

M-POWER PARTNERS WORKING GROUP MEETING
Improving Water Governance in the Mekong Region
Convention Hall 2&3
Le Meridien, Chiang Mai
7-8 March

A Letter to the M-Power Network

Dear Network,

When participants gathered outside the meeting rooms early yesterday morning, chatting, laughing and catching up, it had the feel of old friends coming together after a short absence. I had no idea I was about to step into a meeting of Scientists Anonymous.

Judging by the opening debate on the complexities of the role of scientists, it seems to me the whole scientific community desperately needs psychiatric help.

You are riddled with multiple personalities and suffer severe identity crises –Am I a researcher or an advocate? Am I a government official or a consultant? Perhaps I’m an activist - Who am I!!!

It’s no wonder you suffer these deep psychological disorders; as scientists, we were told you live in cages behind double reinforced doors unable to communicate to anyone from the “outside” except, according to Dipak, the 3.6 people who read your journal articles.

As would be expected of a 5 star hotel, the meeting room was inviting, dining style tables arranged to encourage discussion, reducing the staid environment of the usual meeting hall style seating and Lu Xing, our

MC, paced around the tables collecting his thoughts and the names of people he needed to introduce.

This was a “milestone” meeting. It was the end of one five year planning period and the ushering in of the next five years with the help of you, the M-Power Network, over the next day and a half.

Before the meeting got underway, Ajan Surichai delivered a heartfelt eulogy to David Hall, an innovative social researcher in Mekong region and someone many called a friend. A short but beautiful photo montage of David at work in the Mekong, with his family and with his friends followed by a moments silence encapsulated the love and the loss felt by many from David’s passing.

Dipak Gyawali led the opening debate which canvassed the complexity of the role of the researcher/scientist, by posing the question: was the glass of water he held in his hand half full? The answer is maybe, not, as some of us thought, half empty. Dipak’s metaphor highlighted the role of “values” on what are considered “facts” to expose the problematic environment within which many field researchers operate.

Assisted by knowledgeable and experienced panelists and respondents, the debate drew out the numerous complexities of undertaking research and being a researcher.

It is no longer enough to produce quality research, modern researchers need to: be politically savvy; be good communicators and deliver research findings effectively; be good negotiators; work outside their “comfort zone”; think about the impact of their research in 20 to 30 years time; keep in mind the advocacy potential of their research; find solutions not just problems; be research teachers;.... oh! and don’t forget to translate your research into the local language.

One participant sagely asked whether researchers were simply being asked to do too many things, some of which they may not be particularly skilled at undertaking, suggesting instead that links be improved with the change agents better equipped to undertake the work.

Nevertheless, these demands are a reality faced by researchers and it was noted that science and policy are fundamentally linked requiring the researcher to be involved in the powerful and complex interaction between knowledge and action.

Dipak issued this final challenge of the debate saying scientists aren't brilliant or intellectuals simply by the fact that they do the work they do— it is when they step outside their work and effectively apply and communicate their work that they then can be called intellectuals.

After a short break, and having consumed several delicious cakes, we returned to begin the first two of ten working group sessions that would fill the rest of the day.

All forms of workshop tools were used; PowerPoint presentations, case studies, group discussions, break out groups, mind maps, idea cards, butchers paper and flip boards. Of the seven flip boards John Dore used in his session *Improving Water Allocation in the Mekong Region*, he only managed to knock over two in a domino effect despite trying to get all seven. Other working group participants were so keen, there were times four people adding notes to butchers paper while intensely debating the pros and cons of each addition.

The innovative approaches used in the sessions reaped rewards with lively discussion and debate filling the meeting rooms. And in as much as the working groups were about problem solving, they were also importantly about knowledge sharing. Many project participants

operating along the Mekong, hadn't had the opportunity to discuss their work with each other for some time, and the value of the insights provided will give project partners new ideas to take back to their country's of research.

While you will get the opportunity to read the full working group summaries in the final report, it is worth noting a number of the key themes that emerged out of the sessions.

A recurring issue was how to successfully engage stakeholders in dialogue to achieve a shared vision and shared outcomes. Dialogue is a multifaceted beast. National scale dialogue is different to local scale dialogue, which is again different from regional dialogue and the expectations of the participants differ from forum to forum. It was noted in the session on Multi-Stakeholder Platforms, dialogue is culturally embedded and is effected by the experiences of people involved. Sometimes offering the dialogue is not enough as there are also issues of trust and how the dialogue will be used – perhaps politically. The challenge then, is how to engage groups, governments, people who choose not to participate in formal dialogue.

Other dialogues are more sensitive. While everyone appreciates that the PNPCA is a sensitive issue, the task of the PNPCA is to ensure a high quality conversations between the countries of the region on the issue of energy and national development. Networks like M-Power understand that individual network members play very different roles – some as part of government, some as part of research organisations, some as NGOs advocacy bodies. The task for individual members is how to best contribute to the process.

The session on the HSAP held a lively discussion on how to encourage governments, developers and civil society to trust and believe in the HSAP protocol as a sustainability assessment tool.

Trust emerged as issue across the region. For researchers to effectively engage stakeholder it is always important to understand the political environment, even after the dialogue process has finished, because stakeholders are often influenced by external factors and demands from their own communities, governments and constituencies.

In terms of dialogue, it was noted there was still a “long way to go” but the networks across the region and the many interfaces and dialogues being undertaken were very important.

Effectively communicating your research was a priority issue or as it was put, how can researchers from a galaxy far far away talk to humans, particularly humans who don't necessarily agree with your research.

The session on Making Your Research Travel discussed the good, the bad and the ugly of communicating research. Talking directly with stakeholders was a good experience, and even if the research was uncomfortable for some to hear, there can occasionally be surprisingly positive outcomes when people are confronted with difficult questions. Also utilizing the media as an opportunity not a threat was discussed.

Of course there are challenges including institutional filtering of information and a reluctance of some people and institutions, including the media, to refuse to accept research that challenges common thinking or entrenched beliefs. This will require innovative techniques to get your message across.

The Publishing for Impact session highlighted how to use media, like newspaper opinion columns to communicate your research. The session discussed methods such as timing your op. ed. around current events to get your message out but be careful, you will need to change your research writing style to grab your readers.

And there are also useful tools available to make relatively dry topics, like environmental modeling, interesting enough to grab the eye of a key decision makers. The graphic techniques successfully used by the Hon. Al Gore in his documentary, An Inconvenient Truth is a prime example and work is being done to make raw data about the environmental state of the Mekong, visually engaging to those decision makers.

And in much the same way as Al Gore was a spokesperson on climate change, the Mekong needs a trusted spokesperson to deliver the message

While there is a clear crossover between the issues of dialogue and communication and that of influence and impact, a number of sessions canvassed research methodologies designed to achieve maximum impact and influence.

Impact too, is multifaceted. Discussion in the session on Improving Water Allocation kept coming back to the issue of “impact”, highlighting that from time to time the impact hoped for and the impact actually achieved can be very different. Also, of all the stages in a research project, measuring the impact in terms of the influence of the research and the actual outcomes generated by a project can be difficult.

Sometimes there is a disconnect between high level water planning and water use, and the session exploring Sustainable Water Use for Agriculture in the Asia Pacific used 15 real life examples where high level planning had a negative impact on local agriculture. The question then for those farmers, is how to get better organized and better resourced to have more influence over the high level decision makers

who are currently favouring the well organized industry groups. Perhaps this is something that could be discussed at the regional FAO online conference.

Essentially, friends, an understanding of the political and personal motivations of decision makers will help you influence those decision makers.

Power relations was commonly discussed in the context of research methodologies, from using innovative techniques to engage local communities and people about how to most effectively access and influence power structures; through to engaging the most influential high level government decision makers.

Sometimes the seemingly obvious person or government institution within a complex political environment may not be the final decision maker, as the group discussing water governance and reservoir management found in their governmental mapping exercise of Cambodian government power structures.

And finally, dear Network, the power of sharing of experiences cannot be undervalued: from project overviews; to sharing research finding; to talking about experiences as former Research Fellows for potential Fellows to learn from; to chatting over a cup of coffee or one or two or three beers last night at the Sangdee Gallery, it all promotes and strengthens this Network.

With such passion and enthusiasm shown by the participants over the past day and a half, the issue of water was never going to be dry.

All the best for your future work and all power to M-Power.

Thanks to Steve Mullins and Chantana Wun'Gaeo for writing and reading this letter at the M-POWER Working Group Meeting.