

Water management in a haze

Sunday 8 April 2007, by [Chang Noi](#) (Date first published: 19 March 2007).

The forest are smouldering. The north is choking on the haze. In the background, you can hear a rustling sound. Bureaucrats are dusting off big-budget proposals for rescuing Thailand from drought. As background, it's worth looking at the recent history.

Four years ago, the National Water Resource Committee announced a grand vision that would relieve poverty, make deserts bloom, and "turn Thailand into an agricultural powerhouse." Behind the vision was a simple idea. Water would be taken away from places where there was too much, and given to places where there was too little. The results expected were little less than astounding. Over the past 200 years, the engineers had brought irrigation to only 22 million out of 131 million rai of farmland. But under this new project, the irrigated area would be doubled in five years, and quadrupled eighteen years after that. Virtually every farmer was promised tap water and enough for farming.

The scale, the vision, and the promise was eye-catching. The Thaksin government further raised the project's profile by branding it as the Water Grid, brilliantly borrowing the metaphor of the electricity distribution system. It was easy to imagine water flowing all around the country as power now flows from the rows of great striding pylons down to the tangled cabling on every street.

Everything about the project was big. The minister announced that 30 or 40 million people would benefit. The number of new reservoirs to be dug would exceed 25,000. The amount of earth-moving required was enough to excite every construction contractor and truck owner in the land. The length of piping was incalculable. And the total cost figure had both scale and elegance: a cool five billion US dollars.

Such scale generates its own momentum. The environment minister who mumbled doubts about the whole thing was soon packing his bags. His successor by-passed the usual procedures for public hearings and other forms of scrutiny. Academics who raised objections were brushed aside. When Pramote Maiklad, a former irrigation chief and key figure in royal irrigation projects, suggested the scheme was "not cost-effective nor feasible in terms of engineering techniques," he could not be heard above the chorus of salivation.

The main obstacle to the project was not the critics but the enthusiasts. In the rush to get a piece of the action, different groups jammed up the doorways. The Irrigation Department and the Department of Water Resources came up with rival versions of the scheme. The two agencies had to convene a peace conference as their in-fighting threatened to derail the whole sumptuous scheme.

While the project was big on vision, big on political value, big on budget, big on benefits for the agencies involved, and big on profits for contractors, it lacked a few important elements. Most of all, it simply lacked enough water.

The biggest benefit was expected in the poor dry northeast. The amount of rain which falls in the region and fills the local rivers is simply not enough to spread around. Way back in 1956, consultants concluded that the only way to irrigate Isan would be to use water from the Mekong. But the dam proposed at that time would have displaced almost half a million people, and the scheme

had to be dropped. All subsequent irrigation projects in the northeast have attempted to use the little water available locally with a bit more efficiency. But they have not been very successful. The Rasi Salai dam increased salination of the soil and prompted big local protests. The Pak Mun scheme wrecked local fisheries and provoked national protests. Similar schemes on the Songkram River were howled down. Weir projects along the Chi River were under-utilized because farmers didn't think it worth paying for the water. Similar projects along the Mun were abandoned because the estimated rate of return was too low. Many of the ponds build under the Green Isan project are useless.

Where to find the water? The Water Grid quietly hoped to suck the water out of Laos. It planned to build dams on rivers inside Laos, and pump the water through a pipe under the Mekong. Similarly in the north, the Water Grid planned to get water from the Salween River in Burma. Even among the boosters of the scheme inside the bureaucracy there were many people who doubted such diversion schemes would ever be politically acceptable.

But water was not the only thing lacking. Irrigation only brings a benefit if there are people to use the water. But people are draining away from Isan. In recent years, farmers have shifted to using labour-saving methods like broadcasting, hired mechanical harvesters because they cannot get labour, and brought in workers from Laos. More water is unlikely to reverse this trend. In addition, the areas expected to be irrigated by the Grid in Isan are vulnerable to salination. For these and other reasons, the projected returns on public investment in irrigation in Isan are hopelessly low. It makes far more sense to invest in education, electricity, roads, or agricultural research.

The Water Grid was a very big idea that made very little sense. Parts of the project were excellent, but the whole thing got overblown. The point here is not to condemn the Thaksin government. The problem existed long before, and will continue after. With the fall of Thaksin, the Water Grid may be dead, but its ghost is already walking. On the first signs of this year's drought, the Irrigation Department promptly claimed "more dams are needed," and vaunted its scaled-down version of the Grid scheme.

Water management is hugely important for Thailand. With global warming and local environmental decline, the oscillation between drought and flood is getting worse. But the potential profits from water management schemes tends to distort the process of research and planning. Bureaucrats, politicians, consultants, and contractors have mutual interests in blocking proper public scrutiny. Scale takes over from sense. And the haze gets worse.

P.S.

* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/watergrid.htm>