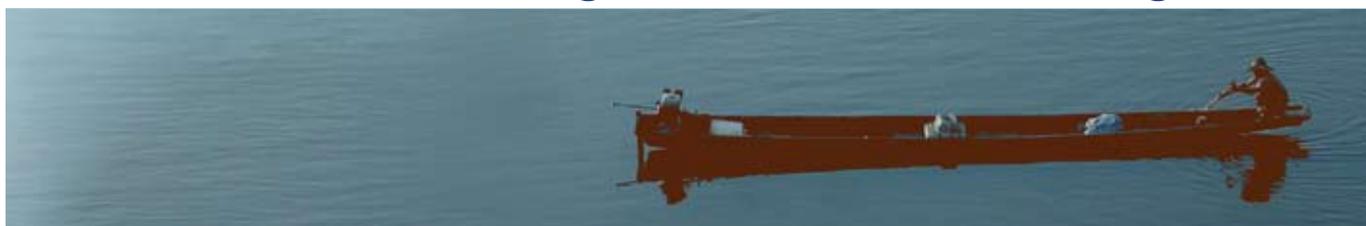


M-POWER

Mekong Program on Water
Environment and Resilience



action-researchers | dialogue facilitators | knowledge brokers



M-POWER Strategic Guide 2011



About this guide

The Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience (M-POWER) is a network of individuals and organizations working to democratize water governance in the Mekong Region.

This M-POWER Guide describes our agenda for action-research, dialogue facilitation and knowledge brokering. It builds on our past successes and incorporates learnings and feedback from the implementation of our activities since 2004.

We will continue to revise the Guide in response to emerging regional priorities and the interests of our network members, and as we learn about better ways of studying and engaging with water governance challenges.

The Guide begins with a basic introduction to M-POWER (section 1). We then articulate our vision, mission, profile and guiding principles (section 2), followed by our goal and specific objectives (section 3).

We outline the framework and five themes that guide our research, dialogues and knowledge brokering activities (section 4), and subsequently present some of our key projects and case study-based work (section 5).

Network management and other opportunities to participate in M-POWER are summarised (section 6).

We conclude with an outline of the core strategies we use for achieving the vision articulated in this guide (section 7).

Please send us your ideas to further improve the next edition of this update.

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Cover photos

From top left to right: Kate Lazarus, Louis Lebel, Truong Van Vi, Louis Lebel

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1. INTRODUCTION

M-POWER – or the Mekong Program on Water Environment and Resilience – began in 2004 as a knowledge network with members from the six countries of the Mekong Region that encompass the territory, ecosystems, people, economies and politics of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and China's Yunnan Province. There was no core funding; that came much later.

We are a network undertaking action-based research, facilitated dialogues and knowledge networking to improve water governance in the Mekong Region in ways that support sustainable livelihoods and healthy communities and ecosystems.

A core objective of the network is to make it normal practice for important national and transnational water-related options and decisions to have been examined in the public sphere; another is to support the development of governance analysts with experience across the region.

M-POWER made a deliberate choice to focus on the wider region, including several international and many domestic river basins, rather than to overly focus on the Mekong River Basin and thereby frame too much 'in' or too much 'out' of different political arenas.

M-POWER activities are supported by a network of about 30 partner organizations. Most members are from academic and non-government organizations but also belong to international organizations and government agencies. The network has received funding from several sources, including Echel Eau, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and AusAID through the Challenge Program on Water and Food, Blue Moon Fund, and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for its activities but relies mainly on the diverse voluntary contributions of its partners.

The first major public M-POWER cooperation was in November 2004 when network members convened, facilitated and provided catalytic knowledge inputs to a high-level roundtable on 'Using Water, Caring for Environment: Challenges for the Mekong Region' at the World Conservation Congress in Bangkok. The event included ministers from five Mekong countries (all but Burma/Myanmar) as well as non-state actors. Sensitive issues were examined, such as: Thailand's proposed water grid, plans for hydropower on the Nu-Salween river, and threats to Cambodia's Tonle Sap ecosystem.

The acronym 'M-POWER' is a play on the word empower, which means 'to give qualities or abilities to do something.' This captures our motivation for engaging in water governance research and our intent to facilitate a culture of continuous improvement in this arena in the Mekong Region. Each element of the acronym deserves elaboration:

- **Mekong** refers to the broad region of mainland Southeast Asia comprising the Mekong, Irrawaddy, Salween, Chao Phraya, Red and the smaller basins in-between (see Figure 1);
- **Program** refers to a coherent set of action-research, dialogue facilitation and knowledge networking activities that extend beyond a single project or grant;
- **Water** refers to inland water as a multi-purpose resource for livelihood activities, a threat or disaster (flood, drought, flow and sediment trapping or release), a way of making energy (hydropower), or an important medium for aquatic life;
- **Environment** refers to the living (e.g. people, fish, wildlife) and non-living (e.g. dams, irrigation infrastructure, power lines) elements of the world; and
- **Resilience** refers to the maintenance of capacities to adapt to and cope with human-induced and natural change in a social and environmental context that is dynamic, multi-scale and inter-related.

Figure 1: Mekong Region



SOURCE: Map No. 4112, Rev. 2. January 2004. United Nations Cartographic Section, New York, US

2. OVERVIEW

This section presents the vision and mission of M-POWER, together with a profile statement that captures our aspirations for further enhancing the network's identity. We also identify the key principles that guide our research and activities.

Vision

Our vision is for the Mekong Region to realize an internationally accepted standard of democracy in water governance.

Mission

Our mission is to support sustainable livelihoods and healthier communities and ecosystems in the Mekong Region through conducting action-research, facilitating dialogues and nurturing transboundary knowledge networks that encourage diverse collaborative relationships and improve policy and practice settings.

Profile

We wish to maintain M-POWER as a widely known and highly regarded network of strategic researchers, facilitators and practitioners committed to improving water governance within and across Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam at local, national and regional levels.

Guiding principles

We are committed to:

- supporting multi-stakeholder deliberations about substantive water-environment-energy-resilience issues in the Mekong Region and beyond, including under the umbrella of 'exploring water futures together' dialogues;
- influencing policy and building capacity through our portfolio of evidence-based participatory research, through facilitated dialogues and through nurturing transboundary knowledge networks;
- giving particular attention to policy relevance and to the interface between science and policy in the design and conduct of our research;
- strengthening social justice, corporate social and environmental responsibility and ecological sustainability in a peaceful and orderly manner;
- emphasizing fair and effective governance in our action-research, facilitation and knowledge exchange – taking into account voluntary and involuntary risks, possible rewards, as well as the rights and responsibilities of all authorities and stakeholders; and
- ensuring that water-related deliberation, negotiation and decision-making are more informed and transparent.

3. GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

This section presents the goal and specific objectives of M-POWER, including an explanation of key terms.

Goal

Our goal is to improve livelihood security and the health of communities and ecosystems in the Mekong Region through continuous improvement in the democratization of water governance.

We take a broad view of *democratization*. It is interpreted here as encompassing issues of public participation and deliberation; separation of powers; accountability of public institutions; social and gender justice; protection of rights; representation; decentralization; and dissemination of information. We believe that action-research, facilitated dialogues and stronger knowledge networks can help societies explore and adaptively reform water governance – rather than assume that a single model fits all social and resource contexts.

We define *water governance* as encompassing the ways in which power is organized, shared and negotiated in society; the interactions and decision-making processes involved in how water resources are developed and used; and the distribution of benefits and involuntary risks from doing so. This takes into account the full spectrum of influences from shaping agendas and deliberating options, and the design of institutions and organizations, through to the day-to-day practices of water management.

Governance emerges from the interactions between State, business and not-for-profit actors at multiple scales. It is not the privy of the State or confined to a particular level or arena.

Specific objectives

Our specific objectives comprise the following five inter-related pillars:

Dialogue: To establish and embed public processes that consider the rights, risks and responsibilities of different groups and perspectives as normal practice when exploring and deciding upon important national and transnational water-related development and management options;

Institutions: To better understand, influence and strengthen institutional arrangements¹ to support more sustainable and fairer water resource outcomes;

Knowledge & Capacity: To robustly link formal and informal knowledge systems to each other and to policy processes, underpinned by diverse, dynamic and enduring communities of practice both within and outside the region;

Social Justice: To redress and transform gender, class, ethnic and other inequities through increasing awareness and application of social justice norms² in the network's research and activities; and

Human Security: To consider the full complex of natural and human-induced factors that affect catchment water cycles when seeking solutions to water resources problems.

1. Institutional arrangements refer to organizations, laws, rules, policies, strategies, practices, norms and the like.

2. Social justice norms refer to notions of fairness and equality of treatment and opportunity.

4. RESEARCH PROGRAM

This section has three elements. Firstly, we explain our overarching strategic and operating framework. We then outline our headline themes. Finally, we present some of our key projects and case study-based research.

Framework

We organize our action-research program around five *themes*, which we explore in depth through conducting our own *projects* and comparative and regional *case studies*, as well as drawing upon the body of existing research findings.

By action-research we mean that our work often involves engagement in the policy debates and actions we are analyzing and commenting upon. We have purposively adopted an action-research approach because it is change-oriented and reflexive. The lessons we draw through ongoing exchange and analysis will inform the thinking and actions of our own network as well as those we engage with in conducting our work.

The first four themes (dialogue, institutions, knowledge & capacity, social justice) have dedicated portfolios of action-research activities, while the fifth theme (human security) will draw from their collective research efforts.

Themes

Our themes are aligned with our specific objectives, namely: dialogue, institutions, knowledge & capacity, social justice and human security. We give a description of and rationale for each theme. We note that the themes presented are sufficiently discrete to warrant individual attention without implying that any are mutually exclusive.

Dialogue

Description: This theme explores the potential of alternative approaches for engaging in water-related deliberative dialogues, diplomacy, negotiation and decision-making in the Mekong Region. The dialogue theme critically reflects on whether and how multi-stakeholder platforms can bring water policy and policy-making into the public sphere. To accomplish this, network members will continue to organise and actively engage in water dialogues: forums, workshops, meetings, public hearings, and the formal and informal policy interface and negotiations that revolve around interconnected water resource management and policy issues. Network members will also review and develop effective methods to conduct dialogues.

Rationale: Effective platforms are characterized by the provision of opportunities for relatively open and fair deliberations, that can lead to better decisions, agreements and implementation. Our thesis is that effective multi-stakeholder platforms not only enable a wider representation of actors to constructively search together for solutions, but also provide opportunities to negotiate tradeoffs and search for compromises. This recognizes that full consensus will rarely be attainable because of differences in the interests and strategic positioning of stakeholders. However, MSPs can significantly complement other forms of governing and are not seen as a replacement.



Visualization of issues explored during M-POWER/CPWF hosted session on Water Governance; MRC Watershed Management conference, Chiang Mai, Thailand, March 2011
Photo: M-POWER/CPWF

Institutions

Description: This theme focuses on understanding the prevailing political, economic and ecological processes in the Mekong Region and beyond – specifically, the incentives, relationships, distribution and contestation of power between different groups and individuals – which, together, greatly impact on development outcomes. Our research is anticipated to support more effective and politically feasible strategies, as well as more realistic expectations of what may be achieved, over what timescales, and with what risks. Its ultimate influence will depend on the extent to which recommended changes in development practice and institutional incentives are adopted. M-POWER is focused on exploring and developing a new generation of operationally relevant tools at the sector and program level, which offers good possibilities for transcending the gap between analysis and action, thereby ensuring meaningful change in government, donor and developer practice.

Rationale: Effective development intervention requires a sound understanding of the political ecology of the Mekong Region. This is especially so because the achievement of pro-poor development, social justice and gender balance is intrinsically linked to good politics. Central to political ecology is power and the way in which it is articulated and used, and how it manifests itself across an ecological landscape. The political ecology analyses carried out under this theme will complement conventional governance assessments by providing a deeper level of understanding about power, capacity, accountability and responsiveness, as well as levels of resilience. We also will pay attention to the role of informal institutions, and cultural and social practices. Tools for international best practice will be explored to provide learning for different actors and its applicability to Mekong Region decisions.

Knowledge & Capacity

Description: This theme addresses how different forms of knowledge inform decision-making and action-taking. It aims to span and integrate understanding from formal assessment processes established by government and inter-governmental agencies, through to the diverse kinds of local and organizational knowledge often embedded in practices. Access to, and the capacity for, analysis are highly differentiated in Mekong societies. This places a high social responsibility on technical experts and their managers operating within bureaucracies that often have strong organizational interests for particular types of rationales and findings. Efforts will be made to include grassroots knowledge in decision-making process. The science-policy interface must therefore be negotiated and its inherent interdependencies acknowledged.

Our fellowship program comes under the umbrella of this theme, and has been strengthened following a review process. It will remain a key focus for building technical capacity in integrated water resource management for both researchers and government officials (see later section).

Rationale: M-POWER recognizes that significant knowledge generation and capacity building needs to occur. Social learning with respect to water governance in the Mekong Region has been far slower and weaker than is required to secure sustainable livelihoods for socially vulnerable groups and to address the social development and economic growth challenges of the region. Assessments are rarely perceived as credible and even fewer as legitimate. Often, fact and fiction are intertwined in ways that hinder negotiations, dialogues and effective policy-making.

Social Justice

Description: This theme explores the social justice challenge of reducing differences in opportunities, rights, involuntary risks, sharing of benefits and access through changing the form of engagement in water governance. We focus our attention on issues of social equity that differentiates according to gender, ethnicity and class. In so doing, we place power at the centre of our research. We wish to explore the conditions and terms under which different groups of people participate in water governance and the consequences for their well-being, especially health and food security. We also ask similar questions about other potentially socially vulnerable groups in the region, particularly ethnic minorities, immigrants, urban slum dwellers and landless farmers. Finally, we look at how class, ethnicity and gender issues intersect and any interdependencies generated. The third volume of our edited book series, *Water Rights and Social Justice in the Mekong Region* examines these issues.

Rationale: Our thesis is that engagement with socially susceptible groups (in both rationale and practice) is often instrumental; that is, it is geared to advocate particular decisions rather than enable the advancement of target group interests. In the case of women, for example, the term ‘participatory’ covers a wide range of applications: from (often unpaid) labor utilization, mobilization for tasks often perceived as extensions of their domestic roles, to token presence in deliberations on community financing.

The social justice challenge is not just a question of process, but also one of outcomes and impacts on the livelihoods of marginalized groups. Action-research needs to identify inequalities and then work to improve outcomes for the disadvantaged. Changing discriminatory and unfair practices that result in unequal rights, benefits and work is difficult, but is a key aim of M-POWER.

Human Security

Description: This theme examines our entire action-research program through the lens of human security. It presents integrated information and research findings on human security from five key perspectives: environment/ecosystem services, food, energy, disaster, and resilient livelihoods. We use multi-stakeholder processes to pursue sustainable economic, ecological and social benefits across the region. We contrast the ways in which different actors have framed environment and livelihood issues in upland and lowland catchments. These actors span grassroots organizations representing the interests of ethnic minorities and academic experts through to bureaucrats in State agencies. We provide new opportunities for those usually excluded from policy and decision-making forums to better represent themselves and to debate upland and lowland issues and alternative options. We pay special attention to the role of 'water' and 'watershed' management in these discourses, policies and politics. Further, we anticipate making a contribution to ongoing and new dialogue processes that aim to reduce conflict.

Rationale: Water resource issues begin at the watershed level; from floods arising from high runoff to droughts resulting from low rainfall. Superimposed upon this are the modifications to and uses of land and water resources by people, which introduce further potential for conflict situations. It is therefore necessary to consider the full complex of natural and human-induced factors that affect catchment water cycles when seeking solutions to water resources problems.

We expect that taking a 'human security lens' approach compared to an individual sector approach will produce a more comprehensive integration of our research and action outcomes.



Environments, infrastructure and livelihoods vary widely across the Mekong Region
Photos from top left: Bernard Moizo, Lisa Robins, Kim Geheb

5. ACTIVITIES

Program activities contribute to an individual theme or, most often, to multiple theme areas. The examples presented here provide a good indication of the directions and emphasis of this element of our work.

Democratizing Water Governance 2010-2012

The democratization of water governance is a key overall objective of the M-POWER network. In doing so, we are building on the last five years of our work in this arena by working closely with Phase 2 of the Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF), which aims to 'increase the benefits derived from hydropower, and to contribute towards minimising negative impacts'. This 'Water Governance' project is one of six integrated projects for the Mekong.

M-POWER has responsibility for a project focusing on ways in which benefits from dams can be improved across the Mekong Basin by concentrating on how dams are managed and operated at a basin-wide scale. Its emphasis therefore is about institutional and managerial innovation in this sector.

This activity will:

- assess existing policies and administration that have implications on benefits, burdens and risks from dam construction and operations and provide recommendations for needed policy and administrative reforms;
- study how water needs, benefits, burdens and risks of downstream communities, of farmers and fishers have been articulated in the public domain, and explore whether they are on the agenda of decision-makers, and taken into account (or not) in design, planning and management of dams;
- ascertain the extent to which procedural and distributive equity in the allocation of benefits, burdens and risks related to overall livelihoods and environment are addressed and taken up in key deliberations and negotiations in dam construction and establishment; and provide advice on appropriate approaches to promote equity in planning and managing operations of reservoirs;
- examine emerging governance formations for dam operations with particular emphasis on institutional development that addresses major issues in a comprehensive and integrated way, and pro-actively addresses transboundary problems and;
- synthesise governance research and implications on current patterns and practices currently dominant at the Mekong basin-level – that is, provide a 'White Paper' on recommended gap-filling regarding administrative and policy reforms and enhanced stakeholders relationships to improve basin-wide governance.

Deliberative Dialogues 2004+

M-POWER is exploring the potential of alternative approaches for engaging in energy-, food- and water-related deliberative dialogues, diplomacy, negotiation and decision-making in the Mekong Region. Our agenda is driven by concerns about the individual and collective impacts of potential large-scale hydropower and irrigation developments.

We are conducting deliberative dialogues with the aim of realizing more open, inclusive and transparent decisions about the development and placement of projects and plans relating to energy, food and water. This aim further extends to decisions regarding functions and the sharing of risks and benefits framed within the broader environmental and social context. Better decision-making processes are expected to contribute to reducing the negative social and environmental impacts of the implementation and operation of major projects and plans in the Mekong Region.

M-POWER has responsibility for establishing and nurturing multi-stakeholder platforms (MSP) under Phase 2 of the Challenge Program on Water and Food which aims to 'increase the benefits derived from hydropower, and to contribute towards minimising negative impacts'. It is one of six integrated projects, and has two components (MSPs and Hydropower Governance).

We use the following definition of MSPs: a 'decision-making body (voluntary or statutory) comprising different stakeholders who perceive the same resource management problem, realize their interdependence for solving it, and come together to agree on action strategies for solving the problem'. MSPs are widely promoted as an institutional setting for participatory water management. They are problem-solving institutional innovations that may be used to democratize water management, to manage conflict, and/or to make water management more efficient.

Improving Hydropower Assessment 2009+

The rapid advancement of hydropower agendas and the growing interest of a range of stakeholders about the high potential for adverse social and environmental impacts signals an urgent need for greater attention to this arena. M-POWER is actively supporting more sustainable hydropower governance through its project activities (Hydropower Governance and Multi-Stakeholder Platforms). Hydropower Governance focuses on introducing and building capacity for the utilization of new governance tools, such as the Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Protocol (HSAP) and environmental flows among others. AusAID has supported our work in this arena since 2009. We are now significantly expanding our activities in China and Laos to build upon some initial capacity development efforts over the last year in advancing more sustainable hydropower.

Collectively, this work is anticipated to influence the way in which hydropower is designed, developed and managed. We will facilitate constructive engagement with and learning of stakeholders (civil society, government, developers and banks) about hydropower development issues in the Mekong Region.

Our activities will raise awareness about and the processes related to the Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Protocol (HSAP) and others. We expect to see greater uptake of national, international and transnational sustainable hydropower guidelines and standards in the region.

It is our aim to also work with major hydropower companies operating in the region to make demonstrable gains in corporate social and environmental responsibility.

Exploring Mekong Region Futures 2010-2012

The Mekong Region Futures project is an alliance between AusAID and Australia's CSIRO. It is examining the dynamics between water-, food- and energy-related policy and investment decisions in a transboundary context. It aims to contribute to formal national and regional decision-making in and between these sectors.

The work focuses on the Mekong Region and is comprised of a regional expert team and five case study sites: water exports in the Vientiane Plain (Nam Ngum) in Laos, future farming in Isaan (Northeast Thailand), impacts of development on the Tonle Sap in Cambodia, sea level rise and future livelihoods in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, and rubber futures in Yunnan, China.

M-POWER has been involved in conceptualizing the project and is actively participating on regional and national implementation teams, which have responsibility for forging working relationships with key policy-makers and practitioners.

The project investigates possible future trajectories in the energy, food and water nexus in the Mekong Region. 'Nexus' is defined as the dynamic interactions between the three sectors as opposed to understanding each sector in isolation. The analysis of this nexus in the context of the Mekong Region is conducted with particular consideration of key drivers like increasing regionalism, cross-border investment flows, climate change, rapid land use change and urbanization.

Twin2Go – Mekong 2010

The Twin2Go project reviews, consolidates, and synthesizes research on adaptive and integrated water resources management in basins around the world. The aim is to draw insights relevant to policy and research on issues around adaptive water governance in the context of climate change, and to make them transferable to other basins.

A key component of the project was to develop a dataset describing 96 different aspects of water governance in 29 river basins in Europe, Asia, Latin-America and Africa that previously been a part of EU Basin Twinning Projects. The dataset was based on a standard questionnaire and a set of expert workshops held around the world with preparatory and follow-up activities to improve, validate and help interpret expert judgments and values from global datasets. Another part of the project is attempting to compile case histories of best-practice experiences from around the world.

Expert Panels 2010+

Expert panels can be an effective way of improving the transparency of decision-making, and the knowledge base upon which it is informed. M-POWER is investing more effort in this arena through both initiating the formation of expert panels and participating in them as an active member. Our first panel initiative has been in partnership with the Mekong River Commission to review the Basin Development Plan Phase 2 (BDP2). The panel comprised of internationally and regionally recognized experts in modelling, environmental, hydrological economic and social assessments, scenario analysis and public participation. Our second initiative has been in setting up a team of social and environmental experts to externally peer review draft environmental and social impact assessment reports for a Chinese company planning to build a cascade of dams in Lao PDR. In future, M-POWER aims to expand its work in this area by providing opportunities to different stakeholders (government, private sector, international organisations) to improve transparency of information and provide high-quality independent reviews.

Research Fellowships 2007+

An M-POWER Research Fellowship provides an exciting and challenging opportunity for a wide variety of people to join multi-country and multi-disciplinary teams of researchers. Fellows will gain a deeper understanding of water governance issues facing the region, conduct original research, and be involved in public events and deliberations.

With the support of the Challenge Program on Water and Food, our annual call invites proposals from professionals, researchers, government officials, and others interested in the Mekong Region, its management and its future. We expect that the fellowship program will progressively attract further resourcing and enable expansion on the current scope of research questions, as well as development of capacity within M-POWER to host research fellows and provide ongoing support to the growing alumni network. The fellowship program is lead by a collaboration between the Asian Institute of Technology, Yunnan University and Ubon Ratchathani University on behalf of the M-POWER network.

Resourcing

M-POWER is primarily supported by the efforts and resources of its members – both individual and organizational, and from within and outside the Mekong Region. We conduct a suite of separately funded projects, each of which has its own deliverables and reporting requirements.

To date, we have received financial and technical support from a variety of donors and partners, notably from Echel Eau (France), the International Fund for Agriculture and Development (IFAD), and AusAID through the Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF), Blue Moon Fund and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).



Fish products remain central to nutrition and economies throughout the Mekong Region
Photo: Lisa Robins

6. PARTICIPATING IN M-POWER

This section outlines the governance structure of M-POWER network and ways in which organizations and individuals can get involved.

There are many ways to get involved with M-POWER and its agenda of democratizing water governance in the Mekong Region. This section outlines both the formal and informal pathways of contributing to and participating in our work and related activities as action researchers, dialogue facilitators and knowledge brokers.

Become a Partner: The Steering Committee welcomes requests to join the M-POWER network from organizations actively working on water governance issues in the Mekong Region.

Apply for a Fellowship: Our calls invites proposals from professionals, researchers, government officials, and others interested in the Mekong Region, its management and its future. Also, find out about our Alumni of current and past M-POWER Research Fellows.

Volunteer: We welcome professionals willing to work with the M-POWER network in a volunteer capacity across a range of skills areas.

Events: An interactive calendar of events and activities in the Mekong Region and beyond related to M-POWER's agenda, such as our Annual Meeting, conferences, book launches and meetings.

Network management

M-POWER is a distributed network of collaborating organizations and individuals. We purposefully allocate functions and responsibilities among partners. The sharing of functions across the network has and will continue to change over time, both in response to existing capacities and to develop new capacities. We have two key elements to our network management, namely an overarching Steering Committee, and an M-POWER Coordinator.

M-POWER Steering Committee

The Steering Committee (SC) has principal responsibility for overall program development and delivery and for representing M-POWER in regional forums. It provides strategic direction and advice on key actions that need to be taken by the Coordinator and M-POWER projects.

The core decisions that rest with the SC are:

- endorsing proposals or projects as formal activities of the network;
- selecting and evaluating Research Fellows;
- approving and reviewing budget management of projects;
- resolving disputes within the network, such as between Research Fellows and their hosts;
- approving annual work plans and reports to donors before release; and
- approving changes to how the network is represented and governed.

The SC communicates principally by email, skype and telephone with face-to-face meetings held each year in conjunction with the annual network meeting. Additional meetings are held if required. When necessary, SC members vote to make decisions, with a majority required for a decision to be adopted.

SC members are nominated and endorsed by the SC. Their term is usually 2-3 years, but may be renewed indefinitely. A gradual rotation of serving SC members is encouraged, but every effort is made to ensure ongoing representation from at least five of the six Mekong countries, and from out-of-region members. Our leadership team brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the challenges of democratizing water governance.

The Steering Committee currently comprises:

Bach Tan Sinh, National Institute for Science & Technology Policy & Strategic Studies, Vietnam
Bernadette Resurreccion, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand
Chayanis Krittasudthacheewa, Stockholm Environment Institute, Thailand
Dipak Gyawali, Nepal Academy of Science and Technology, Nepal
John Dore, AusAID, Lao PDR
Kanokwan Manorom, Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand
Kate Lazarus, Challenge Program on Water and Food, Lao PDR
Lilao Bouapao, Independent Researcher, Lao PDR
Louis Lebel, Chiang Mai University, Thailand
Lu Xing, Yunnan University, China
Marko Keskinen, Aalto University, Finland
Pech Sokhem, Hatfield Consultants, Canada (Chair)
Surichai Wun'gao, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand
Yang Saing Koma, Centre d'Etude et de Développement Agricole Cambodgien, Cambodia

Previous Steering Committee members:

Francois Molle, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, and International Water Management Institute, Syria
Xu Jianchu, World Agroforestry Centre, China

M-POWER Coordinator

The M-POWER Coordinator has responsibility for ensuring that the members' activities are well coordinated and managed, and for facilitating communications and activities among network members. The coordinator maintains the website and listserves for the network, provides research updates, and develops and distributes promotional and outreach material.

Project Leaders are responsible for their own administration, financial accounting and reporting, including communicating directly with donors. In doing so, they refer decisions to the Steering Committee in accordance with agreed protocols, and keep the M-POWER Coordinator and the Steering Committee progressively updated on the status of their work.

Getting involved with M-POWER

Become a Partner

M-POWER is a distributed network of collaborating organizations and individuals. These partners are involved in action research, dialogue facilitation and/or knowledge brokering in the arena of water governance in the Mekong Region. Being a partner in the M-POWER network provides both rights and responsibilities. Partners have a lot of flexibility about how and the extent to which they actively engage with and shape the network. In practice, it is the interest, initiative and drive of individuals within the partner organizations that makes the network effective.

M-POWER provides an umbrella for bringing actors together to share and refine ideas, to apply for and conduct cross-partner research, to build regional relationships and skills, to influence institutional arrangements, and much more. The most active partners will generally hold a position on the *Steering Committee*, which has responsibility for the network's strategic decision-making. The Steering Committee provides a unique platform for working collaboratively and exchanging information and knowledge with a cohort of highly experienced and influential multi-disciplinary actors.

Partners provide input to shaping and delivering the network's strategic directions, which are embodied in, most recently, this *M-POWER Strategic Guide 2011 update*. The M-POWER annual meeting is a key event that in agenda setting. While we will seek to secure resources to support the cost of the meeting, it is assumed that partners will have organizational and project resources from which to draw.

Partners may be asked to take on functions and responsibilities. The sharing of functions across the network has and will continue to change over time, both in response to existing capacities and to develop new capacities.

We recognize that the degree to which partners are able to actively conduct or participate in activities identified in or aligned with our strategic guide will vary. Some partners that were instrumental in building the network and its current knowledge base and social capital will step back and facilitate others in leading the network into its next phase of work.

We welcome requests to join the M-POWER network from individuals and organizations actively working on water governance issues in the Mekong Region. All requests will be considered and determined by M-POWER's Steering Committee.

Apply for a Research Fellowship

M-POWER Research Fellows make a significant contribution to the network's action-research efforts. Through a new Fellowship Program starting in 2011, M-POWER expects to support another 40 new Research Fellows. The program will provide academic support to and build capacity of persons interested in knowledge generation, exchange and policy influence in Mekong Region. The call will invite proposals from professionals, researchers, government officials, and others interested in the Mekong Region, its management and its future. Eight rounds of the *M-POWER Fellowships Program* have been awarded. On the M-POWER website, information about our fellows and the research that they carried out can be obtained. Our Alumni network represents a significant contribution to the development of region capacity in the arena of water governance. This network of enthusiastic and skilled fellows is expected to grow and strengthen with subsequent *application rounds*.

Volunteer

M-POWER is always looking for helpers to progress its strategic agenda. There is scope for volunteers to be based with the M-POWER Coordinator or attached to a *partner organization* or to a *specific activity*. If you are a professional with knowledge and skills that you think are relevant to our work, you are welcome to contact us to discuss potential opportunities or to outline your ideas. We especially encourage in-region professionals to consider ways of getting involved with the network.

From time-to-time there may be funds available to support volunteers however it is likely that you will need to find your own funding support. Many avenues for facilitating volunteering exist, which you may explore independently, such as fellowships, volunteer organizations, professional development funds and travel scholarships.

Join activities, such as the annual meeting of the network

M-POWER convenes an annual meeting for network members and invited guests. These meetings are conducted in different locations within the Mekong Region (eg. 2006 and 2007 Chiang Mai, 2008 Hanoi, 2009 Kunming, 2010 Phnom Penh, 2011 Chiang Mai) in order to provide opportunities for membership engagement and for exploring issues throughout the region. The annual meetings encourage and motivate participants to interact and share their experiences and research learnings. Meetings are utilized to design, develop and refine specific products, such as assessment tools, policy briefs, books and special issues.

7. CORE STRATEGIES

We use five core strategies for achieving the vision articulated in this guide. We are committed to engaging decision-makers and -influencers, sharing information and communicating, developing products and resource materials, promoting grassroots research, and developing capacity in the region.

Engaging decision-makers and -influencers

M-POWER tries to do more than observe the region; we want our research to improve it. To do this we must constructively engage in decision-making processes, and with those who make and influence decisions.

Research has an important role to play in informing decision-making processes and, in some cases, may warn or aspire decision-makers for or against taking a particular path. However, decision-makers are not necessarily well placed to access and interpret research outcomes, especially when the research is conducted in isolation from their processes and without consideration of their specific issues and needs. Action-research, facilitated dialogues and knowledge brokering provide platforms for working with decision-makers and -influencers in ways that are interactive, experimental and demonstration-based to support mutual reflection and learning.

It is important that our network uses and expands its connections to others. This will better enable us to make our desired contribution to Mekong societies. We will establish partnerships across a diversity of water governance actors, and not just confine ourselves to working with other researchers.

We are committed to explaining and justifying our work, and we are prepared to be critiqued in the way that we critique others. We will continue to keep an open dialogue, and to provide different perspectives. How best to do this varies from place to place, and time to time, but we know we need to be creative if we are to have maximum positive impact. We know that writing is important, but that it is not enough. We need to present, interact and use multi-media to convey messages. We need to persuade, listen, and reflect. We need to better understand the context of others and tailor our messages for different actors.

Sharing information and communicating

Mekong Research Listserve

M-POWER, in collaboration with the Challenge Program on Water and Food, are hosting a joint listserve to provide a two-way communication tool for Mekong researchers. The listserve is a dialogue space to share research plans and findings, news and event information related to development in the Mekong Region. Email mekong-research@googlegroups.com to join.

Internet

The internet is a powerful and valuable tool for linking M-POWER's multi-country members. The internet, coupled with other media, provides opportunities for enhancing communication and coordination of our activities in both practical and innovative ways.

We use a web-based multi-media communication system that incorporates voice, video, photographs and documents. These resources are readily accessible and used by M-POWER researchers and their collaborators. We manage most project documentation through the web.

Our website is the public face of M-POWER. It is principally structured around each of our themes, and provides research information, practical tools and an interactive forum for public discussion. We aim to draw both new and return visitors across a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including the general public. The website is frequently updated and has automated database functions. We also profile our partner organizations.

Developing products and resource materials

M-POWER researchers publish their writings and articles in many different ways. We have been producing a multi-authored book series comprising four edited volumes as an integrated output of the collective action-research activities outlined in this guide.

Each volume aims to reflect the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds of the authors while focusing on a common framework of water governance in the Mekong Region. Authors are mainly drawn from M-POWER, including younger upcoming governance researchers, scholars, activists and established leaders.

We produce working papers and policy reports. Working papers are publications written by M-POWER researchers. We expect the vast majority to be published as peer-reviewed literature over time. Unpublished working papers are generally available from authors on request. Media releases are used to convey key findings through conventional media channels whilst some of our partners actively engage in generating alternative media forms.

We also produce audio-visual material including films that are made available for wider public distribution. We produced a film as an output of the Mekong Region Waters Dialogue held in Laos in 2006, entitled *Exploring Water Futures Together*. The film interviews are accessible as interactive audio-visual content on the M-POWER website.

Promoting grassroots research

Good governance requires a free flow of high-quality and verifiable information moving both up and down through society. It requires that decision-makers have access and pay heed to information from local actors. A two-way flow of accurate information can give society an early warning about development proposals and provide a more sound platform from which decision-makers decide.

Sitting on the border between research and development, grassroots research is a process of systematic study of communities, by communities, for communities; it involves the collection and analysis of data by local people of various occupations who can expect their livelihoods to be directly affected by development and refuse to be passive actors.

A key underlying goal of M-POWER activities is to empower disadvantaged groups. We will therefore support and establish mechanisms whereby the views, needs and rights of politically marginalized groups – including women, urban and rural poor and ethnic minorities – are better represented in deliberations and negotiations over the use and development of water resources.

Building capacity in the region

Ultimately, M-POWER may be judged successful if its activities make a significant contribution to the capacity of individuals and organizations in the region to improve water governance. To this end we intend to jointly analyze, propose and encourage institutional changes that would improve the accountability of water management authorities to the people they are supposed to serve and others affected by their activities.

We will also help synthesize understanding about efforts by state, non-state and international organizations to democratize water governance in the Mekong Region. And, finally, foster, and contribute to, the growth of regional networks of researchers committed to critical analyses and actions to support democratization of water governance.

Back cover photos

From top left to right: Shawn Nance, Lisa Robins, Lisa Robins, M-POWER, Louis Lebel, Kate Lazarus, IPS



M-POWER

Mekong Program on Water
Environment and Resilience

action-researchers | dialogue facilitators | knowledge brokers

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