

# The Need to Move from Water Government to Water Governance Involving Civil Society

By Leonie Pearson

With over 780 million people dependent on transboundary rivers in South and Southeast Asia, water governance is vital to regional development. Yet, the current approach to water governance is dominated by state-centric actors (sometimes called the “hydrocracy”) and is not delivering sustainable water management for people or ecosystems.

The so-called “hydrocracy” is a mix of government, bureaucrats, politicians, and national development banks, often aligned with private developers. They have established strong processes for governing transboundary water and are focused on maintaining the cyclical planning-to-construction of large infrastructure projects, e.g. dams, hydropower plants, bridges, etc. These state-centric actors are focused on delivering water allocation, utilisation and management with a clear agenda of ‘the state has a duty to develop its water resources’ for national economic development. For many, the state-centric actors are delivering the governmental agenda. Therefore, it is not governance that is managing transboundary water in Asia, but government.

**Dr. Leonie Pearson,**  
Senior Research Fellow at  
the Stockholm  
Environmental Institute,  
explains that: “For many,  
the state-centric actors  
are delivering the  
governmental agenda.  
Therefore, it is not  
governance that is  
managing transboundary  
water in Asia, but  
government.”

To be clear, government is just one of the arms of modern society which derives its power from taxes, spending, laws, and regulations. The other two arms are: business (which gains its power from creating jobs and paying taxes), and the civil society sector, which gains its power by serving the public interest without profit motives. Governance is the overall process of integrating and managing using all the arms of society. Water governance requires all parts of society working together to deliver sustainable water management for people and ecosystems, necessarily debating perspectives and sharing responsibility. If only one or two arms of society are engaged in water management, with a single shared perspective, it is not water governance, but water government.

The current Asian water ‘government’ structure is struggling to deliver on the dual priorities of state development and sustainable development goals (e.g. equity, poverty, gender, jobs, clean water, and partnerships).

The changing priorities of transboundary river management in the lower Mekong require an increased role for civil society organizations (CSO). The inclusion of CSOs will move the Mekong transboundary river toward a governance structure that enables more than just governments to be part of the solution.

## The Transboundary Water Governance Challenge for the Lower Mekong

The Mekong Basin Development Strategy 2021-2030 is being finalized now and it is a non-government document, spear headed by the Mekong River Commission (MRC) “to guide all actors working on water resources management and development in the Basin toward improvements in the environmental, social, and economic state of the Mekong River Basin, with benefits to all basin countries and peoples”.

This is a new development for all parties in the Mekong – as the river has always had a split personality: the Upper Mekong or Lancang lies within China and is managed separately from the Lower Mekong where the Mekong River Commission (MRC) has managed the four countries’ interests without challenging sovereign rights (Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Thailand).

However, while the plan identified priorities, it does not provide clarity on how and who will be involved in Mekong Water Governance in the next decade. The MRC is the key stakeholder for the Lower Mekong, but who else will be working with them to deliver enhanced environmental and societal outcomes; is it the usual hydrocracy, or more?

### **Enhancing CSOs’ Roles in the Mekong River Commission**

Currently, CSOs provide information and responses during MRC stakeholder consultations on predefined topics and issues via three types of engagement. First, as passive observers to specific MRC meetings, events, or activities. Second, as providing feedback at targeted sharing events which relate to a specific topic (e.g., proposed new dams or hydropower plants or strategies). And third as directly engaged input to a specific MRC activity (e.g., report review, technical input).

These roles of informing and consulting are an important start. But this does not place CSOs in a position in which they are doing more than piecemeal reactive feedback. Governance is about sharing the responsibility, delivery, and power among key stakeholders to ensure that there is no single voice or implementation arm that is dominant or marginalized.

To deliver better water governance in the Mekong, CSOs must be granted more power and decision-making capacity to ensure public concerns and aspirations are reflected transparently. This could also allow space for CSOs to partner with MRC, and other actors in the decision-making process, to develop alternative solutions and identify preferred outcomes. CSOs could be part of delivering solutions on the ground to water management challenges; as such they would partner with MRC and other actors in all aspects of decision making including the development of alternatives, identifying preferred solutions, and shared responsibility for implementation.

#### **The Journey from Mekong Water Government to Water Governance is Essential to Achieving Promised Results**

The journey from water government to governance that includes CSOs in a collaborative partnership requires more than just current water management bodies listening to CSOs and other voices. There must be structural reasons for making the transition.

All Mekong countries have agreed to deliver the sustainable development goals, and past transboundary Mekong assessments have shown that these are not being achieved through established government structures. Change is needed and civil society organizations across the Mekong are ready to be part of the governance solution for “benefits to all basin countries and peoples.”

The change toward water governance for the Mekong is a journey for all actors, where power, resources, and responsibility are given up by some actors and shared with others. This is new and challenging times. The move away from hydrocracy will mean a move away from technocratic solutions toward livelihood options with shared responsibility for delivery.

*Dr. Leonie Pearson* is a Senior Research Fellow at the Stockholm Environmental Institute. She can be contacted at [leonie.pearson@sei.org](mailto:leonie.pearson@sei.org)

APB Series Founding Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye | APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

"To deliver better water governance in the Mekong, civil society organizations must be granted more power and decision-making capacity to ensure public concerns and aspirations are reflected transparently."