

Book Reviews

Louis Lebel, John Dore, Rajesh Daniel, and Yang Saing Koma (eds.): *Democratizing Water Governance in the Mekong Region*

Chiang Mai, Thailand: Mekong Press, 2007, ISBN 978-974-9511-25-1, 304 pages

Water is a vital resource in many regards. Access to and management of water resources can decide the lives and deaths of people and entire populations. Particularly because of scarcities, droughts, floods, pollution, and competing claims for water usage between countries, water has moved to the centre of political debate. The management of water resources is a complex endeavour that encompasses the coordination between technical, hydrological, social, economic and political dimensions. In this volume, the editors attempt to take stock of the most recent developments in water management in the Mekong region. The Mekong region is defined not merely as the area at the basin of the Mekong River, but rather as the entire region of mainland Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, as well as Yunnan Province in the People's Republic of China.

The management of water resources has been problematised under the heading of "Integrated Water Resources Management" (IWRM) for a couple of years now (seminal is the work of Asit Biswas). The concept has been developed out of dissatisfaction with the outcomes of purely technically designed water-management tools. IWRM emphasizes the inclusion of social, environmental, economic, political and developmental dimensions into water resources management. This volume, however, has chosen not to use the term IWRM because it is denounced as a "catch-all phrase" and as too vague and general (p. 2). Ironically, the editors employ the term "governance" instead, which has been accused of having the same attributes. Moreover, the reader has to wait until the last chapter (9) until the term governance is finally defined. However, it is not clear whether the definition is limited to the very chapter or is applicable to the entire book. John Dore presents a rather broad and general definition of the concept. Governance is a "[m]ulti-layered interplay of negotiations, agenda-setting, preference-shaping, decision-making, management and administration between man actors and institutions in the State-society complex, at and between different levels and scales" (p. 200).

The state of affairs in water governance is highly deficient in the region. Water-management programs in the Mekong region show one similarity: the lack of public deliberation and low participation of relevant stakeholders, most of whom are local people. The volume expresses deep concern about the capacity of existing institutions to manage water resources. The design

and implementation of programs has been left to governments, big financial institutions, and engineering companies and is dominated by top-down bureaucratic decision-making including a “good deal of naïve social engineering” (p. 28). For a long time, large-scale dam projects were enforced with great vigor. Dams were seen as a powerful tool for economic development, bringing foreign capital and producing usable and tradeable electricity. Moreover, dams could prevent floods and provide additional irrigation capacity in dry seasons. Governmental decision-makers and engineers have assumed that the construction of large dams is beneficial for everybody. Impact assessment has often not been carried out due to a lack of data or willingness. The main actors have failed to consult with or make use of local knowledge and have not adapted the projects to the needs of the people. State agencies feel concerned about losing control and legitimacy by opening up to public deliberation. There is also the fear that project implementation might be delayed by uncompromising NGO positions (p. 32). Because of these shortcomings, water management in the Mekong region has resulted in suboptimal outcomes. Many people still do not profit from water development projects. Even worse, many people, mostly in remote areas, are negatively affected by these projects.

Knowledge is important in promoting democratization. Democratization thus begins with a better understanding of knowledge and power relationships and their interplay between actors such as the state, various water users and, in particular, politically marginalized groups, and a study of the context within and between each country (Preface). The main claim is that enhanced public participation would be conducive to the higher effectiveness and equity of water resources management. More public debate will lead to better information about projects and their consequences and ultimately result in better decisions. All contributions advocate for more deliberation between all stakeholders, openness to critical and marginalized voices, and local ownership. The authors encourage the people in the Mekong region to reduce their dependencies on foreign expertise and imported best practices and to build their own capacity to design and implement suitable solutions (p. 6). This, in short, is what the authors understand as the “democratizing” of the process.

However, to support public deliberation, and thus establish efficient and equitable water-management, societal changes and democratization will be required. In terms of democratization, the picture in the Mekong region is not promising. All countries except for Thailand are ruled by authoritarian regimes that suppress opposing voices and censor the media. Even Thailand has recently demonstrated great difficulty guaranteeing stability and citizen’s rights. Paying tribute to this sad fact, the contributions in the book concentrate on identifying changes on a smaller scale. The authors observe creative

approaches to more openness in the region and note the increasing role of knowledge in decision-making processes. The chapter on media involvement, for example, examines the role of cartoons, karaoke and music lyrics in the dissemination of information in authoritarian societies with strong censorship (Garden/Nance, pp. 157-175).

Three goals can be identified in this volume. Firstly, it aims to create a better understanding of the ongoing processes of water resource management in the Mekong region in terms of knowledge and power relationships. Secondly, the contributions present the current state of affairs in politics and discourse. And thirdly, these current processes are critically evaluated.

In the first part of the book the ongoing processes in the three most pressing and controversial issue areas – irrigation (Francois Molle, ch. 2), flood management (Louis Lebel/Bach Tan Sinh, ch. 3), hydropower development (John Dore et al., ch. 4; Chris Greacen/Apsara Palettu, ch. 5) – are examined. The second part of the book is dedicated to analysing possible methods for improving water resource management, namely, mathematical models (Juha Sarkkula et al., ch. 6), media involvement (Po Garden/Shawn L. Nance, ch. 7), gender sensitive politics (Bernadette Resurrection/Kanokwan Manorum, ch. 8) and multi-stakeholder platforms (John Dore, ch. 9).

The volume is a product of the so-called Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience (M-Power), which is a scientific and activist network across the Mekong region. The program was initiated by Chiang Mai (Thailand) University's Unit for Social and Environmental Research (USER), which is directed by Louis Lebel, the book's main editor. The goal of the four-year M-Power Program is to produce what the initiators call "action-research" to improve the quality of water governance in the Mekong region. Action means that the participating researchers are also engaged in ongoing political debates and public policy making. The authors of this volume are researchers, activists, local leaders, decision-makers, and journalists. In their various fields of expertise, they have all worked in the Mekong region and gathered first-hand information that proves to be highly beneficial to this book. The volume reviewed here is the first of three on this topic.

All contributions in the book are very up to date and deliver comprehensive analyses of the specific issue fields. The reference list of each chapter includes an impressive compilation of relevant research. The volume is not an introduction to the Mekong region: it does not include introductory notes on the historical development, the economic and political situation, or the structure of existing institution. To appreciate the insightful analyses of the book, a certain amount of previous knowledge is required. Still, the book targets a broad readership. Each case study is written in a very understandable, accessi-

ble manner and transmits a clear message. The envisaged readership includes decision-makers, activists and other persons engaged in the Mekong region.

The book represents an excellent review of current water resources management projects in the Mekong region. All contributions fit together neatly and build upon the main message – that is, the necessity of improving public participation in the process of water management. The division of the book into relevant issue areas, with promising methods for improvement, appears to be one of the best assets of the book. The precise and insightful case studies on irrigation, flood management and hydropower development deliver a clear overview of policies, necessities, stakeholders and shortcomings. The four methods for improvement can then be much better understood. While quite a number of articles and technical reports have been published on relevant issue areas of water management in the Mekong region (especially in the field of hydropower development), there is no visible debate about possible approaches to improve the situation. Therefore, the critical assessment of mathematical models, media involvement, gender discourses and multi-stakeholder platforms are the most innovative parts of the books. In general, despite the critique of existing institutions and processes, the authors share an optimistic view of the theoretical merits of democratization and good governance. Prospects for improvement in the real world of the Mekong region are presented in a reasonable manner, weighing all probabilities. The conclusion is a mixed picture of progress and the deteriorating democratization of water governance. Many of the contributing authors, among them Louis Lebel and John Dore, are firmly established experts on the Mekong region. The quality of all chapters is consistently high. Simply spoken, it is enjoyable and enriching reading.

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