



# The 3S River Basin (Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam)

Creating spaces for cooperation through multi-level dialogue and capacity building





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# THE 3S RIVER BASIN (CAMBODIA, LAO PDR AND VIETNAM)

## Creating spaces for cooperation through multi-level dialogue and capacity building

*Patrick R. MacQuarrie, Rebecca Welling, Lalita Rammont and Ganesh Pangare*

The Sesan, Sre Pok, and Sekong rivers, referred to as the 3S river basin, are shared by three countries and constitute a significant part of the Lower Mekong river basin. The BRIDGE project – Building River Dialogue and Governance – implements water diplomacy in transboundary basins, and is working in the 3S to build and strengthen water governance capacity.

The 3S river basin contains the only transboundary tributaries of the Mekong covering over 78,650 square kilometres. Rapid development of hydropower and mining which has prompted renewed efforts to improve cooperation, challenged by the fact that the three countries it is shared between have vastly different political and institutional arrangements.

As a result of these challenges, BRIDGE uses a combination of facilitating dialogue, information tools, and capacity building bringing together and strengthening stakeholders across local, provincial, national, and regional levels.

Experiences in the 3S have illustrated that water diplomacy is a stepwise process that must include a multiplicity of agreements at all levels. In order for cooperation to take shape, space must be created for dialogue and shared learning which can create an environment where joint action across scales can happen. Lao PDR is gradually setting up a river basin committee (RBO) on the Sekong catalyzed by stakeholders' interest in water governance and IWRM. A crucial point is that water governance depends on combined training and leadership networks that can transmit essential knowledge through non-conventional channels, thereby influencing decisions on transboundary management. In the 3S, these networks require advice and technical support brokered across scales with support from communication and knowledge products to help improve their effectiveness as agents of change.

### Highlighted results

-  Supporting a process for laying out a roadmap for organising transboundary cooperation in the 3S basins and to build needed capacities in key national institutions and stakeholders.
-  Engaging national and provincial authorities in the process of establishing a national River Basin Committee for the Sekong in Lao PDR.
-  Facilitating dialogue with the Cambodian government on a future national Coordination Team for the Sekong, as a necessary precursor to potential future technical coordination at transboundary level.
-  Identifying and engaging local stakeholders in consultations on the organisation of basin management, supported by training.
-  Priorities set for a step-wise, country-driven approach to building cooperation in consultations with government, national agencies and civil society in Cambodia and Vietnam on the Sesan and Sre Pok rivers.
-  Complementing the Transboundary Initiative led by the Mekong River Commission to establish a transboundary institutions for the Sesan and Sre Pok through support for development of an information platform and capacity building.



## THE 3Ss RIVER BASIN (CAMBODIA, LAO PDR AND VIETNAM)

The river basins of the Sesan, Sre Pok and Sekong (3S) (3S) spread over approximately 78,650 square kilometres covering parts of Cambodia (33% of total basin area), Lao PDR (29%), and Vietnam (38%). The source of the three rivers rests in the Central Highlands of Vietnam from where the Sekong flows through Lao

PDR before merging with the Sesan and Sre Pok. The Sesan and Sre Pok rivers flow from Vietnam to Cambodia where the three rivers merge over a distance of about 40 kilometres before forming the confluence with the main stem of the Mekong River at Stung Treng in Cambodia.

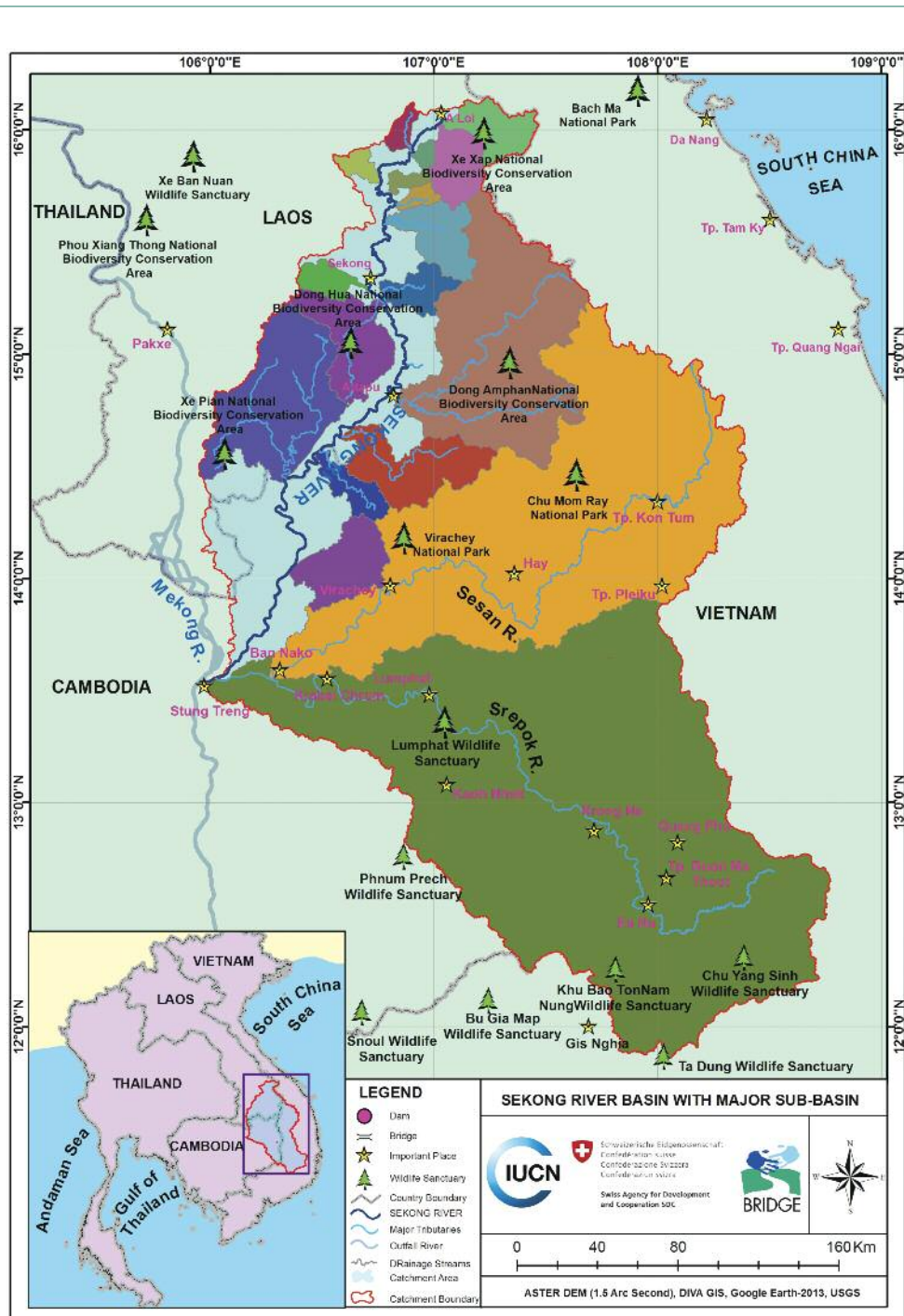


Figure 1. Map of the 3S Basins. Source: Lalita Rammont, IUCN

## SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Agriculture and fisheries are the main sources of income for the communities living in the 3S. The agricultural potential of the area is high and a range of high value cash crops are grown alongside subsistence rice paddies. The poorest areas are in the remote mountainous regions, populated by indigenous ethnic groups. The livelihoods of these ethnic groups are based on a mixture of irrigated and rainfed agriculture and forest products. Increasingly, households are supplementing their income through the sale of handicrafts for the growing tourism industry.

Vietnam is focusing on economic development of the Central Highlands in an effort to increase productivity and make the region more economically viable. In Cambodia, population pressure in the central and western provinces coupled with improved transport infrastructure in the eastern provinces is driving

migration to the lower parts of the 3S basin. Lao PDR is looking to develop the Sekong basin to contribute to the economic development of the Sekong Province.

The 3S basin has great potential for agriculture, forestry, hydropower, fisheries, ecotourism and forestry products. The aim to improve livelihoods could be lost if basin planning is not conducted with adequate consultation with all stakeholders. Hydropower development is an example of where planning has generally taken place as mainly a sector-oriented and technology-driven process focused on profitable outputs rather than sustainable development. The drive for rapid energy production has to a large extent neglected the needs of upstream water users and the impacts of changing flow regimes on downstream communities.



Rice planting in Attapeu, Lao PDR.



## CHALLENGES TO COOPERATION

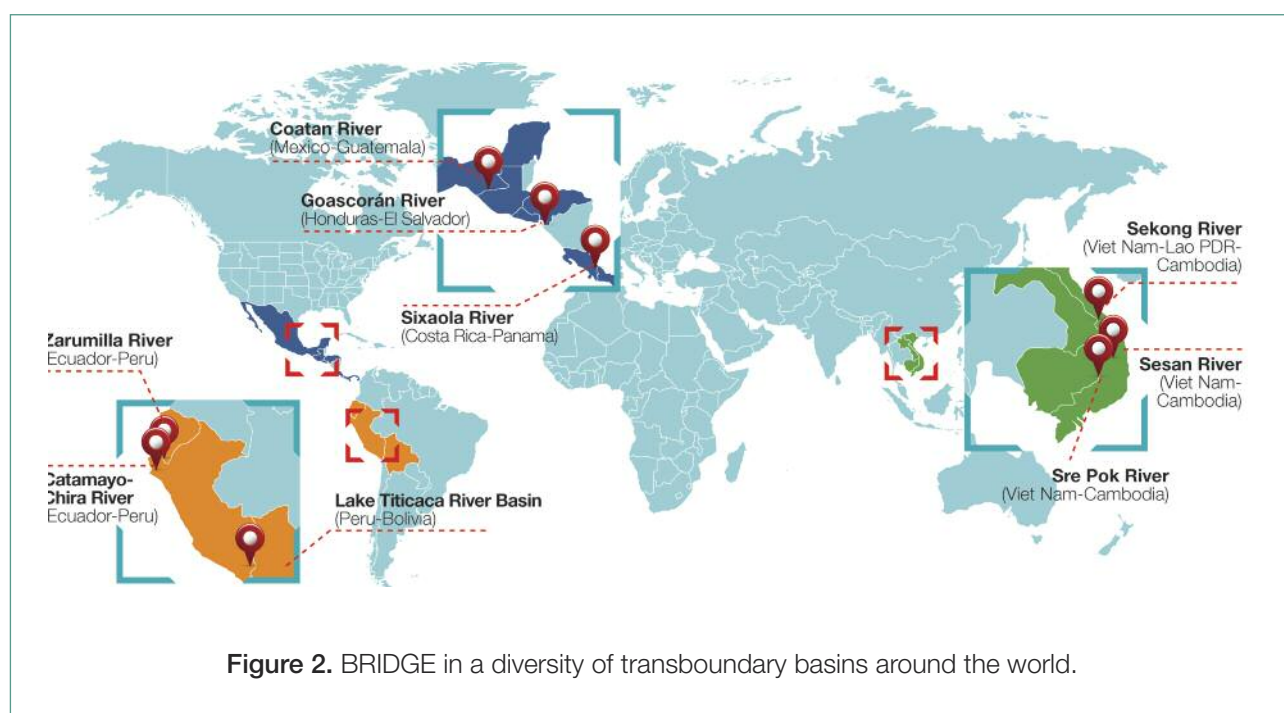
The need for transboundary cooperation in the 3S is urgent. Regional development is taking place rapidly and with the 3S river basin's high irrigation and hydropower potential, the rivers are expected to play a significant role in the economic growth of the wider region. The 3S river basin is remote and located far from provincial and national capitals making coordination among the three countries difficult. This is further compounded by limited basin institution capacities at provincial and national level. Given that the basin is shared by three countries, each with different political systems and institutional arrangement, there is no *one-size-fits-all* strategy making good water governance happen.

Equally challenging is the highly interdependent nature of hydrology and ecosystems in the 3S. River levels, flows and water quality influence the conditions of the Lower Mekong, with transboundary impacts both upstream and downstream of the 3S.

The rivers provide essential resources for the livelihoods and subsistence of local people, especially marginalised communities, the vulnerable and poor. Uncoordinated development of water resources can have unpredictable impacts across provincial and national boundaries. Cooperation over the manage-

ment of water resources provides a means to mitigate and potentially manage the costs for impacted communities and countries, but only if the mechanisms for information sharing, cooperation in basin management, and sharing of the benefits of basin development are distributed.

Lao PDR has made progress addressing basin management by establishing the first river basin committee (RBC) in 2001, under the now named Water Resources and Environment Administration (WREA). The RBC became functional during the Nam Gum River Basin Development Project, but due to inadequate resources and an unclear mandate, progress was gradual. To increase progress in the establishment of RBCs, the Prime Minister in 2010 issued a Decree establishing River Basin Committees the first of which was the Nam Ngum River Basin Committee, designed to operate under the umbrella of the Lao National Mekong Committee. As part of the Decree, two pilot basins – the Nam Ngum and Nam Theun-Kading – were established, with the Xebangfai, Xebanghieng, Nam Ou and more recently the Sekong in the 3S river basin designated as second priority RBCs. The primary impediment to implementing the Decree on the Sekong has been national capacity, specifically lack of funding for the project.



**Figure 2.** BRIDGE in a diversity of transboundary basins around the world.

# BRIDGE ACTIONS, MECHANISMS AND TOOLS

Implementing water diplomacy is not a simple process and BRIDGE incorporates a number of mechanisms and tools in the 3S. First, it uses **demonstration** of how to make cooperation operational in a basin as the basis for confidence and trust building through shared learning and joint action on concrete steps in building national and trans-boundary water governance capacity. Second, through **learning**, BRIDGE uses training and capacity building for multiple stakeholders, including municipal and civil society actors as well as high-level national officials, in water governance, international water law and benefit sharing to improve understanding. Third, it **facilitates dialogue for consensus building** using demonstration actions and learning events to catalyse new dialogues on technical, development and political matters. Fourth, BRIDGE implements **leadership** programmes supporting the empowerment of champions for trans-boundary water cooperation. Finally, through **advice and support** functions, BRIDGE provides guidance on demand and technical assistance to governments and stakeholders, including on effective institutional and legal frameworks, applications of lessons learned, and advice and demonstration in trans-boundary hot-spots.

## Improved water governance through river basin institutions

At the provincial and national level, as part of demonstrations of cooperation and facilitation of dialogue, BRIDGE supported the formation of the river basin secretariats for the Sekong River Basin in Lao PDR. Key stakeholders in the Sekong, Sesan, and Sre Pok Basins were identified across levels of governance in the basin. Multi-stakeholder meetings in the Sekong River Basin were held in Attapeu, Lao PDR and separately in Stung Treng in Cambodia, with the objective to identify and prioritise issues to input into the formation river basin committee on the Sekong.

At the regional level, activities focused on joint efforts between Cambodia and Vietnam to produce a scoping exercise that would link management plans on the Sesan and Sre Pok river basins. Activities have been coordinated with the 'Transboundary Cooperation Project' led by the Mekong River Commission (MRC) which focused on cooperation between Cambodia and Vietnam on the Sesan and Sre Pok River Basins. Increased coordination with the MRC at the regional level has led to the creation of a National-level Challenges Road Map for transboundary cooperation.

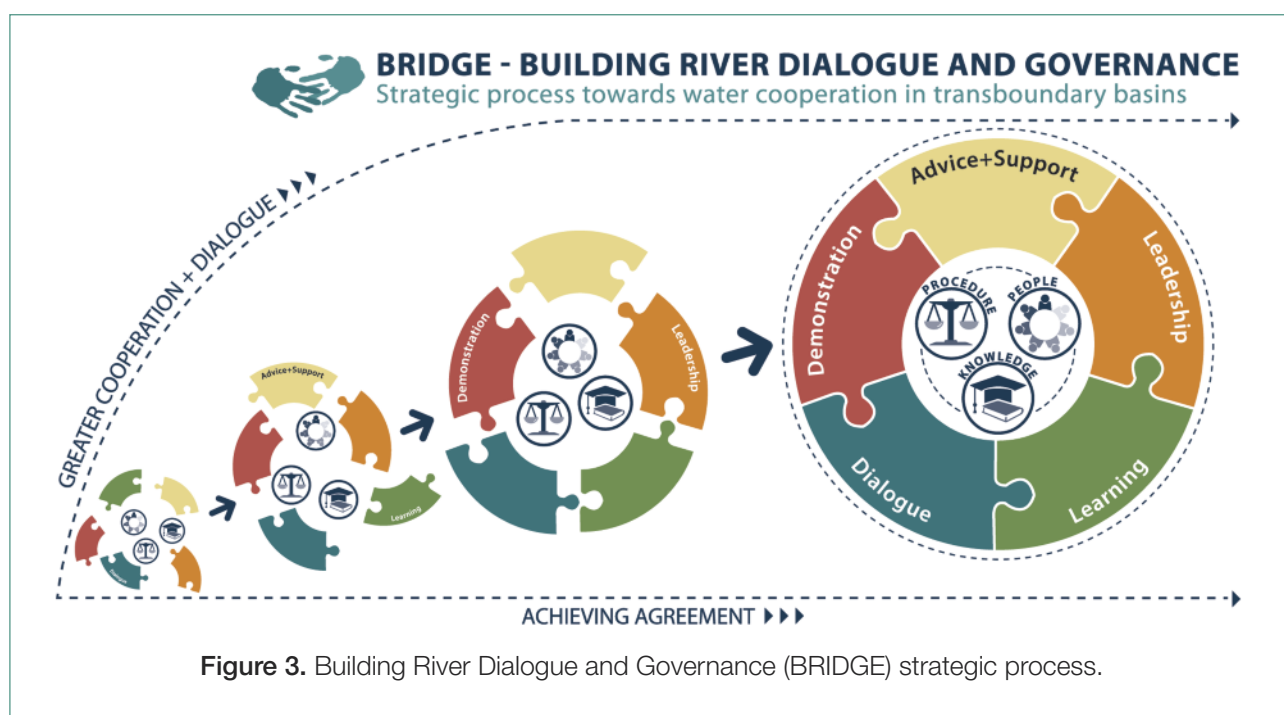


Figure 3. Building River Dialogue and Governance (BRIDGE) strategic process.



Hua Khon Waterfall, Lao PDR discharge to Sekong River.

### Information and data exchange

A key component of water diplomacy in the 3S is the facilitation of dialogue and technical exchanges through the use of data and information derived from the basin. As part of this strategy, a Sekong Basin Profile study was developed including water quality sampling and analysis and results from field visits on the Sekong River Basin. Water quality has been a crucial issue in the Sekong due to the impacts of development in the area. Therefore, having reliable water quality data is a crucial tool for decision-making providing a basis for negotiation with provincial and national line agencies. The study also captures the demographic, economic, and political characteristics of the basin, making data and information available for officials and stakeholders. Additionally, a Mekong Factsheet was produced that shared important information on BRIDGE activities in the 3S basin translated into Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese.

Regionally, BRIDGE facilitated coordination with the Centre for Development and Environment ([www.cde.unibe.ch](http://www.cde.unibe.ch)) to source GIS maps for Sekong Basin Profile. Cooperation with the two organisations led to the development of working maps incorporating GIS layers at provincial and district scales. This has

been made available through a 3S basin website ([www.3sbasin.org](http://www.3sbasin.org)) developed and managed by BRIDGE. The site focuses on data and information, linking project documents and 3S basin data to provincial, national, and regional stakeholders.

Another important knowledge product available on the 3S basin website is a situation analysis report with support from IUCN Environmental Law Centre (ELC). The report provided a review of institutional arrangements, an analysis of domestic legal issues, bilateral treaties and international agreements relevant to the 3S basin. Such analyses have been proven to be crucial in understanding the complexities of how to incorporate multiple layers of water governance in a transboundary institution.

### Capacity building and leadership

Capacity building in the 3S is a crucial part of water diplomacy. It has focused on four key areas: 1) local training on IWRM and water governance, 2) training at the national level to enhance capacity and cooperation, 3) regional training and capacity building through water governance and hydro-diplomacy events, and 4) development and support of a leadership network.



### *Water Governance training*

One of the challenges of river basin management and good governance is getting the involvement of locals in planning, decision-making, and joint action. As a first step, BRIDGE developed water governance training packages delivered to Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam participants through “Training of Trainer” workshops as the first step. Developing the training further led to additional workshops in Lao PDR and Cambodia with training materials translated into several local languages supported by trained facilitators from previous workshops. Participants came from national and provincial governments, NGOs and the academic sector.

Additionally, specific requests for training on principles of IWRM have come from local stakeholders from both Lao PDR and Cambodia. Local stakeholders have shown greater interest in getting involved in water management, thereby increasing their influence on decisions made at the national level.

### *National water governance capacity*

The case of Lao PDR is important as the training not only served to inform and empower stakeholders on the topics of water governance, international water law, and environmental flows, but also served as a precursor for coordinating stakeholder input on river basin committees in the Sekong – a process supported and led by the government of Lao PDR. The impact of training potentially increased momentum and progress towards formation of the Sekong river basin committee. Later in 2012 and into 2013, Vietnam has expressed interest in transboundary cooperation and Cambodia is considering a strategy towards greater cooperation and a more coordinated river basin institution in the future.

### *Regional engagement in hydro-diplomacy*

Activity at the regional level revolved around increased collaboration with the MRC to coordinate regional level dialogues, with the Integrated Water Resource Management Project (IWRMP), the Basin Development

Programme (BDP), and the Information and Knowledge Management Programme (IKMP). A highlighted event came with the regional conference on hydro-diplomacy where leaders and stakeholders from the Mekong region, came together to share experiences on the meaning and practical uses of hydro-diplomacy. Dignitaries, officials, and stakeholders from across Asia engaged in dialogue over the practical meanings of hydro-diplomacy and how to better implement actions on the ground.

### *Leadership programme*

Launched in early 2012, the Leadership programme assembled a network of champions, or actor of change in transboundary cooperation. Its focus was to develop knowledge and processes of transboundary cooperation with the aim of building a network of key stakeholders in transboundary water governance in the 3S river basin. Supported by training workshops, members of the network were empowered to convey and advocate key information and knowledge on transboundary water management to multiple layers of government. This provided a means of challenging the status quo in a welcoming and productive manner while engaging in meaningful and constructive dialogue with peers and stakeholders.

### *Advice and support facilities*

Support Facilities have been a key component of the BRIDGE programme in Asia, delivering water governance capacity training packages and Train-the-Trainer workshops in the basins. Complemented by crucial and timely technical assistance through the Water Law and Governance Support Platform ([www.water-lawandgovernance.org](http://www.water-lawandgovernance.org)), advice and support facilities form the backbone of making water governance work smoothly. Training packages were designed and delivered to provide a foundation for learning, empowering local trainers and supporting the newly formed Leadership Network. Support also was provided through knowledge products such as the Water and Nature Initiative (WANI) toolkits SHARE and NEGOTIATE, which have been translated into Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese.

### BOX 1. When Capacity Building Builds More than Capacity

When is a capacity building session more than just a capacity building session? Very often, it seems, if it has been organised under the auspices of BRIDGE. As Mark Smith, director of the IUCN Global Water Programme, puts it: *“Breaking the ice is important. You can look at capacity building as more than just training.”* *“The biggest success has been a change in thinking, a change in points of view,”* said Lalita Rammont, IUCN project officer in Asia. *“I don’t know when people will be ready to cooperate, maybe in five or 10 years, but the seeds have been planted. The people we have invited to participate in BRIDGE will be part of that change.”*



Water Governance Workshop, Saravan Province, Lao PDR, Feb 2013.

## SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTION RESULTS

Water governance capacity is a function of society's capability to implement effective water management through policies, laws, institutions, regulations, and compliance mechanisms. Countries need to develop each of these components in their own way – but in all cases, they need to be implemented in order to become instruments of effective water governance. Traditional diplomacy normally occurs at a very high political level, and thus in the water sector, often leaves crucial stakeholders out of the process. In transboundary basins, in particular the 3S basin, the issues become more complex due to jurisdictional challenges to implement joint actions across boundaries. Water diplomacy is about gaining multi-stakeholder, multi-level agreements on water management decisions, planning, and actions. Therefore, results from BRIDGE interventions do not necessarily originate from one level – they come from national, provincial, and local levels and often emerge from interactions of multiple layers of governance and stakeholder meetings.

As part of Lao PDR's plan to enhance river basin management, it instituted a Decree to form a number of national river basin committees (RBCs) including the Sekong as one of its priority basins. BRIDGE supported this by coordinating with the Water Resources and Environment Administration from Lao PDR to facilitate discussions with stakeholders on what the components of a river basin committee on the Sekong. BRIDGE also worked with Cambodia to facilitate discussions on a National Coordination Team that could, in future, provide a foundation for technical coordination on the Sekong at the transboundary level.

Part of creating spaces for dialogue is understanding how components of good water governance work together and are applied in transboundary basins. With support from BRIDGE, by mid-2012, Lao PDR became more and more interested in discussing the fundamental designs for river basin committees on the Sekong. A key aspect of this intervention is the linking of local, provincial, and national stakeholders to make decisions for the benefit of the entire basin. An unexpected development coming out of these

meetings was the government placing greater concern on mining activity which having adverse effects on water quality and fisheries.

Another key aspect to cooperation in the 3S is the use, sharing and access of information and knowledge. BRIDGE has played a significant role in this regard by not only creating and hosting a website on the 3S but providing support to stakeholders on the use and interpretation of information and data. By mobilising information and knowledge, stakeholders and government officials were brought together to discuss areas of mutual interest in the basin. As part of this strategy, the formation and activities of the Leadership Programme has contributed to the sharing of information and knowledge through informal interactions with water professionals in their own localities and provinces. To complement the sharing of knowledge locally, BRIDGE has engaged in a strong partnership with the Mekong River Commission which is beginning a transboundary project on coordination on the Sesan and Sre Pok rivers and is cooperating on data and information sharing for the 3S.

Working in the 3S river basin has required stepwise progress on water diplomacy, many times encountering significant barriers to cooperation. However, experience illustrates that taking a multi-faceted approach has yielded the best results. Water diplomacy is a multi-level process and interventions are designed to reach stakeholders at regional, national, provincial, and local scales while targeting tangible knowledge, procedural, and relational dimensions of transboundary river basin management. This is demonstrated through reaching out to stakeholders at the regional level through conferences and leadership activities, engaging stakeholders at the national level through dialogue on the fundamentals of river basin committees, and targeting provincial and local-level stakeholders on water governance training. A key ingredient to making water diplomacy work is the ability to provide relevant and timely support to enable interventions to function. In fact, this finding is equally relevant across many regions that share transboundary basins.



## BOX 2. Information is Golden on the Sekong River

Lao PDR officials in Vientiane had issued a national Decree on river basin committees, and the Sekong basin had been named as a priority. As part of its BRIDGE initiative, IUCN helped identify and mobilise stakeholders to provide input on the RBO plan. Local and national officials from Lao PDR were brought into the same room at the same time. From that meeting came better understanding and a shared vision. But in countries that share the Sekong, information is often scarce, especially information about events and realities in remote areas. *“The area is far from the main capitals,”* said Ganesh Pangare. Just to reach some parts of the 3S region requires a near heroic effort, no matter which capital you set out from. Tek Vannara, deputy executive director of the NGO Forum on Cambodia, recalls taking *“three days to cover 540 kilometres”* on the nearly impassable roadways of his country’s provinces. Given the difficult geography, *“information and knowledge are very important in this region. The right information is very important so that we can be ready for the next step,”* remarked Lalita Rammont, based in Bangkok. An example of this was one of the major issues that came up in the basin was water pollution. Providing otherwise scarce information to somebody in the right place can go a long way. Once information became available on water conditions in the Sekong, a decision was made to put better controls on water quality and mining.



Gold panning in Attapue, Sekong River, Lao PDR.

## LESSONS LEARNED GOING FORWARD



Playing at sunset in Attapue on the Sekong river basin, Lao PDR.

Experience in the 3S basin has emphasised the need for a stepwise multi-level approach to water diplomacy and transboundary basin management. Given the regional hydropolitical context over development and a wide range of political arrangements in the countries sharing the 3S basins, there are significant challenges for implementing transboundary basin management. Innovative approaches are urgently needed. BRIDGE activities are designed to work around constraints by facilitating agreements at multiple levels, filling the spaces left between stakeholder groups and different levels of governance.

Successful interventions in the 3S basin have taken three critical pathways. Through the *substantive* dimension, they focused on creating and disseminating data, information, and knowledge. A key learning is that access to information and knowledge is an effective tool for influencing stakeholders and decision-makers. Access, understanding, and dissemination of information is power and directing this power to stakeholders across multiple scales accelerates the rate of change in the basin – toward better water governance and cooperation. For example, the Sekong basin profile and 3S website provides data and information to provincial and local stakeholders. Moreover, to be effective, information and knowledge needs to be

available in local languages. Information products are not enough – stakeholders need to understand and be able to use knowledge tools to effect for real change to take place

Through the *procedural* dimension, a strategy to inform and support national processes, with institutional structures, has provided guidance on international legal aspects on how water is managed. Examples include support to national and local stakeholders to implement the legal Decree in Lao PDR to set up river basin institutions, or cooperation with the Mekong River Commission interacting with countries through the National Mekong Committees – both dealing with procedural issues on water management. Experience in the 3S shows that in the case where water management is a sensitive and political issue, a stepwise approach is preferred over large leaps forward. This was illustrated by engaging with national processes in Lao PDR to form river basin committees, working with Cambodia to create a future platform for technical coordination and facilitating interest from Vietnam to engage in BRIDGE processes. The use of water governance training and advocacy from the Leadership Network can also have a positive impact on bringing stakeholders together, catalysing official transboundary cooperation.

A key strategy, then, is to enhance water diplomacy in the 3S is to not only support national interests but to engage in regional processes. BRIDGE supported a regional transboundary initiative by charting a road map for benefit sharing on transboundary cooperation. Due to the need to have national authority over any agreements, a multi-level, multi-stakeholder approach to getting agreement on key issues was taken – often filling gaps between local, provincial, national and regional governance mechanisms.

Through the *relational* dimension, water diplomacy is about understanding the complex interactions between institutional and political aspects of water management. The role of stakeholders in decision-making is, therefore, dependant on the interests of stakeholder groups and their power relations in water institutions. At the regional and national levels, BRIDGE hosted several conferences and workshops and as a result is becoming a known source of knowledge and support on issues of environmental flows, water governance, and international water law.

Through the Leadership Network, BRIDGE has learned that change can occur through non-traditional channels

– such as through individuals at work, through virtual networks, and at side events at regional conferences. Bottom-up approaches can compliment top-down approaches – adding new dimensions to water governance and cooperation in a basin. This was also the approach in the stakeholder meetings in Lao PDR on river basin committee emphasising IWRM principles and participatory approaches to water resources management. A crucial part of a Leadership Network is thus to become an actual *bridge* for stakeholders, bringing together local, provincial, and national stakeholders – a dynamic that builds relationships across geographic, political, and cultural boundaries.

Taking these lessons forward, BRIDGE in the 3S basin will focus on a common information platform supporting water resources management, capacity building of key stakeholders specifically in transboundary cooperation, and utilising information and communication to enhance cross-sectoral dialogue at the regional level. Activities will continue to reinforce intervention strategies at the national and regional levels in an effort to foster greater cooperation and water governance for the millions of people relying on water from the Sesan, Sre Pok, and Sekong river basins.

***“Experience in the 3S has emphasised the need for a stepwise multi-level approach to water diplomacy and transboundary basin management.”***



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