Towards Public Participation in Mekong River Basin Development

Contents

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The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) provided the funding for this study on public participation within the context of the MRC's work and through the executing aegis of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Secretariat. The Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) was contracted to produce the required outputs and worked on the project from late September 1997 to June 1998. TDRI enjoyed a fruitful working relationship with the Planning Unit of the Policy and Planning Division of the MRC Secretariat during the course of the project thanks to cooperation from the MRC and NMCs.

This report is partially based on TDRI's Research Papers on the four Lower Basin countries: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam. These papers are attached as Annexes 3-6 of this report.

This report is titled "Towards Public Participation in Mekong River Basin Development" for a number of reasons. Foremost is the MRC's charter for sustainable development in the Lower Mekong Basin. Being based on the concept of sustainable development, there is no escaping the imperative for public participation by the wide range of stakeholders in this development effort.

There is also current recognition by the MRC and donors that new approaches and initiatives by the MRC, such as the Basin Development Plan (BDP) or the Water Utilization Programme (WUP), need to move towards incorporating participation processes. The sober assessment is that public participation is an integral component of the momentum towards further development of the MRC's role and operations in the Mekong Basin.

"Towards Public Participation" provides as set of guidelines and a mechanism for public participation. Preceding this, it offers a public participation definition and ideas regarding the stakeholders who are essential to the process of participation in Basin management. Finally, it discusses the level of support required from the MRC to ensure that public participation does occur in an effective manner.

It would not be exaggerating to describe the road ahead of participation as potentially one of cultural change, both for the MRC and its partners, particularly in the BDP and WUP processes. The guidelines and mechanism proposed in this report are not the last word on participation for the MRC. They are the results of a relatively small project which is the first attempt at developing an integrated approach to public participation for the entire organisation, including the National Mekong Committees.

It should be recognised that this report is not an end in itself. Rather it is a beginning in a process of learning and relearning through application of agreed principles and modes of behaviour. Indeed, the Mission Statement for the BDP signifies planning as a "continuing process" and something which will be "periodically updated", terms which strongly suggest an iterative process. Public participation, being an integral element of the BDP, will certainly go through this process of continuous refinement.

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