

Participatory water resource management in Thailand: Where are the local communities?

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Abstract

In Thailand's water sector the concept of '*karn-mee-soun-roum*' (participation) has been strongly advocated since the late 1990s with the introduction of the 1997 Constitution. Decentralization has also been promoted with the target to devolve power from the central to local governments, particularly the *tambon* (sub-district) administrative organizations (TAOs). In 2002, the Department of Water Resources (DWR) was established, aiming at managing water resources with emphasis on enhanced public participation. To achieve its goal, one of the DWR's nationwide projects is to introduce the river basin as a territorial and administrative unit for water resource management with a river basin management working group/committee for each river basin.

This paper aims to explore the implementation of the DWR's river basin management concept and discusses its implications for local water user groups using the Mae Sa River Basin Management Working Group (RBMWG), located in the northern Chiang Mai province and the first of its kind in Thailand, as a case. Particular emphasis is placed on the roles of TAOs envisioned to be key players in translating the river basin management effort at the local level. To this end, participant observation in the RBMWG had been conducted from July 2006 to September 2007. Meetings of selected member TAOs of the RBMWG were observed. Protocols of meetings of the RBMWG and selected TAOs as well as related documents were also collected. Data were also obtained from informal discussions with individual officials involved in this project.

Based on the data collected, it was observed that the organizational structure of the RBMWG is dominated by state agencies, accounting for more than a third of the total members. With their rigid bureaucratic boundaries, these state agencies largely passively participated in the RBMWG meetings. As regards the TAOs, it was found that their participation level is limited due to their administrative structure and mandates. Local communities and local water user groups, the main stakeholders in rural water management, are thus far not directly represented in the RBMWG. The paper discusses opportunities and challenges of strengthening representation of local stakeholders in the RBMWG and enhancing the dialog between local stakeholders, TAOs and state agencies.

Key words: *water resource management, participation, local communities, local government, Thailand*

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1997 Constitution, albeit short lived¹, has triggered a profound change in many strata of Thai society. With its 'people-centered' emphasis, the concept of *karn-mee-soun-roum* (participation) has been strongly advocated by civil society groups and slowly taken up by state agencies. It also provided a foundation for a decentralization of power to the local government, particularly the *tambon* (sub-district) administrative organizations (TAOs). With this effort, various tasks together with budget and personnel from the central administration have been transferred to the local government.

Thailand's water sector which has long been dominated by a myriad of largely uncoordinated state agencies has also seen a move towards more participatory policies. The Royal Irrigation Department (RID), for instance, has campaigned for public participation in water management as part of its mission. A major development in the Thai water sector was the establishment of the Department of Water Resources (DWR) in 2002 under the newly created Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE). Founded amid the rising calls for enhanced participation in natural resource management and public projects, it is charged with the task of managing water resources with a particular emphasis on public participation.

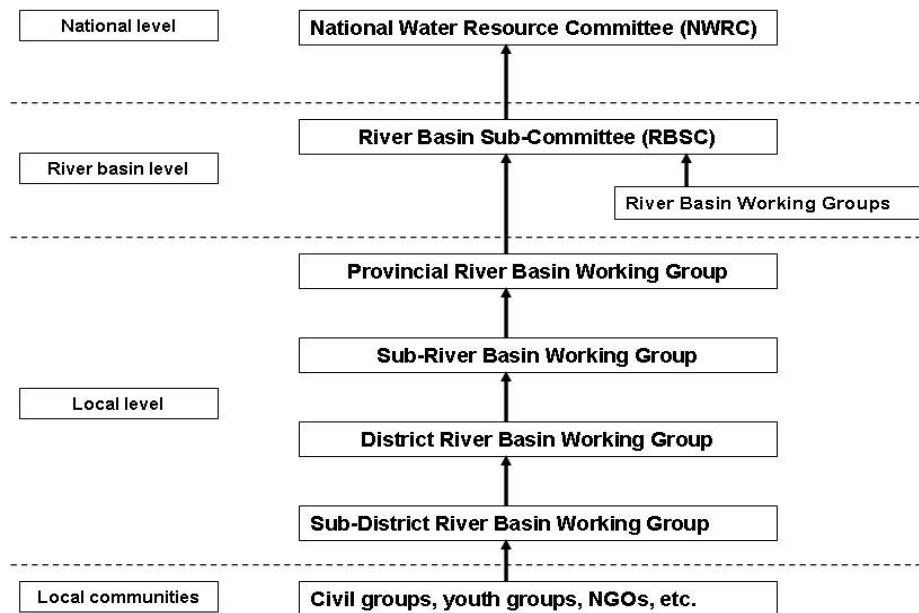
Accordingly, DWR has developed a policy for water resource management in the form of a committee or working group for each river basin. It is envisioned that all concerned stakeholders will be brought into this new governing body to collectively manage water resources in their respective river basin. This participatory approach requires the DWR line agencies responsible for this project, the River Basin Committee Offices (RBCOs), not only to collaborate with a group of stakeholders from one sector, but the stakeholders from different sectors – state agencies, private and civil groups, and local government organizations. Since 2003, DWR has implemented this new approach in 25 main river basins, covering the entire country. This paper aims to explore how the DWR river basin management approach is implemented in one of its pilot river basin project with a focus on the roles of the local stakeholders involving in this project.

2. CURRENT WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT APPROACH IN THAILAND

The Department of Water Resources (DWR) is now the main state agency dealing with water resource management in the country. It has executed its official duty in this regard using the Office of the Prime Minister's Regulation on National Water Resource Management (1989, 2002, and 2007). The 2002 Regulation states that water resources are to be managed using the river basin as a territorial and administrative unit with a committee as a management organization at three different levels: national, river basin and local (DWR 2006) (Figure 1).

¹ The so-called "People's Constitution" of 1997 was dissolved following a military coup in September 2006. During the consecutive military-installed administration a new constitution was drafted and endorsed through a public referendum in August 2007. It has been criticized for containing less participatory elements than its predecessor.

Figure 1: Water resource management organizations



Source: adapted from DWR (2006, 10)

At the national level, there is the National Water Resources Committee (NWRC) supervising all river basins, while at the river basin level, the river basin sub-committees (RBSCs) are responsible for water resource management in the respective river basin. Currently, there are 29 river basin sub-committees for 25 main river basins², covering the entire country. Water Resources Regional Offices under DWR act as secretariat of the sub-committees. In practice, Water Regional Offices have their sub-units to be responsible for the respective river basins and act as their secretariat. The 2007 Regulation abolishes the river basin sub-committees and orders that each main river basin has one river basin committee appointed by NWRC. Once the re-structuring process is completed, there will be 25 river basin committees and 25 respective river basin committee offices (RBCOs).

For the local level which falls within the river basin area, there are the local river basin working groups, representing the provincial, sub-basin, district, and sub-district level. Also, in each river basin, there are three river basin working groups responsible for three aspects of the river basin management: 1) integrated river basin planning, 2) information and 3) public relations and participation.

The members of RBSCs, the river basin working groups and the local river basin working groups represent the public and non-public sector and assume the position by appointment. For the public sector, the members of the respective RBSC and the working groups are representatives of governmental offices relevant for solving

² Some main river basins are sub-divided into parts as they cover the large areas. These divided parts and the remained main river basins are in total 29 river basins; thus, there are 29 RBSCs in stead of 25.

problems in the respective river basin. In case of the non-public sector, the committee/working group members are representatives of the main five groups existing in the river basin area: 1) farmers, 2) business or industry, 3) academics or knowledgeable persons, 4) NGOs working on natural resources and the environment, and 5) local government (DWR 2006).

RBSCs, the river basin working groups, and the local river basin working groups are charged with several tasks. For example, the RBSCs' main tasks include providing advice regarding water resource management to NWRC, developing a plan or coordinate a river basin management planning with other government agencies, determining the priority and quantity of water use and allocation measures, and monitoring and evaluating performance of government agencies concerned with water resource management in the river basin. As regards the sub-district river basin working groups, the lowest management level, their main tasks are to propose project proposals to the district river basin working groups, to collect sub-district data and to solve conflicts and problems regarding water resources occurring in the area (DWR 2006).

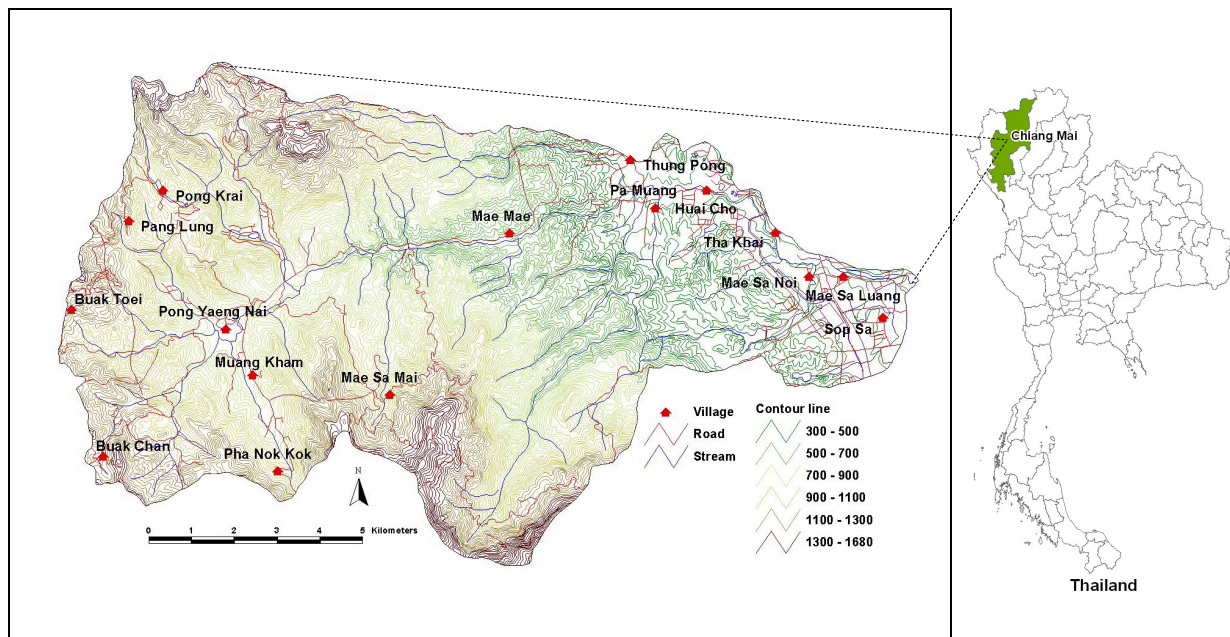
By 2003, DWR completed the establishment of 29 RBSCs for 25 main river basins, while their secretariat offices were set up in 2004. The river basin working groups and the local river basin working groups (provincial, sub-river basin, district and sub-district levels) were also appointed in 2004 (DWR Annual Report 2004).

Parallel to the implementation of river basin management organizations mentioned above, DWR also instructed each River Basin Committee Office (RBCO) to select a local river basin or sub-river basin located in its area as a pilot river basin. The first pilot river basin in the country was the Mae Sa local river basin, under the supervision of the Upper Ping River Basin Committee Office and the river basin management pilot project was started in 2005. Other RBCOs started to implement their river basin management pilot projects in 2006 (at the local or sub-river basin level) with a plan to extend this approach to entirely cover each main river basin later on (DWR 2007). According to an URMCO official, DWR plans that each RBCO will have two pilot projects at the sub-river basin level by the end of the 2008 fiscal year (i.e. in September 2008).

3. STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in the Mae Sa river basin located in the northern Chiang Mai province (Figure 2). It is one of the local river basins of the Ping Part II sub-river basin which is part of the Upper Ping main river basin. The Mae Sa river basin covers four sub-districts of Mae Rim district: Pong Yang, Mae Ram, Mae Sa and Don Kaew, with a total area of 140.20 km². It is populated mainly by local northern Thai and the Hmong ethnic group in the upstream highland area, and local northern Thai in the lowland downstream area. Highly commercialized agriculture, mainly production of fruits, vegetables and flowers, has been practiced in the river basin, while private businesses such as resorts and recreation centers are also significant in the area due to its proximity to the northern city Chiang Mai, which is a major tourist destination.

Figure 2: Study area: the Mae Sa river basin



Source: The Uplands Program

In December 2004, the Mae Sa river basin was selected by the Department of Water Resources (DWR) as the first pilot river basin in the country to implement its participatory approach to river basin management. The Mae Sa River Basin Pilot Project is governed by the Mae Sa River Basin Management Working Group (RBMWG), comprising of representatives from related state agencies, sub-district (*tambon*) administrative organization (TAO), private sector and civil groups. It is also supported by the special working group appointed by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE).

In this study, the focus was placed on the RBMWG. Participant observation of three meetings of the RBMWG was conducted from July 2006 – September 2007. The RBMWG meetings reports since its conception in February 2005 were also used for analysis. In addition, three TAOs (Pong Yang, Mae Ram and Mae Sa) were selected for this research. Some meetings of these TAOs were observed and their available meeting reports were gathered. Apart from these, related documents from both the RBMWG and the selected TAOs were collected. Data were also obtained from informal discussion with individual officials from The Upper Ping River Basin Management and Coordination Office (URMCO) who were involved in the river basin pilot project.

4. THE MAE SA RIVER BASIN PILOT PROJECT AND ITS WORKING GROUP

The Mae Sa local river basin is located in the responsible area of the Upper Ping River Basin Management and Coordination Office (URMCO), which also acts as a secretariat office for the pilot project. It was selected by DWR as a pilot river basin in December 2004 and the Mae Sa River Basin Pilot project was initiated, making it the first pilot project of its kind in the country. It was envisioned that there should be two

working groups at two levels: a) the special working group at the central administration level comprising representatives from related departments/ organizations, and b) the local working group with representatives from the area.

The Mae Sa River Basin Pilot Project was started by the appointment of the special working group in early February 2005. Later in the same month, the Public Promotion and Coordination Office (PPCO), which is a DWR responsible unit for river basin management, together with the special working group and URMCO organized the first meeting of the pilot project at the Mae Ram TAO. It was mentioned in this first meeting that the Mae Sa River Basin Management Working Group (RBMWG) was to be established. In the second meeting held in May 2005, RBMWG structure was concluded with Mae Rim district officer would be the chairman of RBMWG and a representative from the Water Resources Regional Office 1 (the head office of URMCO) was to serve as a secretary. The RBMWG was officially appointed by the chairman of the Upper Ping River Basin Sub-Committee in May 2005. RBMWG has 34 members, including an advisor who is a university lecturer. The members can be divided into four main groups as shown in Table 1.

The RBMWG is charged with several responsibilities, such as setting up a framework for managing the river basin, creating a five-year integrated plan and an annual action plan, and coordinating in terms of the action plans with other concerned agencies from public and private sector as well as the local government. The RBMWG performs its functions and makes decisions in a meeting, to which representatives from other non-member organizations can also be invited, if they are considered relevant for the topics to be discussed in the meeting. So far, eight meetings have been organized (including two meetings before the appointment of RBMWG) at different venues located in the river basin.

Table 1: The RBMWG members by types of sectors represented (excluding the advisor)

No.	Sector	Number of agencies/groups represented	Number of individuals
1.	Public sector	14	15
2.	Local government	4	8
3.	Private sector	4	4
4.	Civil sector (including NGOs)	6	6
	Total	28	33

Source: The Upper Ping River Basin Sub-Committee Order, dated 19 May 2005

5. PARTICIPATION IN RBMWG

RBMWG was established as part of DWR's efforts to introduce a new mechanism for managing water resource in a river basin. In an attempt to integrate all sectors into this project with an emphasis on participation of local communities as envisioned in DWR policy, a number of representatives from different agencies/organizations or groups from different sectors were appointed as the RBMWG members (Table 1). Accordingly, it is assumed that the RBMWG members will fulfill the mandates with

support from the special working group and URMCO. However, it was observed that RBMWG has not fully functioned as a governing body with its members having different contribution levels to the working groups. This is partly due to the nature of the member organizations, but also the influence from the advisor of the special working group, the ways URMCO positioned itself in the working groups and how it dealt with certain members. Detailed discussions on these issues are presented in the following sections.

5.1 Participation of the special working group members

During the first two years of the pilot project implementation (2005 – 2006), some members of the special working group which represent several departments and offices at the central administration and even international organizations such as the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) participated in the RBMWG meetings. Generally, these representatives provided information on budget schemes or projects in their respective agencies/organizations that could be allocated to the Mae Sa pilot project. For example, in the second meeting held in May 2005, a representative from Department of Agricultural Extension explained the department plans for the fiscal year 2005, 2006 and 2007 which parts of the plans may be mobilized for the pilot project. For the meetings held in 2007, no members from the special working group participated, apart from an advisor of this working group who attended all the meetings.

The meeting reports and own observations in the RBMWG meetings provide evidence that the participation of the members of the special working group were to the level of information sharing (cf. Mostert 2003). The only notable exception was the (academic) advisor of the special working group who has played a leading role in the RBMWG and its meetings. Generally, after an invited ceremonial chairman gave a short speech and declared the meeting opened, the advisor would take up the role in moderating the meeting, i.e. facilitating the discussions, assigning the tasks to participating members, particularly the TAO representatives and the working group secretary, and sometimes arbitrarily making decisions for the working group. Together with the working group secretary (the URMCO director), the advisor essentially dominated the RBMWG meeting. Indeed, the advisor and the working group secretary were usually the ones who did most of the talking, while other participating members remained largely passive and expressed their opinions only when asked. Apparently, this meeting atmosphere does not encourage the dialog among the participating members; some of whom are lay persons, and in effect hampers the initial step toward a collaborative relationship among the members.

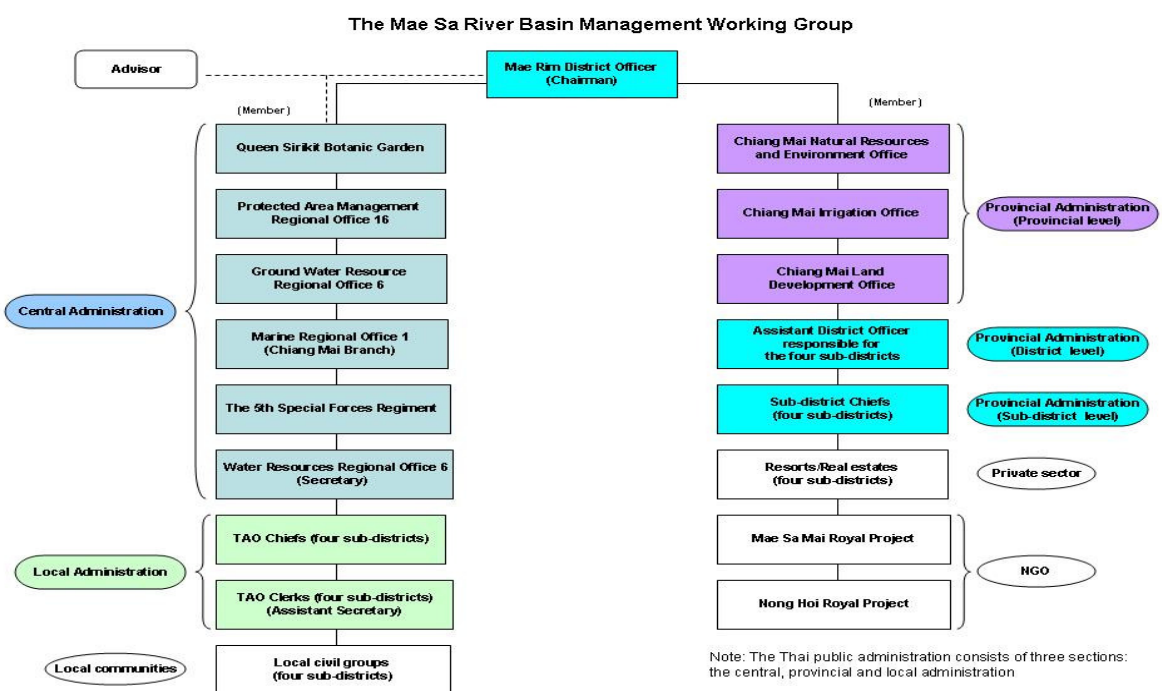
5.2 Participation of the public sector members

From Table 1, it can be seen that the RBMWG structure is dominated by members from the public sector, accounting for more than a third of the total members. State agencies represented in the RBMWG include for example the Ground Water Resource Regional Office, the Provincial Irrigation Office, the Provincial Natural Resources and Environment Office and the military. It should be noted that all state agencies involved, except the Mae Rim District Office, are from either the central or provincial administration (the provincial level) which does not directly deal with issues at the district level. In the Thai public administration context, the central

administration is operated under the centralization principle with ministries, departments and their line agencies. Based on the deconcentration principle, state agencies at the central administration level also delegate the authority to their line agencies to operate at the provincial administration section, which covers the provincial, district, sub-district and village levels (Rangsiyokrit 2003). TAOs which are part of the local administration section is governed by the decentralization principle where they have certain autonomy to operate in their responsible areas (Rangsiyokrit 2003). The involved agencies in RBMWG with their respective administration domain can be illustrated in Figure 3.

Notwithstanding their numerical dominance in the RBMWG structure, the state agencies concerned, except the URMCO, play virtually no role in the working group and their participation is largely passive. This is mainly due to a rigid structure of the bureaucratic system where the state agencies are required to operate according to their own rules and regulations which leaves little room for negotiation with other stakeholder groups.

Figure 3: RBMWG members (state agencies and TAOs) with their respective administration domain



Source: own illustration

From a collaboration point of view, which DWR is attempting to foster in RBMWG, it can be stated that the collaboration among the state agencies which are the working members is mandated one (Rodríguez, Langley and Béland 2007). That is, DWR is trying in a way to impose collaboration on these agencies. Following their view that mandated collaboration is a political process where power, value and interest are essential for building a collaborative relationship (Rodríguez, Langley and Béland 2007), these factors can help further explain a limited participation and contribution of these state agency members.

Based on Hardy and Phillip's (1998) conception of power dependencies, Rodríguez, Langley and Béland (2007) suggest that three main factors: formal authority, critical or scarce resources and discursive legitimacy can be used to "understand the social construction of collaboration in an interorganizational space (p.155)." In other words, an agency aiming to foster collaboration with other agencies should have these factors. Considering the case study, however, it appears that DWR as a mandating agency does not possess these factors. For the formal authority, DWR is a newly established department operating under the Office of the Prime Minister's Order on water resource management, has no authority to request or influence other state agencies to collaborate in its river basin management efforts, including those involved in the pilot river basin project under question. Regarding the resource factor, DWR has allocated only small budget for the pilot project; mainly for its administrative work such as organizing meetings, but no substantial budget for implementing the river basin development plans. Instead, participating agencies like TAOs are encouraged to find financial supports from other sources to implement the plans they have proposed. For the discursive legitimacy in the water sector context, DWR as a new agency has not yet established itself with a strong authority and status quo for water resource management. Royal Irrigation Department remains largely a dominant agency in this regard. An absence of these essential factors regarding power dependencies has partly contributed to DWR difficult task in inducing collaboration among other state agencies (and also TAOs) in the RBMWG setting.

In terms of interest, it is apparent that the state agencies members do not share a common interest in river basin management with the DWR. This is partly due to the fact that each agency has fully committed itself with its own mandates. The administrative levels which the state agency members are affiliated to also influence their interest. Almost all agencies involved in RBMWG are either from the central or provincial administration levels; hence, they tend to have limited knowledge of and interest in what is going on at the local level, like in the Mae Sa river basin. For the value of the state agency members, the data collected did not allow a discussion in this aspect. However, it is still on the safe side to state that in general the Thai state agencies are not fully appreciated the participation concept, given a long history of a centralization of power and a top-down management approach. A recent research in the same study area indicates that state agencies active in the area, some are members of RBMWG, are not in practice open up for participation (Heyd and Neef 2006).

Among the state agencies which are the working group members, URMCO is the most active as it is a DWR agency responsible for the project. Currently, URMCO like other RBSCs, has two main duties: a) functioning as an operation unit of DWR to implement the river basin management effort, including pilot river basin projects, and b) serving as a secretariat office for the river basin committees and working groups. In RBMWG, URMCO served as secretary on behalf of Water Resources Regional Office 1, its head office, with the director representing in the working group. Thus, it is no surprise to observe that URMCO plays a central role in the pilot project and RBMWG.

Regardless of its official role as a secretary of the RBMWG confined to supporting tasks, it is clear that URMCO positioned itself rather as an agency responsible for the pilot project and has tried to exert its influence on RBMWG. URMCO has exerted its influence on RBMWG through its leading role in organizing the RBMWG meetings (e.g. preparing agendas and selecting a venue). The URMCO director as a working group secretary, along with the advisor to the special working group, also plays an influential role in conducting each meeting. In general, he was the one who presented crucial information to the meeting and explained the topics and activities to be discussed. As a result, the RBMWG has in practice a limited functionality as the governing body to manage the Mae Sa river basin and could achieve only some of its mandates only under a strong influence from both URMCO and the advisor of the special working group as discussed above.

It was found that the formal meetings are the only forum where the RBMWG members could interact. According to a URMCO official responsible for the pilot project, no other channel has been accessible to communicate among the RBMWG members during the intervals between the meetings, except URMCO sending a meeting report to the working group members and those invited participants who attended the meetings. An informal meeting was occasionally organized, but only for a few members who involved in a specific issue, such as the river basin fund project. Thus, the RBMWG meeting is very important; indeed, the only channel where the members can communicate face to face. However, it could be seen that the meeting was strategically used by URMCO to mainly inform RBMWG members, monitor the tasks previously assigned and approve certain issues, rather than a space where the representatives could exchange information and learn about each other's situations/problems as documented in various literatures on collaborative river basin or natural resource management (e.g. Samuelson et. al. 2005).

The frequency of the meetings to be held in each fiscal year is determined by the budget allocation and the time of budget transfer. It could be observed that the number of meetings was reduced by half as compared to the first year of the pilot project; only two meetings were held in each of the past fiscal years, 2005/6 and 2006/7. In this current fiscal year (October 2007 – September 2008), no meeting has been organized so far due to a delay in budget transfer from DWR to URMCO. This situation, thus, further limits the interaction of the RBMWG members. The pilot project and its working group and all on-going activities are left out in the cold as no other channels are established to continue the work.

As a line agency, URMCO also received policy directives from DWR via PPCO on how to implement the pilot river basin. These include, for example, creating a river basin management plan, gathering local knowledge for river basin management and establishing a network. Therefore, decisions for the main activities have already been made at the top level and URMCO only implemented the activities so as to fulfill its official duties. Viewed from this angle, the actual implementation of RBMWG contradicts with the vision that RBMWG would be a new approach to bring about a participatory river basin management with the emphasis on integration of all concerned stakeholders and participation of the local communities as often stated in the meetings. The way the pilot project and its working group still largely remains under the traditional top down approach assigned to URMCO by PPCO. Participation in their view appears to be measured only in terms of attendance of the working

group members at the formal meetings. These are the major criteria stated in the policy directive along with the documented outcomes (e.g. visions, annual action plan, progress report), whereas little attention is paid to the processes by which these outcomes are generated.

5.3 Participation of local government organizations

Apart from the involved state agencies, there are also other RBMWG members, which can be considered as coming from the local communities located in the river basin. These include the members of the local government organizations, i.e. Pong Yang TAO, Mae Ram TAO, Mae Sa TAO and Don Kaew TAO; the private sector which represents real estates and resorts in the four sub-districts and the civil sector with the representatives from the four sub-district communities and two NGOs active in the area. The following sections will discuss the roles and participation of these representatives from 'the local communities', starting with the local government organizations.

As mentioned above, there are four sub-districts situated in the Mae Sa river basin. Each sub-district has a local government organization called sub-district (*tambon*) administrative organization or TAO. Each TAO is managed by a TAO chief executive who is elected by the population in a particular sub-district. The power of the TAO chief executive is checked and balanced by the TAO council where its members are representatives from each village in the sub-districts and be in the position by election. The management of TAO is assisted by various sections whose staff are civil servants and headed by the TAO clerk. Based on the RBMWG structure, TAO chief executives from the four TAOs are the members of the working groups, while the TAO clerks served as assistant secretary.

With a transfer of the tasks of small-scale water source development to the local government organizations, particularly TAOs (Sattarasart 2002), it is clear that DWR expects them to be the implementing units for river basin management plans at the local level. This situation was also found in the case of the Mae Sa River Basin Pilot Project, where the four TAOs have been viewed by PPCO and URMCO as the main partners from the beginning of the project. However, as mentioned above, with the URMCO playing a central role in directing the RBMWG, it could be seen that the roles of the four TAOs (or precisely TAO chief executives) are rather the followers who usually receive requests or assignments from the advisor of the special working group or URMCO through the RBMWG meetings.

It should be noted that only the TAO chief executives and TAO clerks are involved in the RBMWG, but none from the TAO council. As any executive decisions by the TAO chief executive and budget plans must be approved by the TAO council, the participation and commitment of the TAO chief executives and TAO clerks in RBMWG is restricted by this structure. The TAO chief executives and their management are also expected to fulfill the mandates of contributing to the development of their sub-districts which are not necessary aligned with the river basin pilot project's activities; for example, infrastructure development and community health. A good example in this regard is the river basin fund initiative. It was approved in the RBMWG meeting that the river basin fund would be established with the initial fund from URMCO, the Mae Rim Water Works and the four TAOs. It

was agreed that each TAO would contribute 50,000 Thai Baht to the fund. Based on the budget regulation for the fiscal year 2008 from the selected three TAOs³, only one TAO (Mae Ram TAO) has allocated the budget as a grant to support the river basin fund. A URMCO's official responsible for the pilot project explained that the Mae Sa River Basin Fund had to make a request for financial support to the TAOs first; and with this TAO chief executives could then make a budget request to the TAO council. Consequently, the initial fund collection from the TAOs will be delayed for at least one fiscal year, if the TAO councils will approve the budget request from the TAO chief executives at all.

5.4 Participation of the private sector members

The private sector in RBMWG represents the real estates and resorts prevalent in the area. One representative from this business group from the four sub-districts should be a member of the RBMWG. According to an URMCO's official responsible for the pilot project, there is no official appointment nor any provision specifying who is the representative of this group in each sub-district. A general practice is that the URMCO asks the TAOs to invite a person from this group to attend the meeting.

Thus, it can be stated that the private sector plays a rather insignificant role in the RBMWG. URMCO also shows no interest to improve the representation and involvement of this sector as no effort has been made to specify a representative who will regularly come to the meeting or to directly interact with the group as a whole, rather than via the TAOs, to learn more about this sector. However, in the last two RBMWG meetings, URMCO has tried to involve more large business firms in the pilot project. This movement was due to the fact that the river basin fund issue was discussed in these meetings and it was intended that some fees would be collected from these business firms. Again, URMCO contacted the firms through the TAOs. This indicates that it is unlikely that URMCO will change its approach in communicating with the business sector and it is very much dependent on the TAOs to do the job in this regard.

5.5 Participation of the civil sector

The last group that could be considered as representing the local communities in the RBMWG is the civil sector. In this sector, a sub-district is considered as one community and one representative is supposed to be a working group member. Like the private sector, it is not specified who is a representative of this group. Furthermore, there is no clear statement which groups/local organizations could fit into this sector. The same method of communication as used for the private sector is also employed for this stakeholder group; that is, URMCO would ask the TAOs to invite a person in their sub-district to attend the meeting as a representative of the sub-district civil sector. Although it is ambiguous what this sector really is, it might be considered also as a stakeholder group representing the general public in the sub-districts involved in the pilot project. Thus, this sector is, in principle, no less important than other sectors. However, it could be observed that no representatives from this sector regularly attended the meeting, thus the participation and influence

³ A) The Budget Regulation for the fiscal year 2008, Pong Yang TAO.
B) The Budget Regulation for the fiscal year 2008, Mae Ram TAO.
C) The Budget Regulation for the fiscal year 2008, Mae Sa TAO.

on decision-making from this sector is almost entirely absent from the RBMWG. Similar to the case of the private sector, URMCO seems to have no interests to improve the involvement from this stakeholder group.

Considered under the civil sector in this paper, there are also two NGOs represented as institutional members in the RBMWG. As these two NGOs are working closely with the Hmong ethnic communities, they could formally be regarded as the representatives of these communities. However, with their mandates to improve the ethnic minority livelihoods by focusing on vegetable and fruit production, the two NGOs only passively participate in the meetings and made virtually no contribution to the pilot project.

In sum, among the three stakeholder groups that can be considered as the representatives of the local communities to RBMWG, namely local government organizations, the private sector and the civil sector, only the local government organizations could make limited contributions to river basin management, such as designing local water source development plans and helping to establish the river basin fund. The other two groups have been largely ignored by URMCO although they are officially included in the RBMWG. Thus, it can be concluded that in practice the local communities at large are not represented in the RBMWG and the impact of their participation in the collaborative effort is minimal. In fact, the overall participation from the four sectors in the RBMWG can be generally described as being only at the information level (Mostert 2003) where the members get informed by URMCO and only on certain aspects where their opinions are sought or their actions are required.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DWR'S APPROACH TO PARTICIPATORY WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Participation has been part and parcel of the official policy rhetoric of Thai state agencies since the late 1990s. As regards the DWR, it has developed a policy that there will be an integration of the state agencies concerned and the participation from local communities in water resource management in the form of a committee or working group for a respective river basin. In other words, DWR has attempted to introduce a collaborative management approach where all relevant stakeholders including concerned state agencies, private businesses, civil sector and local government organization work together to manage water resources. The case study discussed above however illustrated that there are at least three main challenges that DWR and its line agencies responsible for river basin management have to overcome so as to materialize the policy.

As can be seen from the RBMWG case, the most challenging issue for the working group is the limited role and participation from the members. Of all members, only URMCO played an active role as it is the responsible agency for the pilot project, while others largely passively participated. A major reason for this situation is the rigid administrative structure and mandates of the state agencies and local government organizations involved. URMCO's own administrative structure is also responsible for the situation as it has to follow the policy directives from DWR. This in effect has forced URMCO to opt for acting as a pilot project implementing agency

rather a support role of a secretariat office and directed RBMWG in a way to fulfill its official duties. The situation like this might not be limited only to URMCO as other river basin coordination and management offices (RBCMOs) also are implementing the river basin projects with the same policy directives as URMCO's.

With a long history of centralization and fragmentation between state agencies resulting in their rigid boundaries, it will take time for the agencies to fully appreciate participation and collaborate with others. However, DWR as an agency striving to enhance participation in river basin management efforts can re-adjust its policy directives in such a way that will encourage RBCMOs to foster collaborative relationships among the river basin working members in their pilot projects. For example, processes of social learning (Schusler et al. 2003) could be encouraged as one of the activities for the pilot project. More channels for both formal and informal communication should also be promoted as it is shown by the case study that formal meetings are currently the only way the working group members can interact face to face.

Another challenge observed is that a dialog between the local stakeholders (private and civil sector, and TAOs) and other state agencies other than URMCO is very rare in the RBMWG meeting, though it is the only interacting forum. This is due partly to a meeting atmosphere dominated by the strong facilitator (i.e. the advisor of the special working group) in the case study concerned. The central role played by the URMCO director also influenced the working group members and invited participants, particularly those who are lay persons from the local communities. Although facilitation and leadership are needed to move a collaborative forum forward, a dominant facilitator or chairperson can also damage the effort (Warner 2006). Thus, a role adjustment from the part of the advisor and URMCO director will help to create a supporting environment for dialog during the meeting.

A preference to engage with certain members can lead to a limited dialog among the working group members. It was observed that the two facilitators (the advisor and the URMCO director) often had a direct discussion with the TAO members during the course of the meeting, while others only listened to the conversation. Generally, the other members also had not really been encouraged to share information or express their opinion. In fact, information disseminated during the RBMWG meeting was mainly about the activities related with the TAOs and not so much about the problems or recent developments in other members. Thus, a change in a way the meeting is conducted by allowing or encouraging all members to engage in a discussion will open up the meeting for more dialog. As a result, a deliberation which leads to social learning and creates room for negotiation might be achieved (Schusler et al. 2003), thereby increasing the likelihood of a collaborative relationship.

It can be seen also from the RBMWG setup that some relevant stakeholders, particularly those from the private and civil sector are in practice not represented in the working group. As previously shown, although the seats on the working group structure were allocated to the private and civil sectors, their actual representation has largely been neglected by URMCO. No attempt has been made by URMCO to help the private sector and the sub-district civil groups from the civil sector to be more organized. This situation starkly contradicts with rhetoric of enhancing

participation by the local communities in the effort as they were largely absent from the forum. Thus, it is an urgent task for DWR and URMCO to ensure a proper representation for the local communities, both the private and the civil sector.

It is widely recognized that many local communities in Thailand are well organized for managing natural resources. Thus, numerous local community organizations exist including in the Upper Ping River Basin (e.g. Rakyuttitham 2000). This provides an opportunity for the URMCO to include these groups into the RBMWG structure or involve them as invited participants in the setup. Many local organizations such as river basin networks, water user groups and local irrigation organizations possess an extensive experience in water resource management and collaborative work. Thus, having them involved in a state agency-led collaborative management effort like the RBMWG will bring in new perspectives and experiences to the working group. In order to enhance representation and also participation from the sub-district civil groups and private businesses, the URMCO might need also to change its approach in contacting these groups. Directly engaging with the groups, rather than relying on the TAO representatives, will enable the URMCO to better understand these stakeholders and might have a better judgment on who should be included into the forum.

7. CONCLUSION

The RBMWG case study illustrated an attempt to implement the DWR's participatory water resource management approach on the ground has confronted with various challenges. They have been caused mainly by the nature of the members which are the state agencies and the local organizations involved in the working groups and by the URMCO itself. Based on the case, it is apparent that the local communities have largely been excluded from the working group which initially intended to enhance participation from these local stakeholders. This situation is due mainly to the URMCO's lack of interest in engaging with these groups, particularly the sub-district civil groups in the civil sectors and the private businesses.

At this early stage of implementation of this approach for participatory water resource management, the DWR and its line agencies, i.e. RBCMOs, needs to consider the ways to ensure a fair representation and meaningful participation from the local communities as they are the main stakeholders in the areas. The role of RBCMOs in the river working groups for the river basin pilot projects also needs to be re-adjusted to allow these new river basin management bodies to fully function and evolve, so that lessons can be learned and applied to other local and sub-river basins.

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