MEKONG-BRAHMAPUTRA CONVERSATION: Learning and Ideas for North East India and Bangladesh
Case Study: Thailand
THE INTELLIGENT THIRD SPACE
FOR VIBRANT MEANS AND ENDS
CASE STUDY: THAILAND

Mekong-Brahmaputra Conversation:
Learning and Ideas for North East India and Bangladesh
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The Mekong region has a history of regional cooperation amongst the nation states through frameworks such as ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) and MRC (Mekong regional Cooperation). As a part of the MRC framework, regional cooperation over the Mekong river has made further progress.

The more recent Mekong Council Study is an initiative towards an integrated, cross-sectoral, comprehensive and state-of-the-art study bent on ensuring sustainable development in the Mekong Basin and focusing on cooperation among the MRC Member Countries – Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam, to that end. The North Eastern region of India comprises a substantial part of the Brahmaputra basin, and is presently evolving strategies of regional cooperation. The Act East Policy of the government of India is an overarching policy framework aspiring to enhance connectivity of the north-east of India to the South East Asian and Bay of Bengal region while at the same time developing the region itself by putting into optimum use its rich water and biodiversity and human resource potential.

Thus, drawing on the experiences of the Mekong region which has had a history of transboundary institutional and community cooperation and where the local communities and the civil society have found a greater voice, the Brahmaputra region can draw strength towards formulating a more inclusive people friendly mechanism in managing water resources effectively.

In the follow-up to the project “Flowing Boundaries” executed successfully in 2017 by the Asian Confluence with support from the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, India, the “Mekong-Brahmaputra Conversation project” aimed to take forward the process of engagement and sharing between experts and civil society leaders from the Brahmaputra/ Jamuna (India, Bhutan and Bangladesh) and Mekong regions. This involved field visits to Cambodia and Thailand for interaction among civil society organisations, experts and institutions working on various aspects of water resources management, including the regulatory frameworks that governs such management. The various issues discussed included transboundary regulatory frameworks, mechanisms and institutions, the links with communities, livelihoods and natural resource management at the ground level and how the micro aspects on the ground link with the larger regulatory and institutional framework.

This Case Study is prepared under the “Mekong-Brahmaputra Conversation” project. The endeavour is to create opportunities for learning and exchange between the two basins and put in place a strong foundation for collaboration, which can be recommended to governmental and civil society organizations in the respective countries for timely implementation.
Royal Development Study Centres, Thailand- key facts, insights and possibilities

The Huai Sai and Khao Hin Sorn Royal Development Study Centres in Thailand reside in parks that have been created on once degraded land that has been reclaimed and converted into fertile, productive and sustainable spaces. They cater to research, training and livelihoods of communities and visits to these centres revealed what human genius can achieve through compelling visions and diligent and consistent endeavours.

HuaiSai, Royal Development Study Centre

The HuaiSai Royal Development Study Centre situated within the premises of the Mrigadayavan Palace at Cha-am District in Phetchaburi Province of Thailand, was established on April 5, 1983. King Vajiravudh incorporated Huai Sai area into the compound of Mrigadayavan Palace on May 7, 1924, and declared it a sanctuary for animals. With time, however people started migrating and settling in the area and in the process encroached upon the forests, occupied those lands and used them for cultivation of crops, particularly pineapples. Substantial amounts of chemicals and fertilisers were used in these pineapple plantations. Such encroachment on forest land led to the degradation of the area as a result of its damaging effects on soil and water. The topsoil was eroded and was no longer arable or productive and in course of time the area degenerated into an arid and deserted zone. In 1983 King Bhumibol Adulyadej sought to address the unfolding reality by establishing this Royal Development Study Centre at Huai Sai with three clear objectives:

- Rehabilitation of natural resources and environment of the area
- Development of water resources
- Development of people’s quality of life

The overall approach of the Huai Sai RDSC is to enable the people to survive in harmony with the environment while at the same time preserving the natural resource base of the region.
The key components of the centre revolve around the following activities:

- **Vetiver Plantation** - Plantation of Vetiver grass in the hardpan to break the hard soil and nourish and restore the degraded soil. It is also planted along the edges of the reservoirs to prevent soil erosion and to absorb all chemical substances that can flow into the reservoirs.

- **Reservoir Chain System** - Construction of four inter-connected reservoirs for adequate supply of water to support the reforestation areas. It includes regular dredging of the water channels around the reservoirs to increase the water storage capacity. Check dams have also been constructed to contain the soil moisture.

- **Wet Forest System** – Water is pumped from a low lying reservoir up to the highest point in the hills and then allowed to flow freely through the forest, thereby rejuvenating the forest. The system also promotes planting of trees.

- **Propagation and raising of wildlife species that are not harmful, especially the hog deer which is indigenous to the region.**

- **Enhancing understanding and recognition of valued benefits of the forest among the local people.**

- **Water pumping by solar cells to support the center’s agricultural activities and consumption requirements, and to install windmills to support agricultural activities.**

As in most cases with new ideas, initially there was resistance to the King’s initiative. But as the communities began to appreciate the benefits with passing time, they became increasingly convinced. This also resulted in similar centres developing in other parts of the country. In Huai Sai – its ‘Yesterday Once More’. The area is again resplendent with bountiful forests, natural resources, fertile and productive land, wildlife all embodying a wonderful case of peaceful co-existence between man and forest. The study centre is now widely acknowledged as a learning model in forest conservation and natural resource management coupled with a veritable improvement in the quality of people’s lives. It is at the same time an exemplary model of how forests and humans can co-exist on a sustained basis.


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**Khao Hin Sorn (KHS), Royal Development Study Centre**

The Khao Hin Sorn Royal Development Study Centre was established on August 8, 1979 by King Bhumibol Adulyadej in the Chachoengsao Province of eastern Thailand. It was the first of the six Royal Study Centres established and has been, in many ways, the blueprint for other subsequent Royal Development Projects. The study centre has successfully rejuvenated a dry, barren and drought-stricken area into a
productive and fertile one. In the past this area suffered from degraded soil due to various factors like logging concessions, extensive encroachment on forests for farming, use of chemical inputs, erosion of topsoil, etc. The degradation was so severe that even cassava, a crop that is known for its adaptability to arid and degraded soil conditions, could not be cultivated in this area. Following the establishment of the centre, various strategies were employed for restoration of the area. Such strategies included water source development with an aggregate capacity of 5.8 million cubic meters including construction of 1000 ponds, check dams and irrigation canals. Soil and water conservation were addressed through reforestation and water resource creation. In a timeline spanning three decades, 320 hectares of arid land were transformed into fertile land through the revival and conservation of natural resources, forests, water and soil.

The centre has also developed high yielding varieties of seeds and saplings suited to the environment of the region to help local farmers buttress their income. A new technique of farming was tested through studies on agri, fishery, animal husbandry and land management. The five major achievements of the centre include the cultivation of jasmine rice, mushrooms, medicinal plants, and the breeding and rearing of ducks and frogs. Herbal plantations also generated incomes for the community members.

A total of eleven different departments of the Thai government work together at this study centre and their coordinated endeavours have helped to transform the centre into a model for sustainable co-existence of nature and commercial activities. The officials and staff look at various components and aspects of the centre including water resource management, agriculture, irrigation, forest resources, handlooms and handicrafts, soil and land restoration and maintenance, tourism, etc.

The Khao Hin Sorn centre bears a strong impress of the “Sufficiency Economy” philosophy promoted by King Bhumibol. It acts as a demonstration, training and resource centre for farmers in the area to help them get access to better methods, technology, inputs and ideas. It also acts as a demonstration centre for tourists who visit in order to experience and understand its sustainable ways of natural resource restoration and management. The centre also produces various cottage industry items like textiles and hand woven and handcrafted products that tourists find attractive. These products are prepared by local community members who are trained in the vocations at the centre. The herb and medicinal garden supplies raw materials to cosmetic industries, which also helps generate income for community members who participate in this process.
The key activities of the centre revolve around the following:

- Livestock development: fishery, duck and frog rearing.
- Medicinal plant and herb cultivation – emphasis on Amomum biflorum Jack species known for its aromatic, cosmetic and medicinal properties.
- Agricultural development & organic farming: mainly mango, cashew-nuts, sweet tamarind, mushrooms, sweet corn, baby corn, beans, grapes and other vegetables and fruits.
- Organic manure production and training centre – this trains farmers and also supplies them with organic inputs.
- Vetiver plantation for soil rejuvenation: vetiver is one of the chief components of soil restoration used at this centre.
- Promotion of cottage industries for income generation of the communities: textile, woven items (from vetiver grass, etc.), and other hand crafted items – this has been introduced as a means for buttressing the income of farming households.
- The centre also has a Herbal Sauna and Accommodation facilities (8 rooms that accommodate 24 visitors and 1 lodge which accommodates 80 visitors) targeted at tourists, visitors and groups that come in for training activities.

Further information on Khao Hin Sorn Royal Development Study Centre is available at: http://www.rdpb.go.th/en/Studycenter/royal-development-study-centres-rdscs-c60/khao-hin-sorn-royal-development-study-centre-v69

Both the HuaiSai and Khao Hin Sorn Royal Study Centres stand out as inspiring cases of restoration and effective management of natural resources, soil and water leading to sustainability and prosperity alike. They have evolved into exemplary centres of learning for everyone across all spaces.

Possible Adaptation in the Brahmaputra-Meghna basin: Some Insights

Meghalaya is known for its high rainfall and rich verdant vegetation. The constitution of India, under the 6th Schedule provides special powers to the community who owns the land, in order to take better care. However, the last few decades have revealed indiscriminate and reckless abuse of the land resources through mining, jhum cultivation, and excessive farming. Many of the water bodies have been adversely affected and many rivulets have gone dry. This has assumed disturbing proportions in recent times. Even Cherapunji, known as the place for the highest rainfall in the world, has witnessed depletion of its topsoil. During the rainy season the heavy sediment loads get washed down the hillslopes and result in floods in the plains of Bangladesh below. The system of cascading reservoirs and the use of the vetiver grass to
reclaim the top soil and arrest erosion during rains could be a viable solution that can be explored. A joint collaborative project between the bordering districts of Meghalaya and Bangladesh could well draw upon the experience of the Royal Study Centres for developing community based measures using the vetiver grass and reservoir systems. This could lessen the harmful impact of erosion and top-soil depletion and also contribute to better management of the sediment load of flood waters flowing into Bangladesh. It can also create tourism based activities benefitting communities on both sides of the border. In the context of Meghalaya, there is a need for community leaders to take up such projects to mitigate the recurrent feuds between the government and the community over the use of land resources. Some of the traditional institutions of the hill tribes - Nokmas in Garo Hills and Syiems in Khasi Hills - could also be explored to this end, but their capacity building will be a necessary requisite.

Key ideas on exchange and collaboration that can be explored:

- **Vetiver for soil restoration:** The idea of Vetiver cultivation to arrest erosion and restore the quality of the soil can be adopted in some parts of the North Eastern hills, particularly in Meghalaya where deforestation is leading to soil erosion and degradation. Specific learning and replication of such techniques can be initiated.

- **Resource, Demonstration and Training Centre in the form of a Friendship Park at the India-Bangladesh Border:** The Royal Study Centres are worthy examples of curating and convergence of various disciplines, departments, activities and knowledge resources that facilitate training, practical learning and capacity building of communities on various pertinent issues, leading to sustainable development and income generation. A similar initiative could be thought of around the India-Bangladesh border with agriculture, forest conservation, tourism and commerce forming the main planks of engagement.
PHOTO GALLERY
Representatives from India-Bangladesh-Bhutan delegation team and Huai Sai, Royal Development Study Centre, Thailand

Presentations with delegates at the Roundtable in Bangkok on the 5th of October, 2018

Delegates were divided into groups to brainstorm and propose reforms on specific topics.
The community living inside the Huai Sai, Royal Development Study Centre, actively participate in the restoration project. They are an important part of the entire programme as they maintain the upkeep.

Various plantations at the Huai Sai, Royal Development Study Centre
Low cost watering system for the Vetiver grass which helps maintain soil moisture

Representative from Huai Sai, Royal Development Study Centre explaining how they preserve the soil fertility

Various plantations at the Huai Sai, Royal Development Study Centre
Asian Confluence initiates, stimulates and accelerates revival of the shared civilizational values between the peoples of India and her immediate and extended neighbourhood in order to strengthen our intellectual, economic, technological, political and security ties, and thus ensure that we become dependable and involved partners for the growth of all countries in emerging Asia.

The organisation is headquartered in Shillong, Meghalaya, India, as an initiative of Divya Jeevan Foundation which works through research, training, advocacy and exchange programs to empower the ‘Third Space’ towards creating better understanding of the Eastern South Asian region. It promotes an open “Third space” beyond government and industry for cultural, economic and intellectual exchanges towards creating better understanding of the North Eastern and Eastern region of India in the larger context of India as an emerging player in East Asian geopolitics and stable partner in the prosperity of the Indo Pacific Region. The organisation operates using the lens of the following two main viewpoints:

- The region as a confluence of geographies connected by the rivers and shared waters;
- The region as a confluence of ideas, identities, cultures and civilisations

Through its activities and initiatives, the organisation aims to provide an opportunity for civil society to enhance people to people contact between India and her immediate and extended neighbours in Asia and also encourage a better understanding of the cultural and socio-political issues of the region that actually are the driving force behind India’s “Act East Policy”. It aims to do this by promoting research and interest in the region facilitating economic and intellectual exchanges, educational tourism, cultural tourism, creation of “out of the box” livelihood generation by promoting eco-friendly products and services, impetus to green industries aimed at economic development by forging a network of civil society organizations working on similar objectives. The overall aim is to empower the ‘Third Space’ to convert opportunities into collaborations and conflicts into confluence.

The Heinrich Böll Stiftung, India is a German foundation and part of the Green political movement that has developed worldwide as a response to the traditional politics of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism. We are a green think-tank and an international policy network, our main tenets are ecology and sustainability, democracy and human rights, self-determination and justice. We place particular emphasis on gender democracy, meaning social emancipation and equal rights for women and men. We are also committed to equal rights for cultural and ethnic minorities. Finally, we promote non-violence and proactive peace policies. To achieve our goals, we seek strategic partnerships with others who share our values.

Our namesake, Heinrich Böll, personifies the values we stand for: protection of freedom, civic courage, tolerance, open debate, and the valuation of art and culture as independent spheres of thought and action.

Our India Liaison Office was established in 2002 in New Delhi. Working with governmental and non-governmental local project partners we support India’s democratic governance through informed national and international dialogue processes with a view to enhance the diversity of green thinking.

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