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Inland capture fisheries in the Mekong and their place and potential within food-led regional development

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ABSTRACT

The inland capture fisheries of the Mekong represent critical sources of nutrition in rural diets in a region that faces endemic food and nutritional deficits. However within regional development debates that prioritize utilising the waters of the Mekong to generate electricity, capture fisheries are often presented as ultimately doomed, and therefore as an unfortunate, but necessary trade-off for hydropower. At the heart of these debates, lie contested definitions of development. The notion that fisheries could or should be traded-off for some other form of development exemplifies this tension.

This paper draws on anthropological approaches to policy analysis based on discourse and narratives. We begin by placing the conventional wisdom regarding the place of fisheries in regional development under closer scrutiny. We then explore the potential for a counter narrative based around food and food sovereignty, in which fisheries and fishers are drivers, rather than costs of development. We argue that fisheries provide a range of livelihood and developmental values that cannot be replaced and that their management continues to hold potential for strengthening independence and self-reliance. In doing so, we build on empirical evidence from the Lao PDR, a country with a rich capture fishery but also endemic food crises, and also a national policy commitment to both poverty reduction and extensive large-scale hydropower development. As such, this paper attempts to reframe the debate on development in the Mekong. The paper has wider significance for considering how a broader focus on food and food producers can generate alternative development pathways.

1. Introduction

The rich aquatic resources of the Mekong Region are central to regional livelihoods and represent the main source of animal protein in rural diets in countries facing endemic food and nutritional deficits (e.g., MRC, 2010; Hortle, 2007; Smith et al., 2005; Meusch et al., 2003; Sverdrup-Jensen, 2002). These resources depend on the integrity of the river and its floodplains and have been consistently recognised over many years as at risk from human activities (e.g., Dugan, 2008; McCormick Smith, 1925). Despite their central role, aquatic resources are downplayed in regional development debates rather than appearing as a benefit in poverty reduction. Capture fisheries (by which we mean the capture of fish and other aquatic organisms) are instead being framed as an obstacle to progress and an unavoidable if regrettable sacrifice that can, and should, be borne for a greater good (Friend et al., 2009).

The complex difficult choices between alternative development futures that the region faces are frequently framed as requiring trade-offs in order to meet societal objectives, often justified by recourse to a loose rhetoric of poverty reduction (e.g., Friend et al., 2009). Suggesting balance and the weighing of alternatives, trade-offs are increasingly appearing in development debates as a means of framing decisions about costs and benefits of alternative development pathways. Presented in a variety of ways, these trade-offs can often be reduced to the alternatives of economic progress on the one hand and conservation and stagnation on the other (e.g., Chapman and Daming, 1996). In recent hydropower debates, the trade-off is starkly presented at its most extreme as a choice between power generation and fish.

From a poverty reduction perspective this deserves closer scrutiny. Food is so fundamental to human well-being that it is hard to envisage a situation in which it could be traded-off for some other good. This is especially so in the current context of forecasts that consistently stress global food productivity and food production challenges (e.g., Godfrey et al., 2010; Von Braun, 2009). Food is at the heart of national development policies in the region and international commitments to achieving global development and eradicating poverty. Trade-offs, and the assumptions that

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underpin them, raise serious questions about the nature of development and current water resource management strategies in the Mekong. Questions of whose food and food rights are being sacrificed for whose benefit, and what the hungry or potentially hungry are expected to do instead deserve more critical and explicit consideration in the hydropower and wider debates. In many ways, the emergence of trade-off discourses is symptomatic of a wider failure: wild capture fisheries in the Mekong are presented as marginal and facing insurmountable problems (Friend et al., 2009), despite evidence of huge productivity and recognition of their importance and value across scales.

In this paper we will use the example of the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) to explore these issues around trade-offs. For many years Lao PDR has espoused two key national priorities: reduce poverty and eradicate hunger, and establish itself as the 'battery of Asia' through expansion of hydropower generation. Considering aquatic resources highlights an unavoidable tension between these policy priorities. Although aquatic resources remain central to the Lao diet and culture, wild foods (including aquatic resources) have received little attention to date in national policy (e.g., WFP, 2008; Bush, 2008; MAF, 2006). At the regional scale, the notion arises that aggregate impacts would be less severe if dams were developed higher up in the Mekong river system and that the impacts on capture fisheries in Laos might be less than for other downstream countries, particularly Cambodia (Baran and Myschowoda, 2009; Dugan, 2008; Barlow et al., 2008). The (unintended) risk here is of an argument for a trade-off emerging – within the Lao PDR itself, and between the Lao PDR and other countries in the basin.

Trade-offs appear as an element of a broader crisis narrative relating to the capture fisheries of the Mekong (Friend et al., 2009). Narratives play an important role in development policy, representing attempts to shape the world by making complex problems identifiable, creating simple story lines of how a 'problem' has arisen and will unfold, and hence what the necessary course of action should be (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005; Shore and Wright, 1997; Gasper and Apthorpe, 1996; Roe, 1991). Often they represent the 'conventional wisdom', so deeply embedded that they are rarely challenged, or critiqued, becoming the means by which certain types of knowledge are legitimized or excluded and the means by which actors and institutions make claim to action and ownership over resources (Fairhead and Leach, 1997; Roe, 1991). The more complex the situation, the more such narratives endure (Roe, 1991).

Our examination of the crisis narrative represents a contribution to these anthropological approaches to development policy analysis and recent work on 'clumsy policy' (Verweij et al., 2006). We also seek to provide an alternative perspective, whereby fisheries are considered in a more positive light as a resource whose management is central to meeting the varied societal needs and aspirations of the people of the region and addressing the development challenges of the Mekong River Basin. To explore the potential of fisheries as a 'driver of development' our starting point is thinking around food and food security. From this perspective addressing hunger and the implications of individual and societal food deficits remains an ethical and moral imperative, not something that can be sacrificed for a greater social good, as none exists. Ensuring that people have sufficient food of each of the varieties necessary and access to and control over the resources that generate this food for us defines 'good development'. While food cannot generate all the benefits of development, it is a non-negotiable pre-requisite underpinning and enabling such development.

2. Mekong fisheries: the crisis narrative

As with global debates on fisheries and development (e.g., Worm et al., 2006; World Bank, 2004), within regional development debates capture fisheries often appear as doomed under almost any circumstances (Friend et al., 2009; Bush and Hirsch, 2005). In the Mekong, underpinning this narrative are arguments about problems inherent in fisheries that mean the developmental potential from capture fisheries will be less than from other options. Within this narrative, two key storylines revolve around the inevitable decline of an open – access resource in the face of population growth and development, and the portrayal of fishing as a marginal activity with limited potential to generate economic development (Friend et al., 2009).

With echoes of the 'tragedy of the commons' (cf. Hardin, 1968) the storyline of inevitable decline is simple and appealing, and is enduring and pervasive despite little supporting evidence beyond the anecdotal. Widely accepted arguments that fisheries are of particular importance for poor people have (Smith et al., 2005) become an explanation for the overwhelming threats that fisheries now face (e.g., Wong et al., 2007). As the numbers of people increase, 'open access' means the pressures on fisheries will intensify. As such, the recognition that many people in the Mekong fish is combined with assumptions about the inherent risk posed by such a high degree of engagement in fishing, for example, Wong et al. (2007) identify the 'huge scale of subsistence fishing...(that)...is heavy and destructive and there is evidence of declining fish populations as a result' (p. 38). Similarly, Allan et al. (2005) suggest that: 'Over-fishing of an entire assemblage may be most common in tropical regions, where fish diversity and the reliance of local people on fish harvests both are high' (p 1046). While acknowledging the importance of fisheries for local people, those same people have become a key threat to sustainability. Combined with concerns over rising populations this begins to evoke a vision of what Pauly (1990) describes as 'Malthusian overfishing'.

This storyline is well established in the region. McCormick Smith (1925) presented a gloomy prognosis for the future of inland capture fisheries in Thailand, arguing that the combined pressures of population growth and economic progress would inevitably undermine sustainability. Similar prognoses appeared in the, 1960s amid the early considerations of basin development (e.g., Tubb, 1966; Pantulu, 1966). This storyline deserves attention as it can undermine evidence that fisheries have an important role. If decline is accepted as inevitable then, even if capture fisheries are important today, they will cease to be so in the future. Without even needing to address the social, economic and cultural acceptability of impacts on fisheries, debates can be easily shifted towards future development scenarios that no longer include capture fisheries as a viable option.

A further dimension of this storyline is the inevitability of impacts on the capture fisheries from outside the sector arising from the demands for economic development. Implicitly this recognises economic development will impact capture fisheries. Placed in the context of population growth and subsequent economic demands, these impacts and the drive for development are presented as unavoidable. Management of fisheries, it is argued, can at best only hope to minimize such impacts. As a result, fisheries become framed as an impact, and thus as a subject for conservation in the face of development (e.g., Wong et al., 2007).

The second storyline depicting fishing as a marginal activity has its origins in the language used to portray inland fisheries and fishers. Throughout the Mekong region fishing is part of diversified household livelihood portfolios. In Lao PDR 80–90 percent of households in the southern lowlands do some fishing (Hortle, 2007; Smith et al., 2005; Garaway, 2005; Sverdrup-Jensen, 2002). However, these households do not necessarily define themselves as fishers, and may not be seen as such by others (Smith et al., 2005; Garaway, 2005). Perhaps as a result, in assessments that seek to rank multiple, inter-related activities, fishing becomes classified