

Water data democratization in the Mekong-Lancang basin



Carl Middleton

Center for Social Development Studies (CSDS),
Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University

Partial-cooperation and competition on the Mekong-Lancang

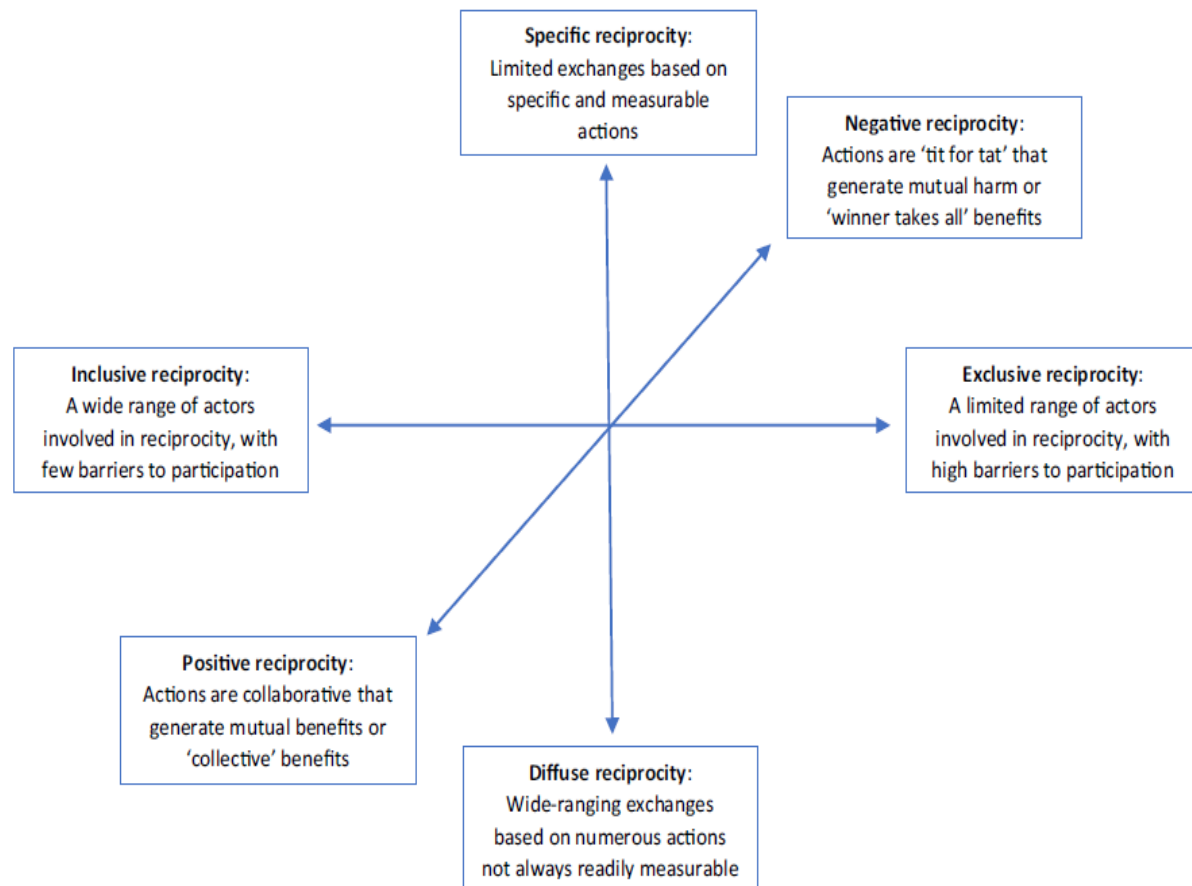
- Partial-cooperation and competition is simultaneously occurring in the Mekong-Lancang basin management
 - Navigation
 - Hydropower dam operation, especially on the mainstream
 - Low flow / Drought / Flood:
 - “Natural” vs “Infrastructure” related
- Growing challenges, such as climate change
- Evolving governance regime
 - Role of MRC and LMC
 - Last week’s announcement on water data sharing



Mekong near Sangkhom, Thailand in January 2020
(NYT, April 13, 2020)

“Reciprocity” in hydropolitics of cooperation and competition

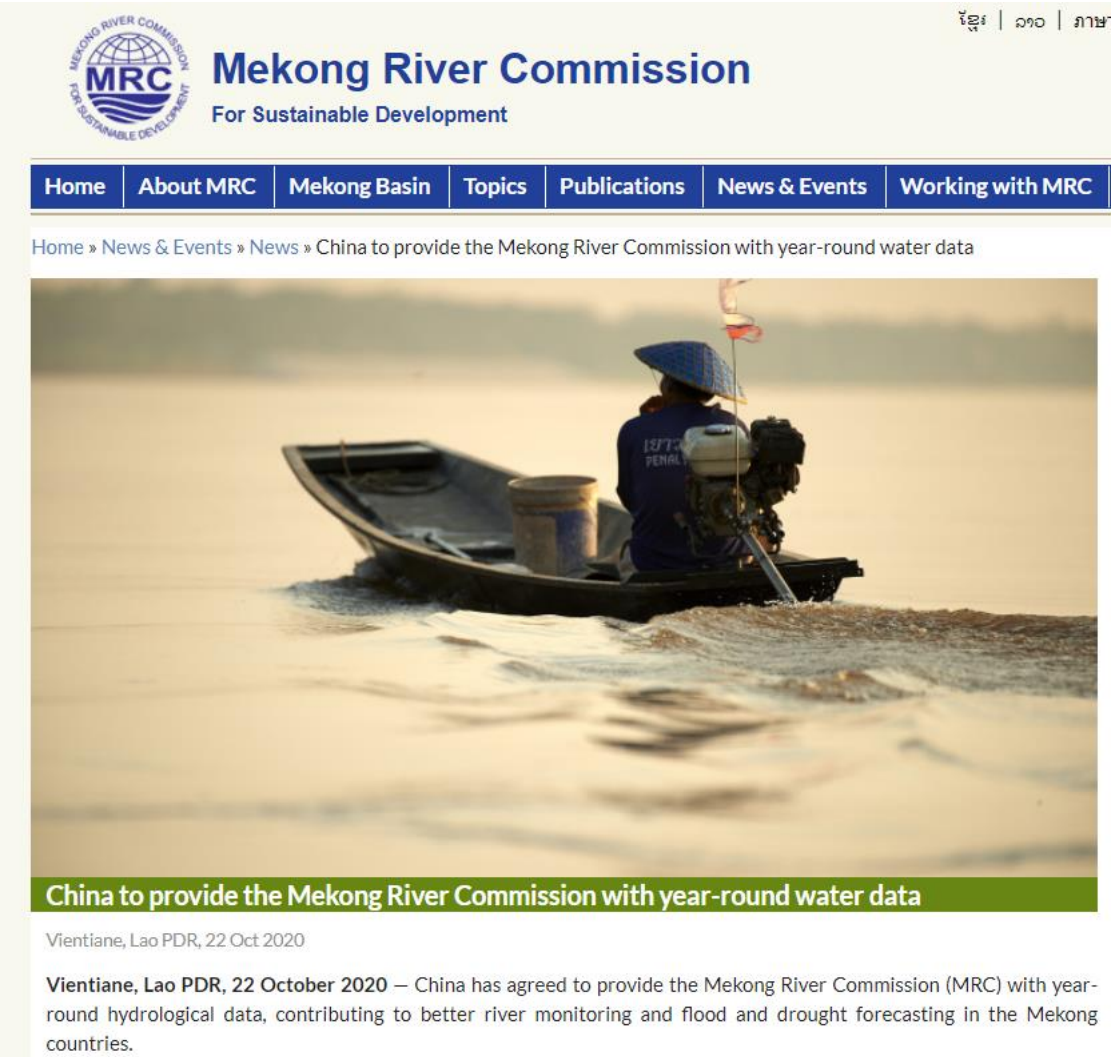
1. Sustaining healthy/unhealthy hydrological systems and river-based non-human life
2. Direct benefits/harms to humans from the river
3. Collective action gains through trusted political-social relations *over* the river or the contrary
4. Collective action gains through trusted political-social relations *beyond* the river or the contrary



Middleton, C., and Devlaeminck, D.J. (2020) Reciprocity in practice: the hydropolitics of equitable and reasonable utilization in the Lancang-Mekong basin. *Int Environ Agreements*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-020-09511-6>

An important new announcement ... and a new act in reciprocated relationships?

- State to state sharing of year-round data from upper basin to the MRC by China



The image is a screenshot of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) website. At the top left is the MRC logo, which features a globe and the text 'MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT'. To the right of the logo is the text 'Mekong River Commission For Sustainable Development'. In the top right corner, there are three small icons representing different languages: Khmer, Lao, and English. Below the header is a navigation menu with the following items: Home, About MRC, Mekong Basin, Topics, Publications, News & Events, and Working with MRC. The main content area shows a breadcrumb trail: Home » News & Events » News » China to provide the Mekong River Commission with year-round water data. Below the breadcrumb is a large photograph of a person in a blue shirt and a conical hat operating a small motorboat on a river. The person's shirt has '1377 PENAL' written on it. Below the photograph is a green banner with the text 'China to provide the Mekong River Commission with year-round water data'. Underneath the banner is the text 'Vientiane, Lao PDR, 22 Oct 2020'. The main body of the article text reads: 'Vientiane, Lao PDR, 22 October 2020 – China has agreed to provide the Mekong River Commission (MRC) with year-round hydrological data, contributing to better river monitoring and flood and drought forecasting in the Mekong countries.'

In the context of a range of existing /emerging data portals

MRC Data and Information Services

Search MRCs scientific data

Monitoring Services

The MRC, together with its Member Countries operates extensive monitoring networks

- Hydrology & river monitoring
- Flood monitoring & forecasting
- Drought monitoring
- Discharge & sediment monitoring

MEKONG WATER WELCOMES YOU

Search. Share. Collaborate.

Credit: Chawee Wongprasitporn



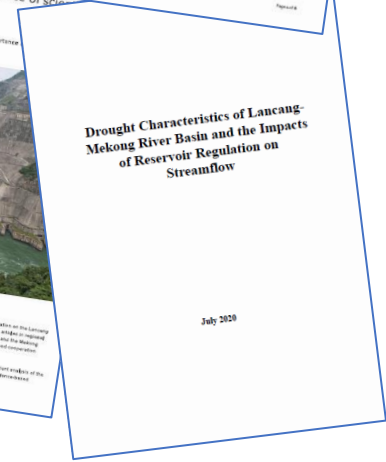
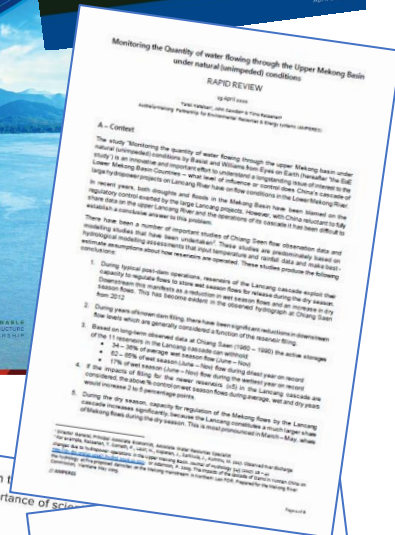
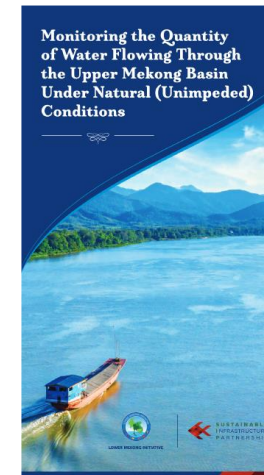
WATER, LAND AND ECOSYSTEMS IN THE GREATER MEKONG

RESEARCH PROGRAM ON Water, Land and Ecosystems
CGIAR
Greater MEKONG

ABOUT US CHANGES DIALOGUE

Role of research in knowledge generation and trust-building

- Recent scientific studies have catalyzed significant regional and global public debate, that have also become (geo)politicized
 - Eyes on Earth study (April 2020)
 - Assessments by MRC, AMPERES, and Kallio and Fallon May-June 2020
 - Tsinghua University research (July 2020)
- *All existing studies have been conducted in the context of incomplete data due to lack of access to existing data*
- (Regional) research can (better) inform public debate and support role of civil society/ media/ community:
 - Connect **regional-global networks of researchers**, reducing perceptions of national-interest aligned research
 - Credible **peer review** processes and research **conferences** ensuring rigorousness
 - **Multiple research groups** for “plural” science
 - Effective **communication** of complex analysis;
 - **Accountability** to public needs/ priorities



Water data democratization

- State-to-state water data sharing is the first step – next step is how to strengthen transboundary water governance
 - Could draw on good practices in other river basins, adapted to Mekong-Lancang socio-political context
- Basis of “**water data democratization**”:
 - 1. Institutions**
 - Clear rules-based regime between states, *building from* UN Watercourses Convention
 - Trusted, inclusive, and accountable to non-state actors
 - Close connections with sectoral line agencies, and “**hybrid governance**” approaches
 - 2. Infrastructure**
 - User friendly online platforms (website and social media) and other means of communication
 - 3. Accessible data**
 - Shared/ communicated in a usable form
 - Reliable, timely and trusted
 - 4. Actionable data**
 - Catalyzes transdisciplinary research
 - Informs participatory decision-making processes, including *via* tools such as Strategic Impact Assessments


Thank you for listening

Carl.Chulalongkorn@gmail.com

www.csds-chula.org



Reciprocity in practice: the hydro politics of equitable and reasonable utilization in the Lancang-Mekong basin

Carl Middleton¹ · David J. Devlaeminck² 

Accepted: 25 September 2020
© Springer Nature B.V. 2020

Abstract

Equitable and reasonable utilization (ERU), the cornerstone of international water law, recognizes the rights of states to utilize shared water resources. However, there is ambiguity in ERU's application, and upstream states often perceive it as against their interests. Recent research highlights the important role reciprocity plays in international water law, yet how reciprocity is practiced in transboundary water governance remains poorly understood. Combining literature on international law, hydro politics and international relations, this article conceptualizes 'reciprocity in practice' for international watercourses as interconnected legal, social and political processes by which state and non-state actors negotiate ERU and distribute benefits and harms. We pay particular attention to power relations and perceptions of fairness that influence the form and (dis)continuity of reciprocity. We demonstrate our approach through an analysis of evolving legal regimes and issues of navigation, hydropower, flood and drought management, and economic regionalization in the Lancang-Mekong basin, focusing on relations between China and downstream states. We demonstrate how multiple forms of reciprocity occur simultaneously across issues that are often analyzed individually, complicating common narratives of China's unilateralism. We show, however, that practiced positive reciprocity is weak and exclusive, generating distrust and resistance from those excluded or who experience harms. Overall, we suggest that processes of 'reciprocity in practice' are at the heart of meaningful negotiation, institutionalization and practice of ERU, and that, as a model of water allocation, ERU should be contextualized to wider process of allocation of benefits and harms that include but go beyond water, and in which power relations fundamentally matter.

Keywords UN Watercourses Convention · Mekong River Commission · Lancang-Mekong Cooperation · Lancang dam cascade · Equitable and reasonable use

✉ David J. Devlaeminck
djdevlaeminck@cqu.edu.cn

Carl Middleton
Carl.Chulalongkorn@gmail.com

¹ Center of Excellence in Resource Politics for Social Development, Center for Social Development Studies, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

² School of Law, Chongqing University, Chongqing, China