

INNOVATING INSTITUTIONS, POLICY AND PLATFORMS FOR WATER DATA DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE MEKONG-LANCANG RIVER

The Mekong-Lancang River flows from headwaters in the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau through Yunnan Province of China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. While there remains a close relationship between rural communities' livelihoods and the river's natural resources, since the early 1990s the river has been transformed from a free-flowing river to one that is increasingly engineered by large hydropower dams. These changes – alongside other development projects including for navigation and large-scale irrigated agriculture - have evoked both cooperation and tensions between states, as well as community, civil society, and the private sector, at scales ranging from the local to the transboundary.

A severe drought in 2019 and 2020 has intensified tensions. It has been vigorously debated whether large dam infrastructure in the basin has exacerbated the impact of the drought, or could have been operated differently to better mitigate its impacts. A focus has been on the upstream dams in China, where eleven projects have been progressively built on the mainstream since the early 1990s.

Two key intergovernmental institutions structuring transboundary water governance, including during the current drought, are the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Framework. The MRC is a treaty-based intergovernmental organization founded in 1995 between Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, with China and Myanmar as dialogue partners. The LMC was launched in March 2016 and includes all six states of the Mekong-Lancang basin, and includes water resources management as one of five priority areas.

In early 2020, several regional and international research groups have published studies on the issues of drought, low river flows and hydropower dam operation that have been influential in shaping regional government and public opinion. The issue of the availability of water data has emerged as a key policy concern. At the time, hydrological data sharing for flood and drought conditions only occurred all year round between the four MRC member states, while China shared hydrological data with the MRC during the flood season. There were growing calls from downstream states, civil society and communities towards China for improved data sharing, and China announced year-round state-to-state water data sharing in October 2020.

CSDS Research

While an important foundation for improved cooperation, state-to-state data sharing is only the first step. Our research aims to identify innovative options for improved water data sharing in the Mekong-Lancang basin to inform regional research, public debates and democratized transboundary water decisions. Our key research activities are:

Review international best practice on data sharing in international law and in select major river basins around the world

- Key international laws are: 1997 UN Watercourses Convention; 1992 UNECE Convention; and the EU Water Framework Directive
- River basins of interest include the Danube River, the Rhine River, the Columbia River, the Murrumbidgee River, and the Rio Grande-Colorado River.

Undertake an assessment of current data sharing arrangements in the Mekong-Lancang basin, including the role of existing and emerging data portals

- The institutional platforms of the MRC and LMC
- Other public platforms, such as mekongwaters.org

Undertake an assessment of the current means by which water data is shared with the public and its impact on decision-making

- Case studies in Northern and Northeast Thailand collaborating with researchers from Mae Fah Luang University and Ubon Rathchathani University, involving interviews with local government, civil society and riverside communities

Identify options for strengthening regional public water data sharing that could facilitate:

- Various forms of joint regional research (academic; civil society-and community-led; government-led)
- Evidence-based public debates
- Improved quality of transboundary water governance and the institutions that facilitate it



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Innovation through water data democratization

CSDS is developing the concept of “water data democratization” to further transparent, participatory and accountable transboundary water decisions. Our research proposes four pillars:

Strengthen transboundary water governance institutions

- Governed as a transboundary commons, there needs to be a clear rules-based regime between states, building from UN Watercourses Convention
- Trusted, inclusive, and accountable to non-state actors via “hybrid governance” approaches, and close coordination between relevant government line agencies

Innovative communication infrastructure

- High-quality institutionalized data-sharing platforms
- User friendly online platforms, including social media, and other means of communication

Accessible data

- Complete data, in terms of measurements on quantity and quality of water, and regularity of sampling
- Communicated in a usable form that is reliable, timely and trusted

Actionable data

- Enables genuine participation of civil society and communities in the river basin
- Improves various forms of evidence generation, including transdisciplinary research
- Informs participatory decision-making processes, including via tools such as Strategic Impact Assessments

Further Reading:



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