



Building commitment to climate action in the Mekong and Zambezi River Basins

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Climate change is expected to intensify water security concerns in international river basins. In spite of international climate commitments, the day-to-day business of development in countries along the Mekong and Zambezi does not necessarily factor in climate change. Varying levels of vulnerability to climate change creates different levels of real commitment to climate action. Prioritizing actions that address immediate development challenges is crucial to increasing political commitment.

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The climate discourse and international river basins

Climate scenarios show that most international river basins are going to be severely affected by climate change, potentially altering existing hydro-political balances and creating a challenge for transboundary cooperation. The UNFCCC negotiations have been instrumental in putting climate change on political agendas in the Mekong and the Zambezi basins. Donors have supported these agendas at not only the national but also the transboundary level, arguing that the transboundary nature of climate change impacts creates an imperative for coordinated climate adaptation in international river basins.

A complex road to climate action

The imperatives of the global climate negotiations, climate science, donor funds and expert advice are not necessarily translated into climate action in developing countries, which often see themselves as the victims of climate change incurred by the developed industrialized world. They claim the right to grow their economies without curbing emissions, which they see as the responsibility of the rich countries. Similarly, they believe that developed economies should help poor countries adapt to the future ravages of climate change. Economic growth, food and energy security dominate the daily business of development in most government offices, and there is little acknowledgement that climate change is a stress multiplier in that it exacerbates existing development challenges and magnifies potential conflicts

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Donors should:

- **Understand the political economy and geopolitics of climate change in river basins**
- **Understand climate change in national development dynamics**
- **Support no or low regret climate action**
- **Address the larger development agenda in river basins to improve climate resilience**

between riparian countries. The road to political action on climate scenarios is complex, as it involves a dynamic interplay between climate knowledge, risk perceptions, economic interests and a multitude of other development concerns.

Drivers of political commitment

Uncertain and contradictory climate scenarios make investments in mitigation and adaptation actions difficult, as there are no clear-cut solutions. Political commitment to climate action is influenced by the perception of the risk incurred by climate change. While scenarios are contest-



Climate change and development

Climate action competes for political attention with economic growth, poverty alleviation, and energy and food security. In the developed world, the current financial and economic crisis has pushed the climate agenda into the background. Moreover, there is widespread climate fatigue as the alarming reports on the melting Arctic do not seem to translate into substantial climate action. To generate the required sense of political priority, climate policies should be mirrored in overall national development strategies. Strong links between general development priorities and climate action in national discourses signal commitment. Climate change may also be used strategically by governments or other stakeholders in domestic or basin-wide negotiations on development plans and projects. Climate mitigation or adaptation arguments may legitimise development interventions or externalise the responsibility for development problems.

able, extreme climatic events (e.g. floods, droughts, typhoons and cyclones) and gradually felt impacts threatening economic assets are strong drivers of political commitment. Climate hazards, vulnerabilities, adaptive capacity and stakeholder pressure vary between countries in the Mekong and the Zambezi regions, creating different incentives for climate action among countries and presenting a challenge for transboundary cooperation.

Climate politics in the Mekong

Development discourses in the Mekong region increasingly incorporate climate change. Extreme weather events are part of national political debates, especially in Vietnam and Thailand. Political commitment to the climate agenda is often strategic and used as a means to access donor funds, especially in Laos. Climate change is also a vehicle for promoting national interests at the transboundary level. Climate resilience and 'green growth' are conflicting goals in the controversy over mainstream dams. Vietnam argues the need to preserve the climate-sensitive Mekong delta from upstream changes, while Laos claims that its hydropower expansion is carbon neutral in an energy-hungry region. Climate is not a stand-alone issue but embedded in distributional and geopolitical tensions in the Mekong region.

Strategic knowledge from the Mekong River Commission

The Mekong River Commission is well positioned to address the climate challenges of the Mekong basin by engaging political stakeholders in regional cooperation. The Commission can produce basin development scenarios that incorporate climate impact studies. Such strategic knowledge could potentially increase political commitment to climate change at the entire river basin level.

Climate scenarios for the Lower Mekong Basin

In spite of some inconsistencies, climate scenarios for the Lower Mekong generally predict a warmer, wetter and in some places also drier climate. Climate variability is likely to intensify, including more frequent and intense cyclones. Increased wet season precipitation and run-off will impact the hydrology of the Mekong through increased variability of the annual flood pulse, higher flood peaks and a greater risk of flooding across the basin. Simultaneously, the delta in Vietnam, most of Cambodia, southern Laos, northeast Thailand and the Vietnamese highlands may experience extended periods of drought during the dry season. Sea level rise is already evident in large parts of the Mekong delta.

Climate politics in the Zambezi

Zambezi basin countries are developing climate adaptation strategies, low carbon growth policies and climate-proofed disaster risk-reduction plans. Extreme weather events and climate finance are the key drivers of political attention to climate action in the Zambezi region. Some governments, however, see the need to reduce emissions as compromising their ability to develop, while adaptation is considered an additional development cost. Development of the significant irrigation, mining and hydropower potential, especially in Zambia and Mozambique, and possibly inter-basin transfers in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Angola, all draws on the Zambezi's water resources. Projects rarely integrate climate change risk, and there is little basin-wide understanding of the aggregated effects of nexus-development. The region is on the brink of rapid economic growth, but severe climate impacts may compromise investments. The embryonic Zambezi Watercourse Commission could become an important catalyst for change through strategic knowledge generation and political dialogue.

Climate scenarios for the Zambezi region

The Zambezi, which flows through a large portion of southern Africa, is characterized by seasonal climatic swings, from rainy to dry, which are also highly variable from year to year. Climate projections for the Zambezi point to a moderate temperature increase throughout the basin, especially in the winter. Scenarios are characterized by moderate wetting and significant drying in terms of mean annual rainfall. The southern and western parts of the region will become drier, whereas the north-east might receive more rainfall from the West Indian Ocean monsoon. In the southwest Indian Ocean there may be fewer tropical cyclones, but those that do occur are likely to be more intense, increasing flooding and damage to the lower Zambezi basin.

A strategic approach: building coalitions for climate action

Climate change needs to be contextualized in the evolving political economy of development in each riparian country. A thorough understanding of the socio-economic implications of climate change on other development stresses such as energy, water, poverty and health at the basin level is

Thailand's climate games

The 2011 monsoon caused severe floods in Thailand. Millions of people lost their homes and factories were flooded, and Thailand's GDP growth declined by 1.1 percent. Political controversy over the floods highlighted how the climate agenda can be used to initiate strategic political games. Climate change was initially blamed for the floods. The real 'culprit' turned out to be unregulated infrastructure development (blocking drainage) and poor management of water reservoirs, underlining the close link between climate vulnerability and general sustainable development principles.

Vietnam's double exposure

Vietnam is critically exposed to climate hazards due to its downstream and coastal position. Official records show a sea level rise in the South China Sea of twenty centimeters during the last fifty years. The Mekong delta, which is of key importance for Vietnam's economy and for regional food security, is already exposed to impacts such as saline intrusion. Not surprisingly, climate change is high on the political agenda in Vietnam. In the Mekong water resources dialogue, Vietnam draws attention to the vulnerability of the delta as an argument against mainstream dams in Laos and China.

Laos's opportunism

In spite of the Laotian government's policy attention to climate change, it is considered neither a great risk nor a high priority. This corresponds to the modest risks projected by available climate scenarios. Laos's development priority is economic growth through the expansion of hydropower and extractive industries. The official climate rhetoric is largely strategic, aimed at acquiring donor funds by 'climate dressing' existing development projects. Climate change is also used to legitimize extensive hydropower developments, which is officially communicated as a low-carbon growth strategy for the region. Thus, climate mitigation is used politically to counter downstream criticism from Vietnam and Cambodia.

Zambia's donor dependency

Since 1992, climate change has provided a strong platform for increased donor assistance in Zambia, with climate-related legal, policy and capacity-building achievements largely funded by the UN, World Bank and bilateral donors. Zambia's seven-year climate programme of more than USD 600 million is largely donor financed, thus establishing an opportunity for donor influence on Zambia's development agenda. As in the case of Thailand, climate change also has a 'scapegoat' function: although the Lusaka floods of 2008 and 2010 were officially attributed to climate change, problems of infrastructure (poor drainage and waste management) and settlement (poor urban planning) were largely to blame.

Mozambique's confused climate mandate

In Mozambique, climate change has come into focus in the aftermath of cyclone-related floods between 2000 and 2007. The government's disaster risk management efforts are proactive, and its Disaster Management Unit is constantly seeking ways to reduce the impacts of climate disasters in a country where flooding is predicted to account for nearly half of the estimated climate-induced damage. Despite these risks, there is no clear government climate change 'leader'. One ministry holds the mandate for multilateral climate change negotiations and national strategy, another is responsible for climate-related disasters and yet another for climate change and development and investment planning. As in many other countries, such dispersed mandates lead to an inevitable inter-ministerial struggle for power through access to seemingly vast sources of climate funding. At the same time, donors and the multilateral development banks are seeking to ensure that the climate change mandate is assigned to ministries that have a strong influence on government development decision-making processes. So while climate funding to Mozambique is extensive, inter-ministerial conflict, diffused climate leadership, inadequate coordination and externally driven agendas are weakening the national climate-change strategy. This weakens Mozambique's voice in the multilateral negotiations and is a lost opportunity for a highly threatened country that also faces downstream impacts of actions in the Zambezi basin.

important for meaningful action on climate. Understanding the national and transboundary development dynamics and assessing the political priority that governments give to climate change are the strategic stepping stones towards effective climate action. National and international climate champions need to draw the attention of decision-makers to 'no or low regret' action on climate-sensitive natural resources management and disaster risk reduction. This approach focuses on the immediate economic benefits of climate adaptation rather than long-term and uncertain scenari-

os. It entails a more pragmatic and contextualized strategy of partnerships with government and economic stakeholders. It builds on the mutual interests of stakeholders that ultimately generate coalitions around green growth in developing countries. Nonetheless, effective climate action also requires political action moving beyond 'no/low regrets' measures. Problems with human and financial capacity are real obstacles in least-developed countries, making support from external partners vital for climate action in some contexts.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Political commitment to national and transboundary climate action is a crucial determinant of future climate resilience in international river basins. The recommendations offered below are primarily directed to donors, but they are also relevant for river basin organizations and governments. The objective is to enhance the appreciation of climate change as integral to the larger development context. The intention is to direct assistance and political attention to more effective climate action that builds on genuine political and economic interests and ownership in developing countries.

UNDERSTAND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY AND GEO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

- Base support for climate action on a thorough analysis of the political economy of climate change and its geopolitics in the river basins
- Identify points of convergence where high-priority national development strategies intersect with climate-relevant measures and provide trans-boundary benefits

UNDERSTAND CLIMATE CHANGE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DYNAMICS

- Build on existing efforts to deal with high climate variability and extreme events: as a low-hanging fruit, climate resilience can be improved through better water resources management and disaster risk reduction measures
- Create political coalitions in support of climate action, acknowledging that government climate champions are often weak and need allies from business and civil society to push the agenda

IDENTIFICATION AND SUPPORT FOR NO OR LOW REGRET CLIMATE ACTION

- Focus the attention of decision-makers on no- or low regret action with immediate benefits rather than long-term scenarios and idealistic adaptation models
- Develop climate indicators and monitoring methods that allow climate funds to support mainstream development projects with an added climate value that also acknowledges the opportunity costs of climate action

WORK WITH THE LARGER DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN INTERNATIONAL RIVER BASINS TO IMPROVE RESILIENCE

- Address the major transboundary development issues in the Mekong (mainstream hydropower) and the Zambezi (nexus development) to improve climate resilience at the basin level
- Through river basin organizations, provide strategic climate knowledge and develop benefit-sharing options that address possible transboundary trade-offs between adaptation and mitigation in basin countries

FURTHER READING

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