. gems and fisheries), complementarities between resource potentials in Indochina and Myanmar, and export-oriented processing industries in Thailand saw the emergence of a “resource diplomacy” (Innes-Brown & Valencia, 1993). These countries, meanwhile, saw resource exports as the most immediate way to support their opening up and deriving export income. Inevitably, such resource development quickly raised questions of sustainability as Thailand’s ecological footprint extended rapidly beyond its borders.

Institutional responses to the regionalising agenda during the early 1990s were dominated by the revival of the Mekong Committee in its new incarnation, the Mekong River Commission. After abortive efforts in 1992, the Commission was established in 1995 with the Chiang Rai Agreement. The Commission has a complex agenda of resource sharing, conservation and development, and this put it at the centre of controversies over resource-based regional integration. Dams have been

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4See Witoon (2000) for a direct NGO challenge to the notion of ADB as honest broker rather than dominant player with its own set of interests.
at the forefront of the more overt resource and environmental politics. In part, this has represented the resumption of a resource development vision conceived in the 1960s but interrupted by Cold War tensions and conflict until the late 1980s – during which geo-political hiatus the global and regional eco-political stage had changed considerably.

Globalised responses to regional resource and environmental pressures include a number of forestry and conservation programmes implemented by the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility (GEF). While the GEF project encapsulating the Western Forest Complex in Thailand (which is the subject of the anecdote with which I started) has not eventuated, a GEF component was part of a Finnish Agency for International Development/World Bank/GEF forest management programme in Laos. This programme, known in its entirety as the Forest Management and Conservation Project (FOMACOP), has been shrouded in resource and environmental politics from its outset. The early NGO critique of FOMACOP revolved around concerns that the programme was an application of a kind of neo-colonial scientific forestry to legitimise increased logging in the name of local forest management (Watershed, 2001). Ironically, the project finally came to grief in 2000 due to a dispute over the notion of forest revenue sharing between government and villagers whose forests were being logged, a dispute that arose between the international project and the Department of Forestry, not involving NGOs or civil society voices – again illustrating the complex siting and character of resistance.

The Asian Development Bank in the Mekong Region

The ADB is one of three regional development banks, each of which exists amidst a tension between regional specificity and duplication of global (Bretton Woods) financial institutional roles (Culperer, 1994). In 1992, the ADB established its GMS programme (ADB, 2000). While the ADB’s programmes included dams as part of the integrative energy approach (in line with telecommunications, roads, tourism and other projects focused on intra-regional linkage), the Mekong River was more incidental than central, symbolic rather than substantive, to the GMS vision. ADB programmes have included large-scale infrastructure, but also programmes based on privatisation and sectoral adjustment.

Sustainability has entered the discourse of most programmes, and environmental projects form one sub-sector of the GMS portfolio (Azimi et al., 2000), albeit through the managerial discourse that has already been subject to critique in the context of the global commons institutional initiatives referred to above. More recently, poverty alleviation has become the official overriding objective of ADB programmes, including those focused on the environment, while the Bank presents itself as going through a process of reform (ADB, 2000). Nevertheless, infrastructure remains an important component of the ADB’s GMS lending portfolio, increasingly financed and managed through public-private partnerships.

The Nam Theun-Hinboun Dam

The Nam Theun-Hinboun Dam is a build-own-operate-transfer project, following an increasingly popular way of using global finance capital for infrastructure project financing in place of the traditional public-sector financing associated with multilateral development banks (MDBs). The project is one of a number of Mekong tributary dams located entirely within one country – Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) – but whose rationale is closely linked to the

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3 Pasuk (2000) questions the extent to which the Bank’s rhetoric on poverty alleviation reflects a real shift in emphasis. She is particularly critical of the indications that ADB programmes are leading the wider Mekong Region along a socially and environmentally unsustainable development path similar to that taken by Thailand over the past several decades. Bello (2000) is even more scathing, suggesting that reform is an impossibility for the institution.
regionalised resource economy of the Mekong Region; in this case, the surplus generation capacity of Lao PDR and Thailand’s purported energy deficit provide such a rationale. Discursively scaled at the regional level, this is an infrastructural project to cope with the development bottleneck of ever impending power shortage. However, scaled at the national level, Lao dams are not so much infrastructural as enclave extractive foreign exchange resource projects.

The Dam was completed in 1998 at a total cost of US$240 million. Forty per cent of the Theun-Hinboun Power Company (THPC) is owned by Thai company GMS Power and Scandinavian company Nordic Hydropower in equal shares, while 60 per cent is owned by the Government of Laos (GoL). Ninety per cent of the equity portion of GoL’s share was financed with a US$60 million concessional loan from the ADB’s Asia Development Fund (ADF), a soft loan facility supported by the Bank’s main donors to finance projects in poorer developing country member states (AMRC, 2000). Although its investment in the project was only 25 per cent of the total cost (equity plus borrowings), ADB was responsible for the social and environmental planning for the Dam and saw it as a model of public-private partnership in a regional project.

The Dam is a 210-megawatt hydropower project on Nam Theun, the Mekong River’s fourth largest tributary, about 100 km upstream of the Mekong confluence. The power produced is almost entirely destined for export to Thailand. It diverts most of the flow of the Nam Theun into a much smaller tributary, the Nam Hai, a branch of the Mekong tributary Nam Hinboun, utilising the 240 m head of water provided by a natural escarpment in an intra-basin transfer. At the opening ceremony on 4 April 1998, the ADB President Tadao Chino declared:

From an environmental perspective the Theun-Hinboun is ecologically friendly. It operates on the simple principle of exploiting the difference in height of two river basins. The results are that there is no flooding, virtually no reservoir, and no need to resettle local people (<www.adb.org>).

The Dam was promoted as environmentally benign on the basis that it is a “run of river” structure. This means that the headpond is quite small, holding back less than one week’s average flow, pre-empting the need to flood a large area and having a relatively minor effect on the overall seasonality of Mekong hydrology.

However, the Dam has in fact had a dramatic but unquantified effect more locally. Hydrological impacts of intra-basin transfers are significant both for donor and receiving systems (Davies et al., 1992). In the case of the Nam Theun-Hinboun, the dry-season hydrological impact downstream of the Dam on the Nam Theun-Nam Kading has involved drastic reduction in releases of 40-50 cubic metres per second (cumecs) minimum dry season flow under natural conditions to only five cumecs with the diversion. Conversely, the receiving system has had an equally sharp increase in flows, particularly during the wet season. Moreover, the power operating regime is such that peak hour flows are much higher than base flows in the receiving system, which means that sudden surges can catch downstream communities unawares on the Nam Hai and Hinboun channels as the sluices

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4In the early 1990s, Thailand’s economic growth rate and energy demand growth were both in double percentage figures. EGAT used trend lines to warn of massive energy deficits in the early twenty-first century. However, the 1997 crisis has greatly reduced projected energy demand, as has successful demand management. Moreover, the move from power purchase agreements toward a regional spot-market based on an integrated grid raises even more uncertainties of the Thai demand for Lao electricity. One prognosis is that EGAT will utilise hydropower, including that from Laos, for peak rather than base load, which has significant implications both for the economics and environmental impact of the operating regime of hydropower facilities.
are opened in response to Thai electricity needs. Child drownings resulting from these surges have been reported (Terry Warren, THPC fisheries consultant, personal communication). While the upper reaches of the Nam Hai have been channelised, erosion of river-banks further downstream on the Nam Hinboun is evident in very high sediment loads.

The fisheries impacts of the Dam have been particularly severe. No baseline survey was conducted ahead of construction, so all information is anecdotal. However, two reports indicate the extent of the impact. In 1998, the International Rivers Network (IRN) commissioned a study by a Lao-speaking American national who had formerly worked with NGOs in Laos for seven years (Shoemaker, 1998). This report found severe dislocation and a 30-90 per cent reported loss of fishery-related livelihoods among riverine communities in the three main impact areas: below the Dam on the Theun-Kading; below the Dam on the Hai-Hinboun; and in the headpond area above the Dam. Meanwhile, a study commissioned by the THPC and carried out during 1998 by a fish biologist with many years’ experience in the region found similarly significant impacts on fisheries in a river with an exceptionally high level of species diversity and endemism (Warren, 1999), but this report was kept under wraps by THPC. Impacts are due to: the barrier effects of the Dam on migratory fish; the altered ecological conditions in the headpond and the destruction of rapids; the diversion of the larger river system into the smaller; erosion, sedimentation and loss of pool-and-riffle sequences downstream; and a range of other factors. The report is available on the IRN website (<www.irn.org>) and is referred to – and implicitly criticised – in another report written by Australian consultant Murray Watson and hosted on the ADB website (THPC, 2000; <www.adb.org>). The THPC mitigation plan is particularly dismissive, not only of environmental releases such as those recommended by Warren, but even of the existing minimum flow release requirements:

[W]hen the decision was made to divert the Nam Theun river it became inevitable that the Nam Kading (the name given to the Nam Theun below the diversion weir [sic]), and the Nam Hai and Nam Hinboun would become different ecosystems. It would be possible to retain the Nam Kading’s previous ecology (and fisheries) only by not diverting most of the diverted flows. The present riparian release is an expensive ‘gesture’ of unknown mitigative benefit (THPC 2000: 3).

In effect, the report turns around the original ADB argument that the Dam had no adverse environmental impact; it suggests that, since the diversion so fundamentally changes the nature of the river system, it makes more sense to treat the Theun downstream of the Dam and the Hai-Hinboun as essentially new river systems with which to work. The report goes on to quote IRN campaigner Patrick McCully’s (1996) Silenced Rivers at length to reinforce the point, an ironic use of an anti-dam tour de force by the Dam’s operators to justify reduced mitigation responsibilities!

INTERNATIONALISED CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES

Civil society responses have emerged in the Mekong Region in a highly uneven fashion, still shaped primarily by the nature of political space within national borders. Thailand has clearly seen the most significant local and non-governmental environmental challenges to mainstream development paths (cf. Hirsch, 1997; Hewison, 1998). Cambodia has more recently seen a nascent NGO response to logging and other environmentally destructive practices, and the political space for such responses here is greater than in the other countries of Indochina (Sithirith, 2000). In both Laos and Vietnam, questions are continually raised over the environmental implications of particular projects, but it cannot be said that there is an environmental movement as such
in either country. The political space for non-
governmental challenges and critique is simply not there. As a result, a good deal of the
discussion on projects such as the Nam Theun II or Yali Falls dams has been in the regional/
international arena. This does not imply lack of passion on either side within each country, but
rather that such passions are not played out in the same modes of civil society challenge or
engagement as they are elsewhere. This is despite international organisations’ attempts to
put a democratic tinge on processes by organising so-called public hearings on big
projects. The legitimation politics of such events have little to do with domestic concerns in
a country like Laos.

Civil society, nation states and the ADB

There is limited political space within most countries of the Mekong Region to articulate
concerns over projects and other aspects of development that threaten social and
environmental sustainability. Many projects are being carried out within the framework of a
regionalised resource economy. Is there, then, an emerging regional politics of environment
that acts as a surrogate civil society and addresses the regionalised resource development agenda? At one level, the response to the ADB regional agenda shown at Chiang
Mai in May 2000 suggests that such a movement is emerging. A follow-up event at Sydney
University in June 2000 involved an engagement between many of the same actors who had been
on opposite sides at the northern Thai capital two months earlier, but this time the antagonists
were in the same room and engaged directly in dialogue over their differences (Gunning-
Stevenson, 2001; see also <www.usyd.edu.au/su/geography/mejong>). In this case, a target audience for the forum was the Australian public and government policy makers who provide financial support to the ADB through facilities such as the ADF, which was due for topping up in September 2000.

Rhetorical moves by the ADB on sustainability and poverty alleviation have not
pre-empted environmental and social critiques of ADB projects. The Khlong Dan Wastewater Treatment Plant in Samut Prakarn in southern Thailand, has become the target of particularly vociferous criticism and protest by local
groups, Thai and international NGOs. Reforms and conditionality, notably water pricing in
Thailand, have been the subject of more generic civil society advocacy such as that
witnessed in Chiang Mai in May 2000. The most obvious targets have been dams, but the relatively small scale of two of those constructed (Nam Song and Nam Leuk in central Laos) combined with the limited civil society development in that country have kept these low-profile (but see IRN, 1999; also Sirivanh et al., 2000). The proposed Se San 3 Dam in Vietnam has recently been removed from the ADB portfolio, following Vietnamese
government reluctance to accede to conditions placed by the ADB. These conditions were
therein part the result of NGO pressures to reconsider the implications of this project in light of the flooding attributed to the Yali Falls Dam higher on the Se San River in Northeast Cambodia (Ratanakiri Province Fisheries Office, 2000). This leaves the Nam Theun-Hinboun Dam as the highest-profile contested ADB project that has been completed in the Mekong Region.

Civil society response to the Nam Theun-Hinboun Dam

The controversy over the Nam Theun-
Hinboun Dam provides an indication of the complexities of civil society responses to
regional elite agendas where there is considerably more space for critique at scales

7The Samut Prakarn wastewater treatment plant is opposed by nearby communities due to the potential impacts of concentration of industrial pollution in a coastal area. The project did not have a full Environmental Impact Assessment because it was classed as an environmental initiative; there have been allegations of corrupt land deals associated with the plant. In January 2001, 104 Thai Senators petitioned for a halt to work on the plant while further studies are carried out, and the ADB Inspection Panel has been asked to investigate.
beyond the nation-state than there is within the national space of the country in question (Laos). After declaring the Dam “ecofriendly” at its opening in April 1998, the ADB soon found itself the target of the Shoemaker report referred to above. The response of the ADB was to send a mission to the area and produce a report that refuted many of the IRN’s findings. A public slanging match between the ADB and NGO critics followed. Meanwhile, neither the THPC nor ADB was prepared to release the Warren report, claiming that it had some technical errors. In fact, a specific recommendation of that report, to double minimum dry season releases into the Nam Theun downstream of the Dam (still less than one-quarter of minimum natural dry season flows) threatened the THPC with losses of up to US$1 million per year.

While the debate continued, people affected by the Dam were largely left to fend for themselves. Because the Dam did not flood any communities, little provision for resettlement or other social mitigation measures had been provided (Shoemaker, 1998). Most of the assistance for affected communities had been designated for provision of wells and of experimental headpond fisheries. Neither of these dealt with the dual impacts of loss of riverbank gardens or loss of natural fisheries, and they did not apply to the communities downstream on the Nam Hinboun whose fisheries had been severely affected by the diversion (Warren, 1999). Moreover, in the closed political circumstances of Lao PDR, information given to NGOs potentially put villagers at considerable risk of punitive response by local or national authorities. It was notable that the villager who had been pictured on the front of the Shoemaker report had his photograph duplicated on cover of the ADB rebuttal, apparently denying that there were problems. In this case we see not so much a jump of scale of resistance as a dislocation of the debate from the affected locale.

An exceptional moment of confrontation came at the June 2000 Sydney conference, which was attended by 220 academics, NGO workers from Australia and the region, green activists, Australian government officials, ADB staff, and government researchers and planners from the region. At the conference, Terry Warren presented his findings from his hitherto suppressed report, along with graphic slides of the erosional and fisheries impacts of the diversion (Warren, 2000). A similar, though less dramatic, presentation was made on the Nam Song Dam, based on a joint study carried out by Australian researchers and the National Economic Research Institute of Lao PDR’s State Planning Committee (Sirivanh et al., 2000). The senior ADB staffer admitted that the ADB had “dropped the ball” in the way it had dealt with these dams, but at the same time assured the meeting that the Bank is learning all the time from its experience. Meanwhile, the Lao Vice-Minister responsible for international cooperation, who had been flown in for the conference by the ADB at quite short notice, while publicly thanking the meeting and announcing that a follow-up investigation would be established on her return to Laos, privately chided the Lao present for their washing of the country’s dirty linen in public. The mitigation plan discussed above was the only known follow-up on Nam Theun-Hinboun Dam.

RE-SCALING ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS AND POLITICS OF ENVIRONMENT

A question that arises is whether this targeting of the ADB, as an institution and as the supporter of environmentally controversial projects such as the Nam Theun-Hinboun Dam, is a logical scaling up of response from national to supranational institutions, or whether it is rather a regional expression of the globalisation.

*The ten ADB staff at the Accounting for Development conference included the Deputy Director of Programs West, the chief of the GMS programme, the senior staffer responsible for hydropower planning, the Bank’s NGO liaison officer and senior environmental staff.
of civil society responses to globalisation. I suggest that, in the first instance, it may well be the latter, but that ultimately it is not meaningful to draw such sharp distinctions. This may seem to be an academic point but, in fact, the politics of legitimacy of protest in Thailand and elsewhere place considerable importance on the question of who is behind the protest. Local livelihood concerns are seen as legitimate, while foreign “Seattle” type instigators are seen at best as naive middle-class outsiders, at worst as sinister “third hands”. This is further complicated by pre-existing tensions between countries in the region, notably Laos and Thailand, so that Thai-based NGOs may easily be portrayed as counter to Lao national interests.

While regional institutions are only partly targeted by those locally affected in most parts of the Mekong Region, there has been a significant scaling up of local response in Thailand. The case of the Rasi Salai Dam on the Mun River is an interesting case in point. Completed in 1994, Rasi Salai inundated between 5000 and 8000 ha of land, much of which was classified as degraded forest or wasteland. In fact, this “gallery forest” (paa thaam) was an important source of livelihood, and areas flooded had been used for wet rice farming, dryland cropping, saltpan farming and forest product collection by a number of surrounding villages, while the river itself was an important local fishery. Some villages had road access cut off by the floodwaters behind the Dam. Following local opposition and restitution claims, including the establishment of protest villages on an island in the reservoir, the Dam site was occupied by some 700 affected villagers in March 2000. The protest joined 16 other sets of villages with grievances throughout the Northeast to join with the Assembly of the Poor in a national protest in Bangkok. This had included seizure of a train that took the protesters from Rasi Salai and Pak Mun from Ubon Ratchathani to Bangkok.

In July, all seven gates of the Dam were ordered to be opened until further notice while two years of study of the social and environmental impacts are carried out.

The Rasi Salai Dam itself is a fairly modest structure. However, its fuller significance is as one of 16 main structures in the Khong-Chi-Mun intra-basin diversion scheme that is designed to take waters from the Mekong upstream of Nong Khai/Vientiane to supplement the headwaters and dams of the Chi and Mun rivers and help irrigate northeastern Thailand. This intra-basin diversion scheme would have a greater impact on Mekong flows than any other project currently under consideration. It is one of the developments that concerns Vietnam due to its implications for freshwater flows and saline balances in the Mekong Delta. Within Isan (Northeast Thailand), and specifically in the area around Rasi Salai, there are emergent problems of soil salinity associated with capillary action bringing to the surface dissolved salts from raised water tables near reservoirs.

The Rasi Salai protests have received international support from the IRN and have been part of a regional initiative, the Southeast Asia International Rivers Network (Searin) that deals with both regional and local issues. Longer-standing regionalisation of NGO responses to Thailand’s export of its environmental problems is evident through Toward Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA) and its publication Watershed.

In the Thai context, this scaling up is significant, not only because of its increased attention to international – and specifically regional – contexts, but also because of the shift from NGO representation to direct action by people’s organisations whose leadership and membership is from affected communities. NGOs have seen a rapid role shift from action to support, partly a result of funding squeeze that has come with reduced international support. The Rasi Salai Dam itself is a fairly modest structure. However, its fuller significance is as one of 16 main structures in the Khong-Chi-Mun intra-basin diversion scheme that is designed to take waters from the Mekong upstream of Nong Khai/Vientiane to supplement the headwaters and dams of the Chi and Mun rivers and help irrigate northeastern Thailand. This intra-basin diversion scheme would have a greater impact on Mekong flows than any other project currently under consideration. It is one of the developments that concerns Vietnam due to its implications for freshwater flows and saline balances in the Mekong Delta. Within Isan (Northeast Thailand), and specifically in the area around Rasi Salai, there are emergent problems of soil salinity associated with capillary action bringing to the surface dissolved salts from raised water tables near reservoirs.

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support combined with the economic crisis, but largely due to the assumption of leadership initiative from within affected communities themselves. Civil society growth in Thailand has thus allowed a more organic re-scaling that is marked by simultaneous localisation and non-local action.

Elsewhere in the Mekong Region, it would be misleading to speak of environmental politics per se. However, the politics of environment are everywhere. The key distinction drawn here is that environmental politics are the headline-making protests and other actions that galvanise opinion against environmentally destructive developments. Politics of environment are the everyday struggles over natural resources and over environmental meanings that engage communities, individuals, neighbours, government departments and other societal actors in their relations with one another (see Hirsch & Warren 1998). They are part of what James Scott (1985) refers to as “infrapolitics” (cf. Mittelman, this issue), based around small-scale, everyday events, needs, demands and assertion of rights. The nature of the development process associated with marketisation, redefinition and formalisation of resource boundaries, as well as larger-scale project claims on local resource bases, inherently involve politics of environment, which in only very few cases enter the arena of environmental politics. This is particularly the case where there is little political space for oppositional protest action. Thus, while environmental politics are more clearly evident in some countries of the Mekong Region than others, the politics of environment are much more universally present. Unrest in the Central Highlands of Vietnam is likely related to resource pressures associated with lowland encroachment on ethnic minorities’ land, forest and water resource-base. Villagers’ vocal expressions of displeasure with the fisheries impacts of dams such as the Nam Song and Nam Theun-Hinboun in Laos never make the television news, but are witnessed by those who visit such communities in the wake of projects that have affected local ecosystems and livelihoods. Awareness of the international nature of funding for such projects does not necessarily lead those affected to stake claims at the international level; the direction of everyday discourse and occasional petitions shows that national government is still held accountable in the first instance.

Just as environmental politics may distract our attention from quieter, everyday struggles based on resource access and livelihood, so we may need to turn our attention from the innovative institutional modes, or evolution of existing institutions, responding to the new challenges to sustainability. It is true that the Mekong River Commission, non-government initiatives such as TERRA, and a host of other governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental institutional developments testify to the extent to which institutional forms play out the regional politics of environment. However, a priority for those seeking to understand civil society input into – even control over – the new regional landscapes of sustainability politics is to look beyond institutional forms. At the micro-level, everyday processes of alienation of control over local resource bases and heightened competition for resources within increasingly marketised rural production and ownership systems are among the disempowering contexts of development affecting the rural poor. Recognising the multiple scales, institutional and ideological contexts in which such transformations are produced is part of the analysis. In this vein, processes of policy formation, of project design and appraisal, and of governance in its widest meaning are all of equal significance to institutionalised politics of cooperation and challenge.

The response to ADB and other initiatives in the Mekong Region shares certain features of globalised civil society resistance to globalisation, yet it clearly has a regional character. This is most evident in the environmental arena, which is not only one of
the more accessible sites of political expression (environmental politics) and of ubiquitous infrapolitics (politics of environment), but also one with its own regionalising logic in a regionalised resource economy. Even the more confrontational political responses such as those of Chiang Mai in May 2000 have specific social locations that contrast with the shadow events at global forums. However, national spaces continue to constrain the emergence of a “Mekong civil society”.

If the modes of organisation and response to regional threats to sustainability are so differentiated from one country to another, what does this imply for a regionalised civil society response to livelihood-related environmental threats? Is a supranational environmental politics or politics of environment bound to occur only among transnational actors – NGOs, MDBs and multinational corporations – or is a scaling up of grassroots response a realistic direction? The answer to these questions lies partly in what is seen as legitimate expression of concern. The post-Seattle eco-political landscape poses new challenges to governments, NGOs and people’s movements alike, in demonstrating that the scaling up of activism to respond to scaling up of decision-making arenas can be democratised. Within this context, we can expect new politics of resistance and challenge, new alliances, new modes of international civil society emergence and even new positions by state agencies and individuals who take issue with aspects of re-scaled governance in the resource and environmental arena.

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