

Where Central Policies Meet Local Objectives: Exploring Sub-Basin-Level Participatory Watershed Management in Northern Thailand

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Global efforts to improve the sustainability of natural resource management are finding that watersheds and river basins are appropriate units for integrated management of many types of natural resources. However, most current management and organizational practices center on hierarchies of social and administrative units, with boundaries that often do not correspond to watersheds or river basins. General trends toward increased decentralization are occurring in both natural resource and administrative hierarchies.

Most national natural resource policies tend to emphasize uniform sets of structures, roles and programs that are formulated at high levels and extend downward in a top-down manner. At the same time, day-to-day decisions by local households, groups and communities are based on the realities of very localized conditions. Many innovations in livelihoods and natural resource management emphasize these local realities and seek to build bottom-up initiatives through collaboration with local communities and local governments. The strength and potential of these approaches are recognized by many decentralization programs.

There are multiple levels of watershed and river basin ‘catchments’, just as there are multiple levels of government administration. Central governments tend to focus on higher levels of organization and the needs of broader populations, while local communities tend to focus on the most local levels. One of the greatest challenges lies in trying to build a common framework where both top-down and bottom-up directions of development can interact in constructive and mutually-reinforcing ways. The sub-basin level has considerable potential as a level of management organization that can help fill in this ‘missing middle’ and serve as a venue for interfacing and integration levels above and below.

In order to help further explore the potential of the sub-basin level in northern Thailand, the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning has recently concluded a pilot project entitled the *Participatory Watershed Management for the Ping River Basin Project*. Efforts to build river basin organizations in the Ping River Basin have been active since 1999. While they have been making substantial efforts to move in more decentralized and participatory directions, they have been doing so from a basically top-down perspective.

This project has sought to explore and test more participatory approaches for sub-basin level management of natural resources and environment in three pilot sub-basins of the Ping River Basin, with particular focus on organizations and planning.

- The organizational component focused on organizational structures and roles at the sub-basin level. These efforts sought to build on reviews of experience with river basin management organizations in many parts of the world, as well as existing organizations within pilot sub-basins, and on their previous experience with river basin programs;
- The planning component focused on the logical structure and content of action plans formulated at sub-basin level. These efforts sought to coordinate with other existing plans at multiple levels, within the context of a fairly broad integrated river basin approach and providing opportunities for emergence of local ideas and approaches.

This was accomplished by a two-phase approach that emerged during project implementation:

- The first phase used a fairly conventional participatory approach facilitated by outside consultants, which centered largely on finding a single approach to coordinate with existing organizations and plans;
- The second phase built on results of the first phase, but provided opportunities for local sub-basin leaders and networks to organize broader groups of stakeholder representatives to review and modify initial draft organizational arrangements and action plans.

A number of interesting lessons have emerged from this experience:

- **Diversity.** There is very substantial diversity among sub-basins in the Ping River Basin. While technical assessments had already identified substantial variation in biophysical conditions, ethnic composition, infrastructure and economic activity, during this project diversity of additional types of social characteristic also emerged. One important example is the differences in approaches to social organization, and especially the relative importance of central government agencies, provincial administrations and local governments. These findings helped clarify why efforts to impose uniform approaches and arrangements in all sub-basins are inappropriate, and what kinds of differences are likely to emerge if more flexibility and local initiative are allowed;
- **Roles.** There is considerable agreement among sub-basins about the basic types of roles for sub-basin management organizations. Basic roles include: (1) problem analysis, negotiation and conflict management; (2) sub-basin level planning, coordination, monitoring and evaluation; (3) higher-level relations with other sub-basins and river basins (upstream-downstream) and larger society (biodiversity, economic development policy, etc.). There was also basic agreement that implementation of activities under management plans should be mainly through existing local organizations and local governments – implementation by sub-basin management organizations should be limited to new or additional types of activities not under the jurisdiction of others. Most of the differences among sub-basins were reflected in their approaches to organizing and implementing some of these roles.

While the project helped confirm the potential importance of the sub-basin level of river basin management organization, it also helped reveal major challenges that it will face:

- Clear high-level policy commitment will be necessary (1) to convince people in the sub-basin that the time and effort they invest will be important; (2) to motivate stakeholders to participate actively in the process; (3) to help local and provincial government see the importance of this work and not see it as a threat; (4) so that central government agencies will participate with sincerity and consistency;
- Fully participatory processes are needed that (1) are not dominated by a few stakeholder groups, and (2) balanced local interests and legitimate national level concerns;
- Cooperation is needed among agencies and stakeholders to provide information and to operate with transparency and accountability;
- There is need for all parties to recognize that this will be a long-term process with support and capacity building needs that will change over time. The aim is to create a learning process based on participatory monitoring of actual results and their effects on livelihoods and natural resource sustainability.