



Gender and water governance in the Mekong region

Assessment and opportunities

June 2018



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Preface

Women play a critical role in providing, managing and safeguarding water resources. This makes it necessary to identify solutions to enhance their participation in water governance at different levels. Poor understanding of the distinct roles and contributions of men and women often leads to a lack of recognition of their distinct needs and interests in policies and programmes linked to water management. This lack of recognition can result in a failure to meet global social, economic and ecological targets such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Interventions aimed at balancing gender relations in water-related domains can also help further gender equality more broadly.

To address these issues, IUCN's BRIDGE (Building River Dialogue and Governance) programme, supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), worked in collaboration with the Inclusion Project of Oxfam supported by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), to initiate research on gender in water governance in the Mekong region.

The Gender, Environment and Development (GED) Cluster of the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) in Bangkok was engaged to lead the research and produce this report. Furthermore, IUCN and Oxfam facilitated a *Regional Forum on Gender Equity and Women's Leadership in Transboundary Water Governance in the Lower Mekong Basin* in Vientiane, Lao PDR, from 13 to 15 September 2017 to gather input for the development of this report. [Click HERE](#) to download the full report capturing the discussions at the Regional Gender Forum.

This report, titled *Gender and water governance in the Mekong region*, is an assessment of current water governance policies and institutional arrangements in the Mekong region from a gender equality perspective. Based on this assessment, the report identifies strategic opportunities for gender-responsive actions to address current gender gaps and strengthen women's leadership and engagement in water governance issues.

Call for Gender Responsive Actions:

1: Ensure engagement of institutions with a gender mandate in the decision-making process

Women's Affairs Ministries, Women's Unions and Civil Society Organization's working on gender and women leadership development issues shall be engaged at all stages in the planning and implementation of water resource development projects. This will ensure gender issues are included and existing gender equality commitments are not overlooked. The active involvement of women representatives will ensure accountability and contribute to capacity building of all stakeholders.

2: Involve women leaders and stakeholders with knowledge on gender analysis in ESIA process

Those ministries and local level government agencies with the mandate to lead or manage an environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) process shall take active measures to include and highlight gender issues. The participation of women leaders and people with skills such as gender gap analysis and women safeguard's policies in the consultation process will lead to ownership by local communities for the developmental project and better outcomes on gender related outcomes.

3: Mobilise relevant stakeholders for the achievement of regional and global gender commitments

The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 and 6 explicitly recognize the centrality of gender equality and women's leadership development in achieving these international commitments. The governments, civil society and the private sector shall work together and develop action plans for the implementation of these commitments to ensure gender mainstreaming in water governance policies and the development plans in the Mekong region.

4: Create an enabling environment for civil society engagement in the MRC processes

The MRC being a regional water governance institution is encouraged to provide an enabling environment for women and men to contribute to the implementation of the regional gender action plan. This could be achieved by establishing mechanisms for active participation of these stakeholders on sustainable hydropower development, development of the state of basin reports and MRC Council Studies.

5: Prioritise gender mainstreaming in water governance curriculum and research activities

Gender issues shall be integrated as an interdisciplinary subject in all water governance research and curriculums, such as Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and Sustainable Hydropower Development (SHD). A regional network of research institutes and fellowship programs shall be created to work jointly on gender and water governance issues and create an enabling environment for more female students. This will support the development of common understanding and regional actions to bridge the existing gender gaps in the Mekong region.

Glossary

Access – Defined as the possibility for participation, utilisation and benefit.

Aquaculture – Several management procedures, designed to increase the production of live aquatic organisms, to levels above those normally obtained from natural fish captures.

Basin – The low point in a catchment where surface water collects; also called base level

Catchment – The area drained by a river or body of water.

Civil society – The sphere of autonomous institutions, protected by the law, where men and women may carry out their work freely and independently from the state.

Climate change – Climate change refers to any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or as a result of human activity.

Ecosystem – A dynamic complex of vegetable, animal and microorganism communities and their non-living environment that interact as a functional unit.

Environment – All living and non-living components and all the factors, like the climate, that surround an organism.

Environmental impact – The measurable effect of human action on a certain ecosystem.

Environmental impact assessment – An instrument to measure the manifestation of environmental impact, which reveals the significant potential environmental impact generated by an activity or work, as well as how it could be avoided or mitigated in the case of a negative impact.

Environmental protection – Any activity that maintains the balance of the environment by preventing contamination and the deterioration of the natural resources

Equal opportunities – In which men and women are provided the same chance to become intellectually, physically and emotionally fulfilled, to pursue and achieve the goals they set in life, and develop their potential abilities, regardless of gender, class, sex, age, religion and ethnic group.

Equality – The condition of one thing being similar to another in terms of nature, form, quality and quantity.

Framework – A high-level structure which lays down a common purpose and direction for plans and programmes.

Gender – Genders are bio-socio-cultural groups, historically built from the identification of sexual characteristics that classify human beings; a complex set of economic, social, legal, political and psychological (i.e. cultural) determinations and characteristics. People are assigned a differentiated set of functions, activities, social relations, forms and standards of behaviour based on their gender.

Governance – The exercise of political authority and the use of institutional resources to manage society's problems and affairs.

Institutions – Institutions can refer, narrowly, to specific organisations – or, more broadly, to the policies, rules, incentives, customs and practices that govern social relations.

Livelihoods – The capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living.

Mainstreaming – When continuous attention is paid to equality between men and women in development policies, strategies and development interventions. Gender mainstreaming does not only mean ascertaining the participation of women in a previously established development programme, but aims to guarantee the participation of men and women in the definition of objectives and planning stages, so that development meets the needs and priorities of both women and men.

Mitigation – Structural and non-structural measures undertaken to limit the adverse impact of natural hazards, environmental degradation and technological hazards (ISDR 2004).

Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) – Monitoring focuses on tracking inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts as interventions are implemented. Evaluation assesses the efficiency and impact of interventions (typically after they have been implemented). Together, M&E allows policymakers to track results, suggest corrections or improvements during implementation, and assess success.

Natural resources – Resources produced by nature, commonly subdivided into nonrenewable resources, such as minerals and fossil fuels, and renewable natural resources that propagate or sustain life and are naturally self-renewing when properly managed, including plants and animals, as well as soil and water.

Opportunities – The possibilities to develop intellectual, physical and emotional abilities, to pursue and achieve the goals set in life.

Participation – Active involvement in decision-making of those with an interest in or affected by important decisions.

Position – the social status assigned to women relative to men, determined by inclusion in decision-making, wage equality, and access to education and training

Power – Dominion, authority or jurisdiction to command, define, control and decide about something or someone.

Resources – goods and means. There are several types of resources, including: economic or productive (like the land, equipment, tools, work, credit); political (like leadership capacity, information and organization); and temporary (which is one of the most scarce resources for women).

Rights – The resources or authority that a person or group may acquire based on prerogatives, opportunities, property or social custom.

Role – A person's assigned or chosen function within society. Based on a system of values and customs that determines the type of activities a person should develop.

Sustainable development – The use of natural resources in a way that avoids irreversible damage to ecosystem structure and function, the loss of irreplaceable features or a reduction in ecosystem resilience.

Acronyms

ADB: Asian Development Bank

AIIB: Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

CGIAR WLE: CGIAR Research Programme on Water, Land and Ecosystems

CSO: Civil Society Organisation

EIA: Environmental Impact Assessment

FITs: Feed-in-Tariffs

GIZ: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

IFI: International Financial Institutions

IUCN: International Union for Conservation of Nature

IWRM: Integrated Water Resource Management

MDG: Millennium Development Goals

MRC: Mekong River Commission

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

PNPCA: Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

SIA: Social Impact Assessment

SUMERNET: Sustainable Mekong Research Network

STEM: Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

UN: United Nations

WBG: World Bank Group

WLE: Water, Land, and Ecosystems

1. Introduction

People in the Mekong region are heavily reliant on rivers for their livelihoods and survival. Women perform important tasks in water usage and management within their households. They engage in water-dependent livelihoods, process food, collect water, and perform cleaning and washing duties at the river. They are often disproportionately disadvantaged when water regimes change and their voices are the least heard in decision-making on water issues. To address this, several efforts have been made to put gender issues on the international water governance agenda: first in the 1992 Dublin Principles¹, then in the implementation of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), and finally in the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Gender and Water (2003–2009) focussing on gender mainstreaming water and sanitation within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). More recently, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on water and sanitation also requires special attention to gender equality.

These policy efforts, however, do not adequately address the persistent disadvantages that women experience in transboundary river contexts, especially the effects of hydropower on fisheries and therefore on poverty and food security,

Thus, there is a risk that these disadvantages may be reinforced through water management, highlighting a critical gap between policy and action (Cleaver & Hamada, 2010; Grant et al., 2017).

This brief scopes the current trends and policy landscape of water governance in the Mekong region from a gender equality perspective, and identifies specific gender-responsive opportunities for future engagement and action in transboundary water governance. The geographical focus of the report is the five Mekong countries – Myanmar, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam – and their transboundary river systems.



A mother and her children at work in the fields © Nguyen Duc Tu / IUCN Viet Nam

¹ The Dublin Principles are an outcome of the 1992 International Conference on Water and the Environment

2. Gender in water governance in the Mekong region

Sharing, developing and managing water resources are key challenges for the Mekong region countries that all depend on the rivers for agriculture, energy and fisheries. Large water infrastructure developments such as hydropower highlight these challenges, showing how many can be disadvantaged through the loss of fishery livelihoods and displacement. For instance, by 2030, if 11 mainstream dams were built along the Mekong River, the protein from fisheries at risk of being lost annually would be the equivalent of 110% the current annual livestock production of Cambodia and Lao PDR. Rural and urban communities living within 15 km of the Mekong River would be particularly affected, experiencing greater food insecurity due to the reduction in capture fisheries (ICEM, 2010: 19).

In a Stimson Center study, recent trends show that hydropower will be less economically competitive as a source of electricity, as the economic costs associated with this energy option are increasing (Weatherby & Eyler, 2017). However, Mekong governments are still not seriously transitioning to other more sustainable energy pathways. Additionally, the Basin Development Strategy 2016-2020 prepared by the Mekong River Commission (MRC) continues to emphasise hydropower development for the energy security of its member countries (Mekong River Commission, 2016).

The research literature generally shows that poor, rural women may be disproportionately negatively impacted by hydropower development, compared with rural men and well-off women, because of their disadvantaged social positions and living conditions (Andajani-Sutjahjo, Chirawatkul, & Saito, 2015; Asthana, 2010; Dang, 2017; Pham, Doneys, & Doane, 2016; Resurrección, Real, & Pantana, 2004). The burdens may also be different and unequal for widows, elderly women, children and young, single women. In dam resettlements, women generally shoulder more domestic chores and financial pressures to secure the well-being of their families and build resilience against future stresses (Andajani-Sutjahjo et al., 2015; Hill, Thuy, Storey, & Vongphosy, 2017; Pham et al., 2016). A recent study from Lao PDR and Viet Nam found that the loss of livelihoods increased women's dependency on husbands and conversely weakened their bargaining power (Hill et al., 2017). In general, women are constrained in water management due to male headship at household and community levels, unequal gender norms that govern public representation at all levels, and men's leadership in large-scale water management decisions (ibid).

In studies that showed women's participation in environmental impact assessment (EIA) consultations and later in community efforts to cope with the effects of dam resettlement, the results were mixed (Resurrección & Manorum, 2007; CECR, 2016; CDRI, 2016; Spectrum, 2016). While women gained confidence and visibility, their participation shifted the burden of coping with displacement to themselves and their communities without transforming the wider unequal power relations that shape decisions made at the national and transboundary scales and disadvantaged them in the first place.

Women's active participation is noticeably lacking at the higher echelons of decision-making, and gender does not usually figure prominently in these crucial spaces. There are limited opportunities for women's voices to be heard in decision-making from the household to the state (Hill, et al., 2017).

Women's work in fishery resources has also often been undervalued, though women are central actors in marketing and processing fishery products in the region. Fisheries have generally been deprioritised within the policy-making related to economic growth and poverty reduction because of the widespread notion that fishery resources have become exhausted by overfishing and illegal practices (Arthur & Friend, 2011; Bush, 2008; Friend & Arthur, 2012; Sneddon & Fox, 2012). While new opportunities are created from aquaculture and hydropower, poorer women struggle to gain any benefit due to lack of skills and capital to invest in new livelihoods and become formally employed in sectors, such as hydropower (Arthur & Friend, 2011; Hill et al., 2017; Francois Molle, Foran, & Floch, 2010; Pandey & De, 2014).

Finally, most water professionals are men. Water governance, a highly technical field, is traditionally perceived as a masculine domain (Liebrand, 2014; Ongsakul, Resurreccion, & Sajor, 2012; Zwarteveen, 2008). Only a few women occupy senior positions, and they have to navigate cultural norms that generally favour male leadership in this field. Water professionals are also traditionally trained not to consider social and gender concerns, which accounts for the side-lining of these concerns in water policy. This also partially explains why there is lacklustre reception of gender and social issues within this sector, despite the fact that these professionals personally do not oppose gender equality as a principle and may even support it.

2.1 Policies and institutions in water governance: Are gender-related challenges adequately addressed?

In recent years, gender mainstreaming in governance institutions has generally advanced, but persistent challenges remain. Overall, national and regional institutions on gender and water resources in the Mekong countries have their own specific and separate technical concerns, which limits their involvement in gender-responsive integrated water management. Opportunities and entry points are, however, expanding to realise greater synergies between these institutions, in large part due to the current favourable climate and momentum of the SDGs, and the growing work of gender organisations on transboundary water governance.



Panel on opportunities to promote women's leadership in national and transboundary water governance policies at a regional forum held in Lao PDR, September 2017 © Vishwa/IUCN

2.2 National

i. Gender equality plans and policies

National gender equality plans in Mekong countries remain largely separate and siloed. They do not focus on environmental governance and natural resource management as themes for planning and action, but focus on social welfare, employment, political participation, and raising awareness on gender equality (Simpson & Simon, 2013b; Tsai, 2015; Resurrección & Boyland, 2017; The Kingdom of Thailand, 2015). There are also no explicit national policies on gender and water-related themes. National women's mechanisms themselves are side-lined from decision-making in economic development and environmental agendas in most Mekong countries, though they are occasionally engaged in some sectoral issues such as climate change on a project basis.

Opportunity for Action

Women's unions and Women's affairs ministries should be involved in national water and natural resources planning and decision making.

Example

Oxfam currently partners with the Lao Women's Union and Viet Nam Women's Union on gender impact assessments in hydropower; promoting the role of these key agencies in ensuring gender and women's interests are addressed in water resource infrastructure development.

ii. Water and energy policy

The majority of the energy and water plans in the Mekong region generally make no mention of gender; however, energy policies in Lao PDR and Myanmar highlight gender inequalities and energy poverty, and promote gender equality especially in regard to renewable energy strategies. Further, The Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy of Cambodia has developed a Gender Mainstreaming Action Group and Plan (Simon, 2013). In Viet Nam, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) and the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development (MARD) have produced action plans on gender equality and the advancement of women (Simpson & Simon, 2013a).

Opportunity

NGOs should support the development and implementation of gender targets within both existing and new national water and energy policies.

Examples

Policy on Sustainable Hydropower Development, Laos
Renewable Energy Strategy, Laos
New Water Resources Law, Laos
New Action Plan on Gender Equality and Advancement of Women, Viet Nam

iii. Social and environmental safeguard policies

Environmental protection efforts, including EIA regulations, generally promote public consultation. Only EIA regulations in Lao PDR and the environmental/social impact assessment (E/SIA) guidelines for hydropower currently being drafted in Myanmar incorporate gender considerations or consider women as a stakeholder group in public consultations. In Viet Nam, the Law on Environmental Protection states that

Opportunity

Civil society and women's organisations' participation in EIA processes should be strengthened. NGOs should support gender mainstreaming of E/SIA guidelines.

Example

Latest E/SIA guidelines draft, Myanmar

environmental protection must promote gender equality. However operational guidelines are yet to be put in place.



Men and women share in the hard work of collecting shellfish from Viet Nam's tidal flats © Nguyen Duc Tu / IUCN Viet Nam

Tables 1-3 summarise these national policies and assess their gender dimensions (see annex).

2.3 Regional

i. Mekong River Commission (MRC)

The MRC has integrated gender across various pillars of its mandate, reflected in its Gender Strategy and Policy, Strategic Plan and Basin Development Strategy 2016-2020. Operational guidelines of the Strategy are currently being drafted to put in place institutional arrangements, implementation and evaluation mechanisms (Mekong River Commission, 2017). In addition, MRC's collaboration with GIZ on transboundary water management, sustainable hydropower development and flood risk mitigation considers gender equality as an important component.

Challenges of harmonisation in regional and national level planning and action may, however, diminish the effectiveness of gender strategy implementation and related efforts. Due to mismatches between MRC and national and sectoral action plans – predominately due to different national legal and regulatory powers, different national and sectoral priorities, and challenges of vertical and horizontal inter-agency coordination – these efforts are yet to be fully recognised in strategies and plans of relevant national agencies and sectors, despite regional commitments to gender equality.

Opportunity

The MRC is currently developing key operational guidelines and strategies that can potentially include stronger gender equality considerations, including:

Transboundary EIA, Sustainable Hydropower Development Strategy, Preliminary Design Guidance for Hydropower, as well as the next **State of the Basin Report and the MRC Council Study**.

The MRC **Gender Action Plan** raises the possibility of a more effective plan for gender mainstreaming, and it may be strategic for NGOs to identify and

ii. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) took a landmark step in 2012 with the adoption of the Vientiane Declaration on Enhancing Gender Perspectives and ASEAN Women's Partnership for Environmental Sustainability, which attempts to bridge gender and environment. However, water resources management does not figure prominently, and tangible outcomes have yet to be ascertained. ASEAN has separate mechanisms that focus on environmental issues and gender issues, and thus opportunities to link these themes currently exist.

Opportunity

The “**ASEAN Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and Sustainable Development Goals**,” was recently adopted at the 31st Summit in the Philippines, 13 November 2017. The declaration recognises the centrality of gender equality and women's empowerment to achieving ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and SDGs including specific work on water (SDG 6) and energy (SDG 7). The declaration also calls for a range of actions to strengthen gender mainstreaming. These include ASEAN sectoral bodies establishing mechanisms for engaging women's groups and organisations, and promoting women's participation in decision-making. This is a key opportunity for NGOs to support implementation.

ASEAN could play a stronger role in encouraging regional cooperation and action on gender and water governance by fostering cooperation agreements between water and gender sectors and working groups.

ASEAN has also taken a step to support gender inclusion within SDG implementation through the “ASEAN Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and Sustainable Development Goals” adopted at its 31st Summit (November 2017). The declaration recognises that gender equality and women's empowerment are a precondition for meeting the SDGs. It supports gender mainstreaming efforts and promotes women's effective participation in decision-making processes in addition to encouraging ASEAN sectoral bodies to establish mechanisms for engagement with women's groups and organisations.

Further, more needs to be done across ASEAN to promote and facilitate improved cross-sectoral coordination and interlinkages between ASEAN Member States, as currently many of the countries and sectors (including water and related sectors such as energy and environment) still work in isolation.

iii. International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and safeguards for infrastructure development

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank Group (WBG) have developed Country Partnership Frameworks (CPFs) with the Mekong governments, where gender figures as a cross-cutting theme. While these frameworks do not specifically focus on water governance, they demonstrate national-level commitments to pursuing gender equality in development efforts and present opportunities where development partners could support national activities that have the potential to be extended into water and related sectors.

Social and environmental safeguards of both WBG and ADB emphasise meaningful consultation and engagement of key stakeholders, including affected communities and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and involving them in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of projects. For instance, the Performance Standards on Environment and Social Sustainability of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) (a member of the WBG) require the assessment of land and natural resources to be gender-inclusive and specifically considers women's roles in the management and use of these resources. The IFC is also starting an initiative in Myanmar, *Powered by Women*, to ensure that hydropower businesses do not miss out on the well-established benefits of gender diversity: access to talent, cost savings, team cohesion, innovation, improved community relationships and risk management.

Gender issues are therefore increasingly included in safeguards and initiatives, but a drawback of many of the current safeguard policies is that organised women's groups are not explicitly considered as stakeholder groups for consultations. As a result, they do not participate in assessment processes, thus risking exclusion of their concerns and interests. This indicates that safeguards are not fully sensitive to social norms and arrangements that constrain women's participation in public spaces (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Pham, 2015).

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a new donor on sustainable energy, introduced the Environmental and Social Framework that supports consultations with national and sub-national governments, the private sector, affected people and NGOs, and calls attention to social risk and impacts on vulnerable groups. While the framework has some drawbacks (e.g. ambiguity in obtaining consent), it provides gender-disaggregated transboundary impact assessments, and promotes equal opportunities for women in access to finance, services and employment.

In general, IFIs are important actors in ensuring the enforcement of social and environmental safeguards, but their involvement is limited to high-risk projects that they directly finance. Furthermore, the lack of monitoring and the reliance on national mechanisms embedded in power dynamics and competing interests, as earlier described, affect the implementation of well-designed safeguard instruments.

Opportunity

WBG will be developing guidance notes for its environmental and social standards. This will be a strategic opportunity for NGOs to promote integration of gender standards, and support development process and strengthening gender in the guidance notes. NGOs may further serve to align work with country partnerships (CPs).

iv. Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals

There has been increasing interest in linking the gender and water sectors under the umbrella of the Sustainable Development Goals. Several efforts are already underway. For instance, the panel discussions at the Oxfam-IUCN Gender Forum in Vientiane in September 2017 cited efforts by the government of Lao PDR to link water and gender issues. Furthermore, in 2016, a High Level Roundtable on Water Security and the Sustainable Development Goals, organised by the Global Water Partnership (GWP), Myanmar Water Think Tank and Myanmar Country Water Partnership,

discussed strategic recommendations related to water security and SDG 5 on gender equality, and agreed that there is a need for women’s participation at different levels of decision making, inclusion of gender equality in legal and institutional frameworks, awareness-raising activities, and overcoming cultural barriers (Global Water Partnership, 2016). Additionally, a joint initiative between the ADB and UN Women is supporting a benchmark study to track progress on gender and the SDGs in the region, and ASEAN has recently committed to gender-responsive implementation of Vision 2025 and the SDGs.



Representatives from the MRC, national ministries and civil society organisations at a September 2017 forum, held jointly by IUCN BRIDGE and the Oxfam Inclusion Project in Vientiane, Lao PDR © IUCN Asia

The past decade has seen increased activity by civil society organisations (CSOs), including local, national and regional NGOs, around water resource management in the Mekong region, especially on issues dealing with economic integration and transboundary investments in large-scale industrial infrastructure. Yet more recent political trends in Mekong countries point towards shrinking spaces for civil society² (Hill et al., 2017). Moreover, most local environment NGOs, as well as national and regional CSOs, networks and platforms, do not have explicit gender agendas linked to transboundary water governance. Conversely, many gender stand-alone bodies do not work on environment-related issues. In fact, only 27 out of over 250 local NGOs attempted to embed both gender and environmental aspects into their programmes, and only 10 of these address transboundary environmental issues in the Mekong region (Resurrección & Nguyen, 2014).

Opportunity

There is opportunity to continue to strengthen gender integration among water organisations and encourage women’s organisations to work on water issues. A number of CSOs and NGOs in the region work on water governance issues, but have weak gender agendas. On the other hand, many women’s organisations have weak links to environmental, energy and water issues. There are opportunities to create networks and alliances between CSOs working on gender, women’s rights and water resources.

² <https://www.boell.de/en/2017/07/05/eclipse-myanmars-civil-society>; <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/events/human-rights-under-threat-shrinking-civil-society-space-cambodia>; <https://www.mmtimes.com/opinion/16491-civil-society-space-shrinks-in-south-east-asia.html>

vi. Educational programmes on water management

Most students of water resource management at universities in the Mekong region learn about technical solutions to managing water resources, thus sidestepping the social and power-related aspects around management and decision-making. IUCN and Oxfam's capacity-building programmes and partnerships with universities have tried to correct this by supporting gender-water research and teaching. Some universities in the Mekong region have also adopted policies to admit more women students into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programmes, including fields like water engineering.

Opportunity

Emphasise **gender in water governance within educational and research agendas** – e.g. CGIAR Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) Mekong Basin Programme and the Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET).

Engage with curriculum advisory boards of universities to create opportunities for holistic learning and research to strengthen and enhance the water governance profession.

3. Concluding remarks

Overall, the current policy climate is conducive to realising gender equality goals at national and regional levels, despite persistent gender-related disadvantages in transboundary water contexts in the Mekong region. Gender mainstreaming efforts have proceeded at uneven paces across different sectors, including environment and water-related sectors. National and regional water governance institutions typically do not engage with gender organisations or women's groups. For NGOs, advocacy and network-building on water and environment issues at the national and regional scales do not readily accommodate women leaders. Dialogues focus mostly on the technical rather than social and gender aspects of water governance. Gender-equal participation and women's leadership are mostly found at micro-levels, and their participation often decreases as engagements scale up. In addition, while some effort has been dedicated to supporting gender mainstreaming among water organisations and water specialists, not enough effort has been dedicated to integrating water governance concerns in women's organisations (e.g. CSOs, public women's affairs, and NGOs) to encourage them to participate in regional water platforms. Opportunities therefore generally lie in creating meaningful interfaces between these siloed institutions and engendering learning about the benefits of inclusive water governance.

Knowledge institutions, such as universities, contribute to creating these silos. Efforts to transform curricula and teaching should be encouraged to ensure that water professionals are well-rounded, and able to integrate both technical and social aspects into their water management practices.



Ha Nguyen from the Stockholm Environment Institute, Bangkok, facilitating group work on energy policy and gender at the regional forum in Vientiane, September 2017 © Oxfam

Annex

Table 1. National gender equality policies

	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Viet Nam
Gender AND water resources	No explicit national policy.	No explicit national policy.	No explicit national policy.	No explicit national policy.	No explicit national policy.
Gender Equality plans	National Strategic Development Plan on Women's Economic Empowerment.	Law on Women's Development and Protection, Vision 2030 and 10-Year National Strategy on Gender Equality (2016–2025) and Vision 2030 on Women Development, 10-year Women's Development Strategy (2016–2025).	National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013–2022)	Gender Equality Act (2015), National Economic and Social Development Plans.	Gender Equality Law (2006), The National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011-2020.
Assessment:	<i>Gender equality / women's development policies do not refer specifically to water resources</i>	<i>Gender equality / women's development policies do not refer specifically to water resources</i>	<i>Gender equality / women's development policies do not refer specifically to water resources</i>	<i>Gender equality / women's development policies do not refer specifically to water resources</i>	<i>Gender equality / women's development policies do not refer specifically to water resources</i>

Table 2. National policies on water resources and energy

	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Viet Nam
Water resources	National Water Resources Policy (2004) Rural Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Strategy (2010-2025) Strategic Planning Framework for Fisheries (2010-2019) Law on Water Resources Management (effective June 2007)	Water Resources Law (2017) National Water Resources Strategy toward 2025 and Action Plan 2016-2020	Draft National Water Resource Policy (2017/2018) Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) Strategy (in development)	Thailand does not have national water law 12-year Master Plan on Water Resource Management (in development) Water Act (has been in process of drafting since 1992)	Law on Water Resources (2012) National Water Resources Strategy Towards 2020
Assessment:	<i>Fisheries framework acknowledges role of women in fisheries and differential impacts on women's livelihoods; specific actions to support women highlighted. Gender mainstreaming required in all efforts in rural water strategy. No explicit reference to gender in other water related laws and policies.</i>	National Water Resources Strategy references Dublin Principles, and one of the action areas include to promote and link gender to IWRM.	<i>Reference to gender is absent.</i>	<i>Reference to gender is absent.</i>	<i>National resources strategy has no reference to gender, but supports participation of social organisations in consultations.</i>

	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Viet Nam
Energy (including hydropower and other renewables, master plans)	Electricity Law (2001) Power Development Plan (2008-2021)	Electricity Law (1997) Renewable Energy Development Strategy (2011) Policy on Sustainable Hydropower Development (2015) and Implementation Guidelines (2016)	National Energy Policy (2014) Draft National Electrification Plan and National Electricity Master Plan (2014-2035) Draft ESIA guidelines on hydropower	Thailand Smart Grid Roadmap (2015-2036) Thailand Integrated Energy Blueprint (2015-2036), and 5 energy master plans linked to Power Development, Energy Efficiency, Alternative Energy, Oil and Gas Feed-in-Tariffs (FiTs) in renewable energy systems.	Electricity Law (2004) National Power Development Plan (2011-2020) National Energy Development Strategy up to 2020 and vision to 2050 Renewable Energy Development Strategy (2016-2030) Hydropower Decree (2008) FiTs in renewable energy systems.

Assessment:

<i>Gender equality an objective in Renewable Energy Development Strategy (2011). Policy on Sustainable Hydropower Development and guidelines recognise</i>	<i>Energy Policy highlights women as main energy users, and the need for women's participation in community-based renewable energy</i>	<i>The alternative energy development plan, under Thailand Integrated Energy Blueprint, has no explicit mention of gender or need</i>	<i>No explicit mention of gender or need to consider women.</i>
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Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Viet Nam
	<p><i>distributional impacts, including on women, references need for 'gender development plans'.</i></p>	<p><i>development.</i></p> <p><i>Draft National Electricity Master Plan has no explicit reference to gender or need to consider women, but it is currently revised with support from Japan International Cooperation Agency.</i></p> <p><i>Draft ESIA – reference to gendered impacts, women's participation.</i></p>	<p><i>to consider women.</i></p> <p><i>If FiTs were made more gender-responsive, could set a good example for region.</i></p>	

Table 3. National Environmental Protection (including Environmental Impact Assessment) Laws and Policies

	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Viet Nam
Environmental Protection (including EIA)	Draft Environment Code	Environmental Protection Law (1999)	Environmental Conservation Law (ECL, 2012)	Enhancement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act 2535 1992 (NEQA 1992)	Law on Environmental Protection (LEP 2014)
	Law on Environmental Protection and Natural Resource Management (EPNRM Law 1996)	Decree of Environmental Impact Assessment 2010 (EIA Decree 2010)	Environment Protection Rules 2014 (EP Rules)	Constitution of Thailand 2007	Decree Providing Strategic Environmental Assessment, Environmental Impact Assessment and Environmental Protection Commitment No.29/2011/ND-CP (SEA/EIA Decree 2011)
	Rewriting its Sub-Decree on Environmental Impact Assessment 1999 (EIA Sub-Decree 1999)	Ministerial Instruction on the Process of Environmental and Social Impact Assessment of the Investment Projects and Activities 2013 (Ministerial Instruction on ESIA 2013)	EIA Procedure (2015)	Guidelines for Public Participation in EIA Processes (2008)	
	EIA Law (in preparation)		Draft public participation in EIA guidelines (EIA PPG) (2017/2018)	Guide on Environmental Regulation 2014 (BOI 2014)	
	General Guidelines for Developing Initial EIA Reports, MoE, N.376 BRK.BST (2009)	Ministerial Instruction on the Process of Initial Environmental Examination of the Investment Projects and Activities (2013)	Draft National Environmental Policy (2017)		

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2012)

Assessment:	<i>EIA Sub-Decree 1999 encourages public involvement but no concrete requirements stipulated.</i>	<i>Decree incorporates social impact assessments and warrants public participation, but no reference to gender or women as stakeholder group. EIA Guidelines state women's & feminist groups to be consulted.</i>	<i>EIA procedure calls for public consultation processes, but no specific reference to gender; latest draft of EIA PPG references gendered impacts and women's participation.</i>	<i>NEQA has no provision on public participation or information disclosure with respect to EIA; constitution & guidelines support public consultation processes, no specific mention of gender.</i>	<i>LEP 2014 acknowledges that environmental protection must promote gender equality. But outlines no requirements for open public involvement or guidance on effective consultation methods, leading to disadvantaged & voiceless groups often misrepresented.</i>
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