



Foundations of the participatory approach in the Mekong River basin management



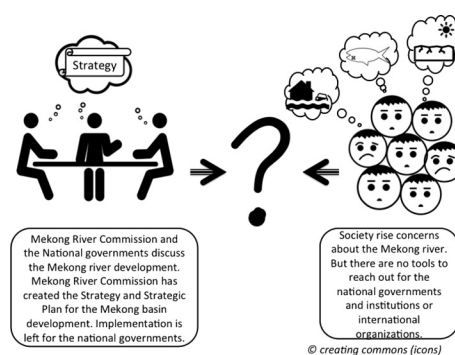
Paulina Budryte*, Sonja Heldt, Martin Denecke

Department of Water and Waste Management, University of Duisburg-Essen, Essen, Germany

HIGHLIGHTS

- IWRM ideas vanish amongst big words in the Mekong river development documents.
- A mismatch between strategies and reality hinders the sustainable development.
- People from cities in Mekong delta delegate decision-making power to the government.
- Public does not feel ownership of the Mekong river and obligation for its future.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) was acknowledged as a leading concept in the water management for the last two decades by academia, political decision-makers and experts. It strongly promotes holistic management and participatory approaches. The flexibility and adaptability of IWRM concept are especially important for large, transboundary river basins - e.g. the Mekong river basin - where natural processes and hazards, as well as, human-made "disasters" are demanding for a comprehensive approach.

In the Mekong river basin, the development and especially the enforcement of one common strategy has always been a struggle. The past holds some unsuccessful experiences. In 2016 Mekong River Commission published IWRM-based Basin Development Strategy 2016–2020 and The Mekong River Commission Strategic Plan 2016–2020. They should be the main guiding document for the Mekong river development in the near future.

This study analyzes how the concept of public participation resembles the original IWRM participatory approach in these documents. Therefore, IWRM criteria for public participation in international literature and official documents from the Mekong river basin are compared. As there is often a difference between "de jure" and "de facto" implementation of public participation in management concepts, the perception of local stakeholders was assessed in addition. The results of social survey give an insight if local people are aware of Mekong river basin development and present their dominant attitudes about the issue. The findings enable recommendations how to mitigate obstacles in the implementation of common development strategy.

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Abbreviations: ADB, Asian Development Bank; IWRM, Integrated Water Resource Management; MRC, Mekong River Commission; NARBO, Network of Asian River Basin Organizations; Strategy, IWRM-based Basin Development Strategy 2016–2020; Strategic Plan, The Mekong River Commission Strategic Plan 2016–2020.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Water and Waste Management, University of Duisburg-Essen, Universitätsstr. 15, 45141 Essen, Germany.

E-mail address: paulina.budryte@stud.uni-due.de (P. Budryte).

1. Introduction

The participation of society or stakeholders is often discussed in the various contexts. It is especially important in the urban development; because any changes in the urban pattern affect a lot of people, and thus rise up conflicts caused by NIMBY (Not-In-My-Backyard) and LULU (Locally-Unwanted-Land-Use) effects (Berke et al., 2009; Sanoff, 2000; Schively, 2007). Additionally, if the urban development is related to a multilateral agenda, the complexity of the decision-making process multiplies. Nonetheless, there are various international agreements declared to encourage the involvement of society in such process, but the most of these documents are declarative and do not hold a power (political or otherwise) for the country to actually implement a participatory concept in the legal framework.

In the water sector, including the management of the urban river, Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) is one of the most promoted tools (Kramer and Pahl-Wostl, 2014). IWRM holds a very holistic idea of how water resources should be managed. It is arranged according to the Dublin Principles, which include a participatory approach and the promotion of women's involvement in the provision of water resources as well as concerns of the importance of fresh water and endless possibilities to use water for economic purposes (ICWE Secretariat, 1992).

1.1. Overview of Integrated Water Resource Management and its participatory approach

One of the key elements of IWRM is public participation. The understanding of IWRM and its participatory approach, in theory, is important for any further discussion about the Mekong river development since that is the main management tool officially promoted in the region.

In river basin's complex reciprocal interactions between ecological and human systems, multi-dimensional issues, that influences the well-being of all humans and their society are likely (Rault and Jeffrey, 2008). That is true especially, in the densely populated transition countries in the South-East Asia. Compromising economic well-being through a huge variety of water uses from different sectors and social equity as well as ecological sustainability is a highly political task. It can only be solved adequately by participatory practices including the interests of all stakeholders and civil society (Antunes et al., 2009; Cooper, 2012; Varis et al., 2008). Thus, public participation plays a crucial role in IWRM (Cooper, 2012; Rault and Jeffrey, 2008; Walk et al., 2012). Still, the economic development of water resources is often the focal point of water management and the public is "amazingly frequently ignored and forgotten" although its lacking involvement is a "typical bottleneck[s] of implementation of IWRM, and they are often inadequately addressed" (Varis et al., 2008).

Public participation allows improving the education of the public, to solve conflicts, to build trust, to gain local knowledge and to increase the efficiency and legitimacy of a decision by including a variety of perspectives in water management (Cooper, 2012; Rault and Jeffrey, 2008). The management of water resources concerns everyone; scientists, politics, experts, different stakeholders and the public (Rault and Jeffrey, 2008). But opening decision-making processes bears also the risk of only strengthening already powerful stakeholders and undermines the democratic idea of participation (Euler and Heldt, 2017; Walk et al., 2012). Therefore, enabling participation also means to activate all parties and balance power asymmetries by ensuring equal possibilities to access and influence decision-making (Cooper, 2012; Euler and Heldt, 2017). The basis for this is, that real participation is wanted (Walk et al., 2012) and experts and civil servants overcome their "we know everything" attitude and value the knowledge of citizen and local stakeholders equally (Rault and Jeffrey, 2008). Further, clearly communicated objectives and a common problem definition avoid different expectations towards a participation process between organizers and participants.

Rault and Jeffrey (2008) argue that for both IWRM and public participation "everybody agrees on the principle" although there are no

common detailed understandings or objectives. Indeed, there are various intentions, objectives, forms and procedures for the implementation public participation ranging from manipulation, information, consultation over a partnership to full citizen power (Arnstein, 1969; Rault and Jeffrey, 2008). Although information and consultation are often mentioned as the basis for meaningful participation (Cooper, 2012), however, neither information nor consultation can be referred as participation as such (Arnstein, 1969; Worldbank, 1993). Finding the right form of participatory IWRM is a complex problem as it is strongly depending on the political and socio-economic context in the target region, the scale of the region, the available resources, dependency on the responsible managers and the reasons for the participation process (Cooper, 2012; Rault and Jeffrey, 2008; Walk et al., 2012). Further, in transitioning countries the source of external funding for the implementation of IWRM is also often influencing the form of participation (Cooper, 2012; Heldt et al., 2017; Walk et al., 2012).

Common formal and informal regulations and habits on participatory practices as well as the stability of political structures are limiting the possibilities to which extend participation can be realized in a country (Cooper, 2012; Walk et al., 2012). This holds especially true for the management of large transboundary river basins, where equal chances for participation have to be provided covering different country-contexts (Cooper, 2012). The four transition countries involved in the conjoint Mekong river basin management have occasionally both highly dynamic politic structures and limited socio-cultural and political participation habits (Cooper, 2012; P. Hirsch, 2001). Coordinating multi-level and multi-stakeholder participation against this highly diverse background is a challenging task. In these large scale regions, participation is often perceived by organizers as "messy process where it is unrealistic to involve interested parties at the same scale as of the project" and therefore missing its rationale and benefits as "tool to promote better decision making" (Rault and Jeffrey, 2008).

Also, the motivation of citizens and stakeholders to participate in decision-making is important. If people are not used to having the right to contribute to decision making because of their socio-cultural or political context, they might be skeptical or overcharged to suddenly be involved in a participatory process (Walk et al., 2012). Especially, in transition countries, people often lack the capacity and resources to take part in an extensive participation process (Walk et al., 2012).

Public participation should not be implemented to fulfill the formal requirements of the IWRM concept. It always focuses on the context-specific, sustainable solution of water problems that are rooted in society, but step out of the business as usual (Giordano and Shah, 2014; Varis et al., 2008). In this way, public participation can initiate social learning processes that are the basis for trust and long-term cooperation (Rault and Jeffrey, 2008) and impulses for the development of sustainable decision-making structures (Walk et al., 2012) in river basin management.

So IWRM promotes a nice and "fashionable" idea of the participation and engagement, however, for this principle to be implemented it is necessary to set legal framework, which allows it to happen, but as well society must be equally aware, interested and willing to take part in the decision-making process. However, rarely if ever that receives attention from academia. The knowledge gap how these different threads are combined is meagerly discussed.

In case of the transnational Mekong River Basin, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) is the main international body to coordinate the Mekong river development for many decades. But instead of arranging and implementing its own public participation process, the MRC leaves everything in the hands of countries' governments (Davidsen, 2006; IUCN, 2009; Mixap, 2015). Mixap (2015) points out that a reciprocal connection between the countries' government and the MRC does not exist either. Although, the MRC does have a commitment to provide any information and to communicate with the countries' governments, the connection is rather one-way. However, on the other hand, countries do not have obligation to follow requests from the MRC fully. Thus, the participatory approach of IWRM is more like a statement without no one to pursue.

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