



# The Politics of Engaged Geography on the Mekong

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In this brief discussion of what I refer to as an engaged political ecology of the Mekong, I wish to reflect on some of the tensions, dilemmas, synergies and potentials of an applied critical social science of environment in a specific regional context. Like Blaikie in his conclusion that an engaged approach to political ecology can be “useful”(2012: 239), I suggest that the path to be negotiated in a more hands-on approach is not necessarily as narrow and treacherous as sometimes assumed, but at the same time I argue that a considered, broadly consistent and strategic approach is essential.

I take as my backcloth the fraught development arena that is the Mekong River Basin and Mekong Region. More specifically, I base the reflection on the establishment and running of a small academic unit with a research-based advocacy-support objective, the Australian Mekong Resource Centre (AMRC) at the University of Sydney, which I founded in – and have directed since - 1997. I look at the academic, activist and institutional implications and choices of advocacy support through research and teaching that are geared toward achieving particular socio-environmental outcomes. These outcomes refer in particular to the socially just distribution and sustainable use of land and other resources on which the rural poor continue to depend, yet which are increasingly appropriated for



private gain in the name of national economic development. As such, they resonate with the core concern of political ecology with the links between environment and socially, economically and politically differentiated access to resources.

### **The Mekong as a contested development space**

The Mekong refers to a river, a river basin and a broader region, all of which are undergoing rapid economic, political, social and environmental change. Visions for the future of the Mekong are highly varied and hotly debated (Glassman 2010; Hirsch 2001), raising the question of how research engages with the issues and actors that define the political ecology of the Mekong as a contested development region.

The key debates over the Mekong River itself are based around longstanding plans to construct a cascade of dams on the main-stem of the river, referred to hereon as “the mainstream”. In fact, six dams are already complete on the Lancang Jiang, which is the Chinese section of the mainstream, one more is under construction, and several others are planned. While the Chinese dams are controversial and much criticised, and while there may be scope for advocacy on the way they are operated to at least ameliorate their downstream impacts, they are a *fait accompli* and decisions on their past and continued construction are outside the realistic scope of international advocacy to influence. As a result, the most contested issues concerning mainstream dams have been on the Lower Mekong inside Laos, along the Thai-Lao border, at the Lao-Cambodian border, and in Cambodia. To date, none of these has been completed, despite plans put in place since the 1950s (Lee and Scurrah 2009), but there are blueprints for two mainstream dams in Cambodia, two along the Thai-Lao border, and seven on the stretch of the Mekong mainstream inside Laos. Construction of one of these – Xayaburi – has now commenced.

Debates over the Mekong River Basin include the increasing number of dams that have been built on Mekong tributary rivers, including some high-profile and controversial projects such as dams on the Theun River in Laos (Usher 1996; Shoemaker 1998; Hirsch 2002) and the Sesan and Srepok Rivers in Vietnam and Cambodia (Hirsch and Wyatt 2004; Wyatt and Baird 2007). They also include a range of plantation, mining and other land- as well as river-based resource projects whose impacts affect not just the natural environment but also the resource-based livelihoods of the rural poor, who make up the majority of the Basin’s more than 60 million people. The lower part of the Basin is governed by the Mekong Agreement, under whose articles transboundary issues are supposed to be addressed by the Mekong River Commission (MRC) (Mekong River Commission 1995).

The Mekong as a development region goes well beyond the river basin as bioregion. As a result of a particular economic and infrastructural agenda set in place through the Asian Development Bank’s GMS program initiated in 1992, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) has been constructed as a contested

development space through challenges by civil society organisations including Focus on the Global South, Toward Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA), and International Rivers.. In many ways, the GMS has thus been reified not just by the agenda of regional economic integration and the neo-liberal approach to development promoted therein), but also by the galvanizing of non-governmental organization (NGO) and academic interest and concern over the GMS in direct response and challenge (Bello, Cunningham et al. 1998) .

### **Research and advocacy**

Engaged scholarship has a long tradition in Southeast Asia and in geography. *The Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (rebadged in 2001 as *Critical Asian Studies*) was established in 1968 by academics of the calibre of Noam Chomsky and Mark Selden to bring the weight and status of university-based scholarship to the anti-war movement in the United States and elsewhere during the 1960s and 1970s. *Antipode* was founded in 1969 as a radical journal of geography to address social justice issues, employing tools of a discipline that had been either apolitical or inherently conservative and with a history of association with empire and an Anglo-American view of the world. Both of these have moved from radical fringe academic publications to highly respected journals close to the top of the rankings in their respective disciplinary fields.

The questions that most frequently arise over a hands-on and overtly political approach to scholarship are based on ethical and professional concerns that science and social science should eschew normative, subjective and value-laden positions, in favour of objective, evidence-based and theoretically elegant approaches to our subject. The contrary position is most frequently based on the premise that all scholarship is, and should be, based on certain values - that economic prosperity and economic efficiency are good things; that violence and abuse of power are bad things; that we should not degrade the environment or exploit the poor; that truth and intellectual honesty are ideals to be upheld; and so on.

I wish to sidestep this well-trodden ground by looking at the strategic rather than moral issues in engaged scholarship that involves wearing one's heart on one's sleeve rather than engaging in research and teaching in a seemingly more removed way. Specifically, my experience in working on issues of social and environmental justice in the Mekong suggests that research-based advocacy support that keeps open engagement opportunities with a relatively wide range of actors in and beyond academia can be a fruitful way in which to practice political ecology.

## **Australian Mekong Resource Centre (AMRC)<sup>2</sup>**

The Australian Mekong Resource Centre (AMRC) was established at the University of Sydney in 1997 to bring together scholarship, research student supervision and collaboration between academic and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners around key questions of development, environment and natural resource governance in the Mekong. It was established at a time when academic institutions in Australia were falling over themselves to “engage” with Asia, but in a largely elite-oriented and business-driven way. The motivation for establishment of AMRC was in part to establish a more citizen-to-citizen oriented approach to engagement.

The establishment of the Centre came about through discussions between academic staff and an international group of postgraduate students, Oxfam America and Oxfam Australia, TERRA, and the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation’s Mekong program. It was essentially a consolidation of existing advocacy-oriented research, and it also built on a report carried out by a team led by University of Sydney geographers that had been commissioned by AusAID, and on which at least one major NGO initiative in the Mekong drew for its strategic direction. In particular, the identification of stakeholder interests in the Mekong delineated along societal rather than simply geopolitical axes generated an advocacy agenda drawing on political ecology for its analysis and questioning some of the assumptions behind the existing institutional infrastructure including the MRC and ADB programs.

With core support from the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, and building on research projects already funded by the Australian Research Council, AusAID, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research and the International Development Research Centre, AMRC self-defined its role as:

... a focal point for data and information, international scholarship and policy-oriented research, training and outreach, and discussion and debate on development and environment issues in the Mekong Region (<http://sydney.edu.au/mekong>).

As a resource centre, AMRC has always been geared to employing the core university activities of research and teaching to resource groups and initiatives engaged in what many civil society organizations came to refer to as “Mekong issues” with scholarly and analytical outputs, and also to provide a forum that facilitates engaged discussion, debate and dissemination. Specifically, in an age of organizational “mission statements”, the mission was set out as follows :

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<sup>2</sup> Since this article was first drafted, the status of AMRC has changed in line with University of Sydney policy to limit Centres to larger units with significant levels of external core funding. We now operate as the Mekong Research Group but have kept the acronym AMRC. Further details can be found at [sydney.edu.au/mekong](http://sydney.edu.au/mekong).

AMRC is committed to research and other activities that support action, policy and advocacy for equitable and sustainable approaches to development in the Mekong Region. It works on principles of engaged research that also supports the building of independent and critical research capacity within the region (ibid).

AMRC has worked in pursuit of this mission in a number of ways. Perhaps most importantly, the Centre has served as a point of intellectual refuge and revitalization for those from the region keen to step back from the fray of campaigning, planning and policy to follow their interests in an engaged scholarly mode, both as postgraduate students and as visiting scholars.

A significant part of our public role has been through the co-hosting of a number of conferences. For example, in 2000 AMRC and Oxfam Australia collaborated with several regional NGO partners to host the conference *Accounting for Development: Australia and the Asian Development Bank in the Mekong Region*. This public meeting held over two days at the University of Sydney attracted 220 participants, including 10 from ADB, several from AusAID and other Australian government departments, and more than 30 civil society activists from five Mekong countries. The context was Australia's continued support for ADB through the top-up of the Asia Development Fund soft-loan facility at a time when displacements and environmental impacts of the GMS infrastructure program and hydropower schemes were arousing considerable controversy in the region. In 2002, AMRC jointly hosted conferences in Brisbane ahead of the international River Symposium and at Ubonratchathani University in Thailand as a series of *Dialogues on River Basin Development and Civil Society in the Mekong Region* to challenge the Mekong River Commission in the context of its reluctance to work to its mandate in transboundary river governance at a time when the Se San dams in Vietnam were causing significant hardship across the border in northeastern Cambodia. In 2007, we co-hosted a conference in Sydney with AusAID entitled *A Greater Mekong? Poverty, Integration and Development*, which sought to unpack and challenge some of the assumptions surrounding the benefits of regional economic integration without proper regulation and consideration of impacts on the rural poor. All of these events brought together groups on different sides of often bitter debates, providing the space and intellectual milieu in which to conduct reasoned public challenges, and of course to respond to them.

AMRC has taken a highly selective strategy to involvement in letter-writing campaigns. For the most part, we have not signed on to such lobbying exercises unless they are backed up by our own research work. For example, we have on many occasions declined invitations by NGO partners such as International Rivers to sign on to letters and petitions protesting about the unwillingness of MRC to take a more assertive role in decisions over controversial dams, or targeted at various individual projects. For an academically based Centre such as AMRC, the weight and value of such exercises are also enhanced by focusing on the most significant issues. One example of this was the controversy over the proposed

construction of Don Sahong Dam by a Malaysian company at the Khone Falls near the Lao-Cambodian border. In this case, the impacts of the project relative to the quite insignificant public return to the investment were such, and were so unequivocally documented by scientists with whom we had been working closely, that AMRC took the lead in galvanizing a measured letter signed by 34 international scientists and addressed to the government of Lao PDR and to the Mekong River Commission.

As an academic centre, AMRC has a publication profile, much of which is in journals or working papers whose readership is restricted largely to the academic community. We have complemented this with a number of more accessible Mekong Briefs ([http://sydney.edu.au/mekong/publications/centre\\_publications/mekong\\_briefs.shtml](http://sydney.edu.au/mekong/publications/centre_publications/mekong_briefs.shtml)), which are mostly published in association with conferences or other key events. We have also issued a number of reports that have been quite widely circulated and read. These include a study carried out for AusAID in the lead-up to the establishment of the Centre, and on whose reputation the Centre in fact attracted its core funding for the next nine years (Hirsch and Cheong 1996). It also includes a hard-hitting critique of the governance framework of MRC, in a study commissioned and jointly authored and published by DANIDA, the Danish Government agency that had been MRC's main financial sponsor to date (Hirsch, Jensen et al. 2006). More specifically, a joint publication with Oxfam raised key scientific and governance issues around mainstream dams (Lee and Scurrah 2009) that reinforced not only NGO critique of this program but also helped encourage donor agencies to take a stronger stand in their dealings with MRC and its constituent member governments.

For nine years from 1998 to 2006, AMRC produced *Mekong Update and Dialogue* ([http://sydney.edu.au/mekong/publications/centre\\_publications/mekong\\_update\\_dialogue.shtml](http://sydney.edu.au/mekong/publications/centre_publications/mekong_update_dialogue.shtml)). Its 33 editions each led with an invited article on a key issue, followed by two or three responses. Contributing authors were sourced from academia, government and NGOs from around the region and internationally, so *MUD* served as a means to air different perspectives on a wide range of topics relevant to development in the region and its social and environmental implications. A short editorial introduced each edition.

While the more public and region-wide engagement through such events and publications has been a significant part of our work, engagement also requires a detailed and critical “grounding” in the key concerns and processes at a local level. Prior to establishment of AMRC, and throughout its existence, staff and postgraduate students have been engaged in field-based research in Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, in fields such as community-based natural resource management. This level of grounding not only provides the backup, confidence and credibility to identify with local concerns and critique large-scale

development programs from a livelihoods perspective, but it also provides a critical angle on the simplifications (Li 2002) that sometimes pass as local discourses.

An important consideration in walking the line between active engagement in hotly debated issues such as dams on the Mekong mainstream, on the one hand, and balanced scholarship on the other, has been to use our international University-based location to best advantage, in keeping not only with the issues that concern us but also with the intellectual and public-good principles espoused by a publicly funded higher educational institution. On a number of occasions, in trying to situate AMRC as an externally-focused organization that engages with quite controversial issues, we have been asked whether we are an NGO. The response is clear – if we were to conceive of ourselves as an activist entity rather than a research- and teaching-based one, we would immediately diminish our value to those NGOs with whom we work closely. These include regional organizations such as the Foundation for Ecological Recovery, Australian-based organizations such as Oxfam Australia, and international organizations such as International Rivers. We also work with local and national governmental agencies in our collaborative research work, and with mainstream Australian government agencies such as AusAID whose policies and programs are sometimes the object of our critique. As such, we also leave space for critical engagement with some of our NGO colleagues, based on mutual respect, but not always without a degree of tension and difference in interpretation or strategy.

An early concern was that the large University establishment that hosts us would balk at our role as an externally-oriented advocacy support-oriented resource centre. In the event, this has not been a significant tension. In fact, in an era during which external research funding has been seen – rightly or wrongly! – as a marker of success or recognition, the School, Faculty and University leadership has been overwhelmingly supportive of our approach. The external funds that have supported our activities from foundations, from NGOs such as Oxfam America and Oxfam Australia, from agencies such as AusAID and DANIDA, have largely been directed toward conferences, research, collaborative development of field pedagogy, and other activities that remain squarely within the scope of University “core business”. Further, by serving as a location for a number of postgraduates from the Mekong region who have gone back to take leading positions in NGOs, at MRC and in various governmental and research agencies, the Centre has worked well within the University’s mission of internationalization of our higher degree by research program.

## **Conclusion**

A concluding lesson here is that with clarity on principles, and with respect for the organizational mission and role of the academic host institution, there remains space for taking an engaged approach to research and teaching, even within a large and established university setting. The adherence to a clearly articulated set of values around social justice and environmental sustainability is as

valid an underpinning for rigorous scholarship as is academic work in pursuit of economic efficiency, political stability or other more 'mainstream' goals. Research and other academic activity that maintains a suitable degree of reflexivity pre-empts the questioning of its objectivity on the basis that it is too involved with its subject. The continuing engagement of AMRC by governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental agencies in various policy dialogues, research and institutional initiatives is testament to the niche for critical engaged analysis, and its substantive emphasis lies squarely within the realm of an engaged political ecology.

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