The effectiveness of multi-stakeholder dialogues on water: reflections on experiences in the Rhine, Mekong, and Ganga-Brahmaputhra-Meghna river basins

Patrick Huntjens[a*], Louis Lebel[b], Brian Furze[c]

[a]*The Hague Humanitarian Cooperative for Water (HHCW),*
formerly with *The Hague Institute for Global Justice,*
E-mail: patrickhuntjens@yahoo.com

[b]*Unit for Social and Environmental Research (USER),*
Chiang Mai University, Thailand
E-mail:louis@sea-user.org
llebel@loxinfo.co.th

[c]*International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN),* India
E-mail: brian.furze@gmail.com

Abstract

Multi-stakeholder dialogues aim to create and support spaces, in which, meaningful conversations can take place among diverse stakeholder groups. A key notion is that dialogues can inform, and help shape, more formal negotiation and decision-making processes; by bringing in a wider range of perspectives on needs, impacts and options, and having them deliberated openly. We studied three different dialogues about water resources management and development issues, in three parts of the world: The Rhine, Mekong, and Ganga-Brahmaputhra-Meghna river basins. In each case, the primary unit of analysis was a particular dialogue or cluster of closely related dialogues, while recognizing that these were triggered by different factors (context related), and usually part of a larger process. A set of shared questions were used to guide the analysis of each case, covering initiation, format, content, and outcomes. Effectiveness was evaluated in terms of evidence of meaningful conversations, shared understanding, and influence on negotiations or decisions. Effectiveness of dialogues is clearly dependent upon not just the quality of participation and facilitation, as is widely recognized, but also on the preparation and follow-up actions by conveners and participants around main events. It also appears that, contextual factors may modify substantially the forms and effectiveness of common dialogue strategies, which deserves further systematic exploration. This study shows it is possible to draw comparative insights about the dialogues, by using relatively simple questions about principle events.

Key words: multi-stakeholder dialogues; effectiveness of dialogues; dialogue strategies; water resources management; water resources development; Rhine Basin; IJsseldelta; Mekong Basin; Ganga-Brahmaputhra-Meghna Basin; Ecosystems for Life

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* Corresponding author

1. Introduction

Multi-stakeholder dialogues or platforms aim to create and support spaces, in which, meaningful conversations can take place among diverse stakeholder groups. A key notion is that dialogues can inform, and help shape, more formal planning, negotiation, and decision-making processes; by bringing in a wider range of perspectives on needs, impacts, and options; and, having them deliberated openly. Dialogues themselves need not result in consensus, but when well conducted, should help manage conflicts, empower disadvantaged groups, and support social learning (Leeuwis & Pyburn, 2002; Warner, 2006).

In the field of water resources development and management, multi-stakeholder dialogues have become popular. One of the early examples, The World Commission on Dams (2000) was a very large multi-stakeholder dialogue (Hemmati, 2002a, 2002b), characterized by the complexities it brought to discussions through the multi-stakeholder process. Since then, the approach has become an important component to water resources development and management, and many other organizations have convened water-related dialogues (Dore, 2007). However, expectations from dialogues are often higher than achievements, especially once participants demand more than just sharing of information and improved understanding (Warner, 2006).

Given the continuing use and mainstreaming of multi-stakeholder dialogues, and given their often contested nature, there is a continuing need to reflect upon them more critically. This is needed at both the analysis of the processes and approaches of dialogues in general, and also at the experiential level, where the realities of managing contested spaces 'on the ground' and in specific contexts is understood in greater detail.

Multi-stakeholder dialogues are highly contextual. Whilst there is already some evidence for how a few factors influence the effectiveness of dialogues, especially, with respect to selection of participants, format of events and facilitation the actual reasons behind this are found in the complexities of issues, stakeholder reationships, political power and expectations (to name a few). The very term 'multi-stakeholder' implies representation from various groups each having specific interests and experiences in the water management/development process and outcomes. In turn, this implies sets of issues related to representation of interest groups, access/inputs to decision-making, power relations between groups, recognising multiple forms of knowledge and experience and, ultimately, outcomes that have forms of 'buy-in' from stakeholders.

Who participates, is therefore a significant design and analytical issue. A stakeholder can be defined to include all persons, groups, and organizations as having or showing an interest in an issue. Conveners and actors may exclude others by narrowing the definition; for example, only considering individuals directly affected by a proposed project, or those who can formally influence an outcome. Stakeholders may include individual citizens and companies, economic and public interest groups, government bodies and experts. Some formats are only suited to small numbers of individuals, so issues of representation need to be addressed; others can handle much larger number of participants, but often at the expense of lower levels of interaction (Coulby, 2009).

One apparent risk to the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder dialogues is a high degree of 'overcrowding' of each, hitherto autonomous, policy sector as stakeholders from other policy communities demand and get entry (Richardson, 2000). Overcrowding increases

complexity, shown by examples during implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive where including too many participants made constructive work difficult (Kastens & Newig, 2008). A diverse mixture of participants places significant challenges on the conveners of a dialogue to create the appropriate spaces for all to meaningfully participate and also requires flexibility on the part of participants themselves (Schneider & Rist, 2014).

Another important set of design issues, therefore, relate to format: as meeting venue, structure, and content can all influence the attitude and confidence of participants and thus the effectiveness of dialogues (Muro & Jeffrey, 2012). In practice, there are many different ways in which interaction between multiple stakeholders, or between public and government, can be managed (Rowe & Frewer, 2005; Huitema, van de Kerkhof, Bos-Gorter, & Ovaa, 2009). Common techniques include: science-policy or public consultation workshops; expert or citizen panel debates (Huitema, Cornelisse, & Ottow, 2010); focus group consultations with distinct stakeholder groups (Faysse, Errahj, Imache, Kemmoun, & Labbaci, 2014); joint model building exercises (Huntjens, 2011, Huntjens, Ottow, & Lasage, 2014); and scenario development (Schneider & Rist, 2014). Meaningful participatory processes should results in social learning, but social learning takes time and is not inevitable (Faysse et al., 2014; Fazey et al., 2014; Muro & Jeffrey, 2012).

The knowledge content of a dialogue is also critical – what topics and issues are covered, and what knowledge participants draw on in forming their arguments. This often depends on access to scientific and experienced-based knowledge. At the same time, deliberative opportunities – time to question, seek clarification, discuss assumptions, and examine arguments – are thought to be critical for dealing with contested knowledge claims, and to explore alternatives and poorly known risks and interests.

The quality of facilitation is widely acknowledged as important to creating a deliberative environment in which conversations are open, respectful and multi-directional (Leeuwis & Pyburn; 2002; Schusler, Decker, & Pfeffer, 2003). Facilitation, for example, can be important to allowing less empowered stakeholders with local experience-based knowledge to contribute in dialogue settings otherwise geared towards conventional and formal science-based presentations (Lundmark & Jonsson, 2014). The line between facilitating engagements, convening negotiations, and advocacy of a particular interest is fine and sensed by others. The interactions among the actors often take the form of mere negotiations, following the rules of power sharing and distributive justice (Gray, 1989). Different actors have different perceptions about issues and framing and reframing of the issues at hand is a condition for making progress (Dewulf, Craps, & Dercon, 2004). Even careful communicative practices don't overcome conflicts over interests and positional differences (Bouwen, Dewulf, & Craps, 2007). Facilitators of learning exercises need to be ethical, honest, and respectful of views of others, and encourage similar values among participants. Helping stakeholders figure out for themselves what they need to know more about is a key task for facilitators. As in other structured conversations, facilitators often must work hard to encourage constructive debate, understanding of others, and avoid domination by individuals or small groups (Wollenberg, Edmunds, & Buck, 2000; Schaap & Nandi, 2005).

Given the complex and often contested spaces inherent within the processes of multi-stakeholder dialogues, there are important lessons to be learned from how these have

been managed in specific dialogues. In this paper, we studied three different multi-stakeholder dialogues from the Rhine Basin, Mekong Basin, and Ganga-Brahmaputhra-Meghna Basin to draw lessons 'from the field'. We adopt a broad definition of multi-stakeholder dialogue; accepting at face value, the claims of conveners that they aim to create and support spaces, in which meaningful conversations can take place among stakeholder groups. The main question we address is: How does the way a dialogue is initiated, its format and content, and how it is followed-up, influence its effectiveness?

2.   Research design

We studied three series of multi-stakeholder water dialogues (Table 1). In each case, the main unit of analysis was a particular event or cluster of closely related events; while recognizing that these were usually part of a larger process.

Our interest in drawing from these diverse case studies is not only to understand in greater depth the processes within each case study. It is to also look at the relationship between some of the *key principles* of multi-stakeholder dialogues (introduced above and further throughout the paper) and their *application/management* within the specific contexts of the cases. Therefore, we aim to both provide information on the cases themselves and to embed the cases into the broader discussions of multi-stakeholder dialogues in water management/ development. Hence, the dialogues were purposively chosen to represent a mixture of relatively state-led and dominated processes, to others with greater civil-society engagement and control of the agenda. Their geographical scope varied from small areas within one country, to a multi-country region. We now briefly introduce each of the case studies.

The *IJsseldelta* case in the Rhine Basin, focuses on two important periods when public participation and stakeholder participation took place (respectively in 2005 and 2006), during the process of developing the masterplan for IJsseldelta South, in the Overijssel province of the Netherlands. The area was confronted with a number of spatial challenges in water management, infrastructure, transport, urban extension, recreation, and nature conservation.

The *Mekong* case focuses on a regional event held in Lao PDR 2006, which was convened in response to a need for greater public consultation on several plans of multilateral

Table 1
Selected dialogue processes in Asian and European basins

Dialogue	Geographical scope	Focal year events
Design sessions for the Master plan for IJsseldelta	The delta of the river IJssel in the western part of Overijssel province of the Netherlands	2005 and 2006
Exploring water futures together: Mekong Region Waters Dialogue	Mekong Basin, i.e. Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, China & Thailand	2006
Ecosystems for Life: An India-Bangladesh Initiative – Hilsa conservation	Ganga-Brahmaputhra-Meghna Basin, in particular the transboundary region between India and Bangladesh.	2013-2014

agencies, for expanding investments in water infrastructure in the Mekong River Basin. The dialogue was an alternative platform to those convened by the international organizations at the regional level, and was intended to influence how water governance and basin development planning were proceeding.

The *Ganga-Brahmaputhra-Meghna* case (from hereon: *GBM* case), focuses on a series of dialogue events convened by IUCN within the *Ecosystems for Life: A Bangladesh-India Initiative* project (E4L); which promoted better understanding of the management of natural resources in Bangladesh and India. The focus in this paper is on the work undertaken on conservation of the important fish *Hilsa*. The *Hilsa* example highlights the E4L dialogue processes as stakeholders moved from identification of issues, to collaborative joint research, to policy-engagement, and ultimately, to policy change and its implications.

To guide the analysis of the dialogues, we agreed on a set of shared guiding questions (Table 2). These consider both some of the triggers and preparatory activities leading up to the events that are the focus of the case study, as well as the follow-up activities and contributions to outcomes. They also provide a window into some of the contested spaces within the multi-stakeholder dialogue approach which have been discussed above.

The primary data sources were documents about the dialogue events and interviews with participants, or conveners involved in their preparation, implementation, and follow-up. In all three cases, the authors were also in some way involved in the dialogue process, either as facilitator, researcher, or expert consultant.

Evaluating the performance, or the effectiveness, of a dialogue is challenging. Identification and attribution of specific outcomes, is often confounded by other social and political processes that surround dialogue interactions. In this study we distinguished between procedural and outcome effectiveness, drawing on methods for assessing public participation (Rowe & Frewer, 2000). For the procedural dimension we focused on evidence that design and

Table 2
Simple analytical framework for evaluating the dialogues used in this paper

Dimension	Analytical questions
Initiation	What triggered the dialogue? What was the stated purpose? Who convened? How was support mobilized?
Format	Who was invited to participate, and who attended? Who spoke or wrote? What venue? What was the format of sessions? What was the structure (agenda) of the event? What kind of organizational and presentation formats were used? How were exchanges between participants facilitated?
Content	What information was made available to participants beforehand? Was it relevant? Was their sufficient time to review the input materials? What issues and topics were addressed during the dialogue? Which were excluded or avoided? What kinds of evidence and arguments were used? Which assumptions were challenged and on what issues was there wider agreement? Did participants learn useful things from each other?
Outcome	What follow-up was there by conveners and participants? How did the dialogue influence negotiations or decisions?

activities encouraged meaningful deliberation of alternatives (Dore, 2007). For outcomes we emphasized evidence of learning by participants, and influence on negotiations and decisions.

3.   Initiation

The three dialogues had distinct beginnings. In each case there were either specific triggers or windows of opportunity, which some actors were prepared for and used to launch or engage in a dialogue. We first look at each of the dialogues individually, and then draw some brief comparisons related to initiation.

The IJsseldelta dialogue was triggered by a new policy. In December 2003 the Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment (VROM), invited all provinces to identify sample or pilot projects to be included in the National Spatial Strategy ('*Nota Ruimte*') (VROM, 2004). This strategy articulated a policy shift from "imposing restrictions" to "promoting developments". With this strategy, the Cabinet-Balkenende III decentralised spatial planning. At the same time, it consolidated water management as a fundamental principle of spatial planning. Less detailed regulation by central government meant fewer barriers and greater latitude for other levels of government, members of the public, and the private sector to influence development planning. Early 2004, the Province of Overijssel took the opportunity provided by *Nota Ruimte*, to launch the IJsseldelta project. The project was comprised of two sub-projects: National Landscape IJsseldelta, and IJsseldelta-South. We focus on the multi-stakeholder dialogues of IJsseldelta-South in this paper. The labeling as a "pilot" project explicitly articulated the wish to develop a masterplan together with stakeholders, usually covering distinct issues of urban extension, infrastructure development, and water management. The project started in 2004.

The Mekong dialogue was triggered by draft strategies and plans of multi-lateral organizations, which appeared to be ushering in a new era of large-scale water infrastructure development, but without adequate public consultation. In Vientiane, Lao PDR in July 2006, the World Conservation Union, the Thailand Environment Institute, the International Water Management Institute, and the Mekong Program on Water Environment and Resilience (M-POWER), convened the "*Mekong Region Waters Dialogue: exploring water futures together*" (International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN], Thailand Environment Institute, International Water Management Institute, & Mekong Program on Water, Environment & Resilience, 2007a, 2007b). The regional multi-stakeholder platform was organized t*o "provide an opportunity for high-quality, multi-faceted debate and learning that will contribute to improving water governance in the Mekong Region*". A key part of the meeting asked participants to evaluate the role and performance of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and Mekong River Commission, in basin development with a focus on the Mekong Water Resources Assistance Strategy (World Bank and Asian Development Bank, 2006), and the Mekong River Commission's draft Strategic Plan. The idea was not to replace any public consultations that should take place, but to begin an exchange of views on their content, the roles of these international organizations, and other critical water governance issues in the region.

The E4L dialogue on Hilsa was initiated because it was identified as a significant issue for fishing communities in both India and Bangladesh. Further, the species was an

important flagship species for the E4L project – a species which represented an important conservation need in the trans-boundary context. The dialogue therefore was initiated by the E4L project and was important for livelihood, conservation, policy and trans-boundary cooperation. It therefore had a number of dimensions to it, and IUCN's role as a neutral broker of good faith was crucial to its initiation. The availability of new research findings, which were undertaken by a joint research team from India and Bangladesh and which contained policy recommendations for each country as well as for joint-country policy/ practice collaboration, acted as a rationale for the dialogue processes and ultimately for evidence-based policy engagement.

Each of the dialogues arose in a particular context; whereby some key actors were prepared and waiting for an opportunity to bring together various other actors to discuss issues they felt were critical. Thus, an alliance of actors in the Mekong Region was already cooperating to lift the standard of constructive engagement in the public sphere, about significant water decisions prior to the planning of the regional dialogue. In November 2004, several members of this alliance helped set up and then participated as keynote speakers and facilitators in the half-day roundtable in Bangkok "Using Water, Caring for Environment: Challenges for the Mekong Region," which was co-hosted by the Thai Minister of Natural Resources and Environment and the IUCN; almost fifty development donors and senior government officials (Ministers) from Mekong Region countries attended the event. In the IJsseldelta, stakeholders realized that it was no longer possible to find a solution to various water management and planning challenges through sectoral approaches (van Rooy, van Luin, & Dil et al., 2006, p. 85). The launch of a new policy on special planning projects created a platform meeting a real need. In the E4L case, the context of this dialogue was provided by two things. First, there was the joint research that had been undertaken, which was to be disseminated (including policy recommendations). Second, however, was the additional dynamic that prior to the meeting, the Government of West Bengal had issued notifications that there was to be a change to the ban period for *Hilsa* fishing.

In summary, dialogues were convened in response to a combination of triggers and background activities, which prepared the way for their emergence. The immediate triggers were different: a new policy, the release of a draft investment strategy, and a change in regulations coincident with availability of new research findings. As we shall see in subsequent sections, the initiation of multi-stakeholder dialogues had some important consequences for format, content, and outcomes.

4.   Format

The basic issues in dialogue format are who participates and how that participation is structured and facilitated. Contested spaces here include socio-economic and political power (and whose voices are heard and acted upon), the ways knowledge is constructed and legitimised (the extent knowledge, especially that being derived from technical or scientific discourses integrates with local knowledge and experiences – or overpowers it), and the ways this can be managed through the structuring and the facilitation of dialogues.

'Dialogue' is relatively easy to say, but much more difficult to facilitate ways which reflect the aims, objectives and contexts of water management, transparent dialogue processes which recognise the dimensions of power (socio-economic, cultural, and knowledge-based) and provide the space for stakeholders to engage in ways that are both meaningful to them and to good outcomes in water management/development.

4.1   Participation

Convening power is important to success of a dialogue as it influences who accepts invitations to participate, and what effort they put into making it work. This is typically an outcome of the initiation process.

During the process of developing the masterplan for IJsseldelta South, there were two important periods in which public participation and stakeholder participation took place. In period 1 (from 7 April to 14 May 2005), six weeks of public participation took place in three stages: information supply, discussions (public hearing and debates), and expression of opinions. In the stage of information supply, project staff presented five scenarios to the public. Subsequently, citizens and stakeholders were able to provide feedback during the public hearings, where there was ample time for discussion; including individual and group debates, and questions/inputs from the audience. The end of the first period was marked by the submission of the 6th scenario. The sixth scenario was developed by citizens of the town of Kamperveen and nearby areas, with support from experts provided by the project group. Period 2 was from February to March 2006, when the so-called design sessions ('ontwerp-sessies') were organized. The main objective of the design sessions was to further develop the masterplan, based on the building blocks and 6th scenario being developed previously. Period 2 took almost two months, including preparation, implementation, evaluation, and reporting activities; although the design sessions themselves took only one full day.

Although the Province of Overijssel plays a major role in the project as a director of the planning process, it is very much dependent upon others. As a matter of fact, the plan for the IJsseldelta is made in close cooperation with the stakeholders, such as the municipalities, neighboring provinces, the water boards, and many nongovernmental organizations in the region. The municipality of Kampen, water board Groot-Salland, and the Province of Flevoland are the most important partners in the region. But the national Government has a decisive position in the project too. The national ministries involved are: the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment; the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality; and, the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management. Last but not least, the public was also mobilized to participate.

In the Mekong dialogue, non-state actors from local communities, academia, non-governmental organizations, and private sector participated in discussions along with government officials and representatives of multilateral agencies (IUCN et al., 2007b). The main dialogue meeting lasted two full days, and was held in Vientiane, Lao PDR. Participants with a base in either Thailand or Lao PDR made up 64% of the participants, and altogether 86% came from the Mekong River Basin countries.

The E4L regional policy dialogue had participants representing researchers/experts, the fisheries departments of both West Bengal and Bangladesh, fisher communities from both West Bengal and Bangladesh, media from both countries, and communications professionals from West Bengal were also among those who participated.

Experts were an integral part of the E4L processes. For researchers, their research was applied to both policy-advocacy, and livelihood security contexts/implications. Additionally, experts external to the research team were used in peer review processes, in dissemination dialogues, and in policy-advocacy dialogues. The dissemination and policy dialogues brought experts together with policy makers, community stakeholders, and others; so that research was grounded both in terms of taking forward policy engagement, and also in terms of community relevance. The dialogues recognized the importance of multiple experiences and understandings being brought together, hence the focus on ensuring the expert analysis was ultimately grounded analysis, making sense to both local communities and policy makers.

The dialogues shared some features in terms of composition of participants. Women made up about a third of the participants, with a much smaller fraction of speakers in the main events in the Mekong dialogue. A feature of the Mekong Dialogue was the relatively low fraction of formal presentations by national government officials in the Mekong dialogue (less than 20%).

In E4L, approximately one third of participants in the dialogues were women. However, in dissemination and policy advocacy dialogues, women's representation was lower (approximately one fifth of participants), probably reflecting the historically patriarchal gender composition of policy-making and scientific water managers. This reflected the tension which multi-stakeholders often face – the multiple dimensions to representation and social power. Another limitation within the E4L process was that consumer groups weren't represented in the dialogues – an important omission as consumers have a significant responsibility in the conservation of *Hilsa*. However, in this case, the dialogues represented an important step towards establishing an awareness campaign for fisher communities, consumers and the restaurant/hotels sector. This is why the dialogue had representatives from media organisations, who were then called upon to scope campaigns. Participation was therefore seen as a longer-term process, bringing layers of participation after foundations were laid, rather than as a 'one-off' dialogue outcome.

4.2   Structure

The format of the stakeholder dialogues in period 1 of the IJsseldelta dialogue, clearly shows a shift from one-directional communication during information supply – by members of the administrative board, and in particular by the Provincial Deputy Rietkerk – towards multi-directional communication during the public hearings and debates – with inputs from citizens, other stakeholders, experts, policymakers, and politicians – and then moving back to one-directional during the expression of opinions by means of questionnaires and letters from stakeholders, including citizens, to the project group. The design sessions during period 2 were characterized by multi-directional communications all throughout. In general,

all interactions were characterized by an open dialogue, with parity of voice across all the key stakeholders, based on jointly developed plans (e.g. planning scenarios and building blocks), and cooperation based on mutual respect and mutual benefits.

A key feature of the format of the Mekong dialogue program were 1 hour sessions with pairs of keynote speakers; one from the main regional agency being discussed, and the other by an analyst. Breakout sessions on the second day looked specifically at the plans of the three targeted agencies. In between, other breakout sessions looked at more specific water governance issues – for example, related to hydropower, irrigation, and fisheries – and on the final day, different ways to improve water governance (IUCN et al., 2007a). One challenge and weakness of the format was that the main language used was English, which for many of the participants, was not their first language. Simultaneous translation services may have allowed more diverse group of participants to attend, and changed the balance of contributions in discussions; however facilitators were aware of the challenge, and made substantial effort to give all around the many tables an equal chance to speak.

The E4L dialogue was structured so that its first section focused on the research itself, and the second focused on the implications of the research in terms of necessary policy and fisheries/conservation management changes. Hence, the structure presented evidence and analysis which had been peer-reviewed and which contained recommendations which were at country-level and trans-boundary (the first section) and the grounding of that in terms of usefulness, appropriateness and relevance to various stakeholders.

In the context of managing dialogue processes, the second part was particularly insightful. People were put onto tables by E4L facilitators; to ensure there was a mix of Government officials, representatives of fishing communities, and researchers/experts. Communications professionals were also represented at each of the three tables. Each table was asked to identify implications of the policy recommendations, and also how an awareness campaign that focused on civil society actors – such as fishers, suppliers, and consumers – could be developed.

4.3   Facilitation

One indicator of quality of a dialogue is the multi-directionality of conversations. Participants in the IJsseldelta dialogue noted a shift between first and second periods, from more one-directional to more multi-directional formats and sessions in the second period. Breakout sessions and smaller roundtables generally gave participants substantial opportunities to contribute in the Mekong dialogues; much more so than was usually possible in plenaries. Public hearings and debates provide some opportunities for two-way conversations, while submissions by stakeholders in parts of the IJsseldelta process were obviously more one-way. The IJsseldelta dialogue involved more discrete iterations of interaction among participants than the other dialogue processes. This allowed new ideas to be introduced, argued through, and eventually become accepted by others. In much shorter or largely one-off interactions, these possibilities are much more constrained. At the same time, this difference between dialogue cases, is partly an artifact of where in time you draw the boundaries of a dialogue. In the Mekong dialogue, several of the stakeholders had

interacted with each other before and after the regional event in other venues, underlining that the processes of lobbying, negotiation, and learning are often on-going.

In IJsseldelta, the most important breakthrough in the stakeholder dialogues, was brought on by the way in which citizens and policymakers became committed to the project. The moderator of the process, consultant Jos Pierey, reflected that people can be really motivated by letting them actively participate in the development of images or visions (e.g. the planning scenarios) of how the end result should look like. During the process, the citizens expressed on many occasions, their frustration about not being taken seriously in the past, by the national or provincial government (e.g. in case of the Hanzelijn) and the local government, which were called "fake consultation rounds," by some citizens. This skepticism and lack of trust by citizens was being confronted by the moderator, and it took a lot of efforts to win the hearts and minds of these citizens. A sense of inter-dependency can be a powerful motivation for collaboration among stakeholders. In the IJsseldelta case, a participant noted: "we need each other to achieve our goals."

Several of the dialogues had special ways to deal with experts. During the second period in the IJsseldelta dialogues, four design groups with stakeholders and citizens were created; with at least one spatial planner/urban developer/architect per group, who was able to visualize the inputs. At the same time, there was a separate group with experts. This group could be consulted by the design groups in case there were questions. This separate group of experts was also constructed in order to prevent the design groups being dominated by experts. In the lead-up event to the Mekong dialogue, specific roundtables were allocated to high officials with planned seating and facilitator. A similar strategy was used in one of the follow-up workshops, where scenarios were built with participants of the north-south economic corridor project.

In the E4L case, interactions needed to be facilitated carefully to ensure experts didn't dominate the dialogue. The dialogues were facilitated by E4L staff members, or members of its Project Advisory Committee to ensure a continuity of purpose in the context of the E4L project, and also as a built-in mechanism for project staff to be reflexive within the process. Thus, there was a clear connection between the dialogue and the objectives of the project. Importantly in terms of engaging with various stakeholder groups, having E4L staff facilitate meant there was a familiar face for stakeholders when they came together. There was a sense of continuity of interaction between stakeholders and E4L staff – an important contribution to dialogue legitimacy and the trust necessary for successful engagement.

Evaluation of the dialogue processes by participants varied. In the IJsseldelta dialogue, participants were very positive about the multi-stakeholder process, since it created more understanding for each other's positions and interests. They were also appreciative of the carefully planned input of knowledge and information by thematic experts. In the Mekong dialogue, participants concluded that it was a suitable place to "inform, and be informed," but also complained about the lack of time to engage fully with complex issues. A few participants in Mekong dialogue, including the conveners, were concerned that the event might "legitimize the draft strategic plans of MRC, ADB, and the World Bank." The conveners wrote formal letters to these organizations indicating that the dialogue should not be considered a replacement for a more extensive public consultation on their plans (IUCN et al., 2007a).

E4L's experience was a combination of the above. Participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss, share, and learn; something that required some facilitation in the policy dialogues. However, time was a constraint. There needed to be a balance in the dialogue between research presentation and policy advocacy discussion, and the management of the time for the more formal presentations was a challenge.

In summary, the role of the facilitator and the structure of the dialogue was extremely important to the procedural effectiveness of the dialogues in all three cases. Despite attention and diversity of formats, a recurrent challenge for conveners of dialogues is preventing domination of conversations by particular individuals, and ensuring there is adequate time to consider complex information and arguments. The process of selecting participants is clearly very important to which issues are likely to be addressed; the quality of facilitation, in turn, is important for how well those issues are deliberated.

5. Content

By content, we mean the information supplied to participants, issues or topics addressed, and the kinds of arguments made. The three dialogues we studied dealt with different water-related management or development issues.

The spatial planning challenges in the IJsseldelta are complex and potentially conflicting. Because of this complexity, the moderator of the process introduced five planning models (scenarios) being developed by project staff. During development of the scenarios, a large group of stakeholders was already involved in the form of a feedback group. These planning models were used to provide a starting point for interaction during the multi-stakeholder process. Some professionals felt their interests were not being represented clearly; however this approach was well received by most citizens. The moderator was convinced that such a kind of interaction would yield a better plan. During the early information sessions, a lot of resistance against the proposed plans arose. In reaction to this resistance, the province, notably by Deputy Rietkerk, offered support to inhabitants to develop alternative plans. Inhabitants of Kamperveen submitted an alternative plan (scenario 6), because the river bypass in the other scenario's affected their local community. Scenario 6 gained support in the press and wider community. During the later sessions, ideas were discussed, experts consulted, and maps constructed. The maps from each group were presented, and a high level of consensus for certain solutions emerged.

The Mekong dialogue examined the roles and regional strategies of the Mekong River Commission (MRC), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the World Bank. It also gave opportunities for alternative perspectives on water resources development to be articulated, and other critical water governance issues in the Mekong region to be raised. The final working session focused on ways to improve water governance in the region. The knowledge inputs were collected and published as a set of resource papers; some contributions were in the form of power point presentations, while others as short analytical essays (IUCN et al., 2007b). A key draft document – the Mekong Water Resources Assistance Strategy (World Bank and Asian Development Bank, 2006) – was only released to the public shortly before the dialogue. Many participants complained that it should have been available earlier, so that it could be properly studied before the dialogue.

The two key dialogues for *Hilsa* conservation within the E4L process, were those related to research dissemination and policy advocacy. The dissemination dialogue provided a mechanism by which the research, its findings, and its policy recommendations were 'ground-tested' in the context of local people and local users. Moreover, by the time of this dialogue, the Government of West Bengal had already issued a notification which, in essence, made West Bengal's ban period on *Hilsa* fishing more similar to that of Bangladesh. As a result, it was possible to take these discussions into specific directions – for example, the need for livelihood security in the context of ban periods, or ways to raise awareness of the ban periods – so this dialogue was able to draw very clear policy/practice connections and implications.

In each of the dialogues, expert knowledge inputs played an important role, but with variation in how much expert knowledge was contested. In IJsseldelta, knowledge and information played an important role during the process, and, was at some points, even crucial to make decisions in principle. Knowledge input came from the 12 involved governments (often thematic experts), and a dozen consultancy firms and knowledge institutes. Process moderators in IJsseldelta acknowledged that the way knowledge is provided during the process might be more important than the knowledge itself. In the three dialogues, knowledge of citizens and non-conventional bureaucrat or academic experts was important. In the IJsseldelta dialogues, residents made many inputs directly. In the Mekong dialogue on the other hand, participation by civil society groups was high, and raised awareness about the interests and rights of various marginalized livelihood groups; in particular, fishers and small-scale farmers. In the GBM case, representatives of fisher cooperatives and communities participated in dialogues dealing with the scoping of issues, research dissemination at national and regional levels, and the policy-advocacy dialogues. In these events they were able to engage with other fishing community representatives, experts, and Government officials from both India and Bangladesh.

Conveners, by declaring the purpose of a dialogue, and then through the agenda they prepare and instructions they give to facilitators, have a large influence on what topics can be effectively addressed. In the IJsseldelta case, the focus on building consensus around a plan also acted as a strong filter on discussions. In the Mekong case, the framings were done more through the topics covered by keynote speakers, and the tasks set for discussion groups. For example, in the Mekong case, sessions analyzed the roles of a multilateral organization and its strategic development plan. In the GBM case, the latter dialogues focused on research dissemination and policy advocacy. The main constraints here were to ensure that research was grounded meaningfully in local communities, and that policy implications were discussed in a positive and open, collaborative environment.

In summary, the content of a dialogue matters as much as the process for whether or not meaningful conversation takes place, and stakeholders really learn about each other's perspectives on critical issues. To do so requires access to and effective use of scientific and experience-based knowledge. Preparing adequate background information for participants well in advance of key events, and providing ways of accessing additional information during them – through keynote talks, question-and-answer sessions, wandering experts

or documentation exhibits – all have a large influence on the quality and substance of the discussions. Participants evaluate the timeliness and quality of information provided before, during, and after dialogues by organizers. Substantial effort is often needed to satisfy the information expectations of diverse participants in a multi-stakeholder process.

6.   Outcomes

The potential pathways to impact for a dialogue depend on the plans of conveners and how participants choose to follow-up on their interactions. In this section, we look at products, and other efforts to follow-up dialogues by organizers and evidence of other types of outcomes.

The birth of the 6th scenario was probably the most remarkable outcome of the IJsseldelta stakeholder dialogue, and according to some of the participants, including the convener, also the most interesting learning experience. In the case of IJsseldelta South, there was no way of knowing before, based on the five planning scenarios, which one of them would appear on top – "that is how genuine stakeholder participation should be" noted a moderator. The key output of the multi-stakeholder dialogue was a widely supported master plan, completed in 2006. Within the Masterplan, the six spatial challenges in the area (housing, infrastructure, leisure, nature, agriculture, and river bypass) are combined and integrated. One could say, that the result has become more than the sum of its parts. The Masterplan is broadly supported by the public, because it is based upon a draft of the bypass (the 6th scenario) that was made by the public; mostly farmers, assisted by planners and professionals. In 2007, an agreement was signed by 11 governmental organizations, with the intention to work together to implement the Masterplan; another 11 non-governmental organizations supported the plan. Recently, the spatial plans of the Provinces of Overijssel and Flevoland have been reviewed. A strategic environmental – impact – assessment (SEA) was part of this review. Within this SEA, several alternatives for the Masterplan were studied. The decision making process has led to several modifications of the Masterplan. The current plan resembles in almost every aspect, the most environmentally friendly alternative of the SEA.

The initial outcomes of the Mekong dialogue were collected in a pair of reports, summarizing meeting findings and resource papers (IUCN et al., 2007a, 2007b). The dialogue contributed to the downplaying and eventual disappearance of the Mekong Water Resources Assistance Strategy. It also triggered further interest in multi-stakeholder dialogue process, nationally and regionally. Follow-up meetings included a participatory scenario building exercise, focussed on exploring the Asian Development Banks' plans for the north-south economic corridor as organized by M-POWER (Foran & Lebel, 2007). IUCN also organized several national-level follow-up activities. The Cambodian Water Working Group held 12 meetings and two study tours with an emphasis on irrigation, and its interactions with other water users.

A key cross-cutting theme of the Mekong dialogue was the need for greater transparency and stakeholder participation in basin development planning (IUCN et al., 2007a). The demonstration effect of the dialogue and follow-ups was important for phase 2 of the

Basin Development Plan process of the MRC, which was beginning to place much greater emphasis on multi-stakeholder engagement (MRC, 2005). MRC organized the first regional stakeholder consultation forum on the second phase of the BDP programme on 12-13 March 2008, Vientiane, Lao PDR (MRC, 2008). Members from the water governance network M-POWER provided design and facilitation support and suggestions on the draft agenda, in order to ensure adequate discussion of important topics. The key messages from the consultation was to re-affirm the shift towards greater participation: "through an open BDP process the MRC has earned greater trust and confidence from stakeholders and is committed to building ownership through genuine participation," and that "developing workable participatory processes is more important than delivery of a Basin Development Plan at a specific point in time," (MRC, 2008). Among many issues mentioned, the trade-off between hydropower development and fisheries was highlighted (Friend, Arthur, & Keskinen, 2009). Climate change was also signaled as an issue that needs to be taken into account when exploring future water availability. A second regional stakeholder consultation forum, modeled on the first but with the MRC more firmly in control of agenda and facilitation, was held in mid-October 2009.

In the *Ecosystems for Life* case, by the time of the dialogue on policy, the Government of West Bengal was issuing notifications, effectively aligning their actions for the conservation of *Hilsa* with that of Bangladesh; which was an important part of the policy recommendations of the joint research. Importantly, E4L was also able to facilitate on-going dialogues between the two Fisheries departments, resulting in the development of a *Hilsa* research centre by the Government of West Bengal.

Thus, the links between the dialogue and political process varied in important ways across the three case studies. In E4L, there was a very direct link through the research dissemination and policy-advocacy dialogues. Importantly, the rationale for the joint research approach ensured research was *joint* – that is, not India research or Bangladesh research – and the policy recommendations it contained were both national and joint recommendations.

In the IJsseldelta case, the province and state, respectively, as convener was also in control; but the content of deliberations and influence on decisions was less predictable and dependent on stakeholder inputs. The close and relatively direct links to the political process, resulted in clear influence on plans and strategies. The Mekong case differs from the others, in that it is in a transboundary setting where regional institutions are relatively weak compared to national-level arrangements. In the Mekong dialogue, the lack of direct and immediate links to decisions was important for sensitive topics to be raised and discussed. Inter-governmental discussions would not have been able to make much headway on some topics.

In summary, the products and other outcomes of a dialogue in the short and medium-term, are enhanced by timely and quality follow-up by organizers; especially where the post-dialogue process is not already strongly institutionalized. Leadership, important in initiation, is also crucial to securing clear outcomes. Outcomes need to be assessed against the purpose of a dialogue, and expectations of organizers and participants. Expectations often exceed outcomes, especially once post-event enthusiasm has passed, suggesting that care is needed

not to over-sell the significance of dialogues in the wider political process. Transparency with respect to the boundary or relationship between the dialogue events and negotiations or decisions, should be made as clear as possible from the beginning; while also being allowed to evolve as a consequence of dialogue interactions.

7.   Discussion

Dialogues vary in how effectively they enable meaningful conversations among stakeholders, and what impact they have on policy or decisions. In this paper, we looked at three very different case studies to highlight how design and practice issues that arise in initiation, format, content, and outcomes influence effectiveness.

How and the context in which dialogues are initiated, lay the foundations for what subsequently can be achieved. The immediate trigger for dialogue varied, but this in itself was not so important for effectiveness as in each case, some actor groups were prepared beforehand and could mobilize to use the space created. The notion of a perfectly 'neutral' facilitator is a myth. The identity of the convener effects stakeholder perceptions of legitimacy, credibility, and independence. The actions of the conveners, including key design decisions, such as format or who was invited and who got to speak also matter. All conveners drew on foundations of trust which had been established in different ways, that enable an atmosphere of goodwill, even where issues discussed are contentious.

The dialogues, however, differed in the diversity of interests of those engaged in the conversations, and thus the level of contested knowledge. Participants in the E4L dialogue for instance, shared a common interest in the conservation of Hilsa, even if there were different reasons why the stakeholders wanted it conserved or 'sustainably managed,' and thus the range of interests was modest. For E4L, the issue was less about bringing in a diversity of interests and more about ensuring that the nuance in the commonality of interest was established and Hilsa conservation/management reflected this nuance and overcame the historical power imbalances between Government agencies and local communities.

The Mekong case was also transboundary; but in this case, the breadth of interests and views on what constitutes desirable water resources development were large, and these differences provided the key rationale for dialogue in the first place. In both the Mekong and E4L dialogues, IUCN had an important role as co-convener or facilitator, and was thus able to create space for discussion, questions, and debates in an international context. Even so, a recurrent challenge was providing fair opportunities for different participants to contribute; there were, for instance, major issues of language in both the Mekong and the E4L cases.

The quality of participation is a function of many factors, including venues, session formats, how agendas are set, time, quality of briefing materials, and facilitation. It is still common practice by governments to sell predefined plans and call it participation or consultation – sometimes called a DAD (Decide, Announce, Defend) approach (Susskind & Elliot, 1983; Elliott, 2009), i.e. neglect to involve stakeholders throughout the project, right from the inception to its implementation, thus inducing oppositions of different levels up to

outbursts of the so called Not in my backyard (NIMBY) syndrome (Cascetta & Pagliara, 2013). The cases highlight some of the ways a multi-stakeholder dialogue is able to move beyond the 'DAD' and bring about more meaningful and transparent engagement.

Facilitators and conveners have crucial roles in determining the meaningfulness of participation and depth of deliberation. In the GBM case, IUCN was able to leverage its 'honest broker' and non-political capital in both Bangladesh and India, to bring together a range of stakeholders and Government. Using project staff rather than outside facilitators supported this specific role and also ensured there was a sense of continuity and engagement from the perspective of the stakeholders themselves.

In this study analysis of content included what issues were covered, and how well-informed and reasoned debates were in a dialogue. Most reflections on dialogues have focused on process issues, and not considered so closely on issues with content; we suggest that the quality of information provided to participants in all stages is also a very important factor that affects effectiveness. This requires preparation by conveners. For controversial topics with contested knowledge claims, commissioning briefing papers or presentations from alternative 'camps,' may help tease out the strongest arguments and key differences in view from the start (for example, the E4L experience of the joint research).

For less controversial issues, participants appreciate having access to experts to clarify basic information and understanding about relationships. Managing the flow of technical information through a dialogue process can help lift the quality and substance of debates, by allowing focus to move from points of shared understanding and agreement, to more difficult issues related to differences in assumptions, interests, and values. More controversial issues may require a moderator's ability to reframe problems, by redefining or interpreting to make problem solving more feasible and the communication more acceptable to the receiving party (Moore, 1994). Different actors have different perceptions about issues and framing and reframing of the issues at hand is a condition for making progress (Dewulf et al., 2004). Reframing is different from a merely process-oriented view of mediation practice (Stack, 2014), and undermines claims of a neo-liberal concept of mediator impartiality and neutrality (Wilson, 2014).

As noted earlier, attributing particular policy or decision outcomes directly to a dialogue is often impossible, given the myriad of social processes at work around difficult water resources development and management issues. On the other hand, more immediate outcomes can be secured and identified in follow-up activities of conveners or organizers, and sometimes also, of participants. One of the challenges for conveners and supporters of multi-stakeholder dialogues, is to set realistic expectations with respect to outcomes. On the one hand, there is a temptation to over-promise, so as to gain stronger contributions and enthusiasm for participation; on the other hand, this can create false hopes, and lead to post-event disappointment. Hence, an important lesson is that multi-stakeholder dialogues require proper expectation management, in particular by providing stakeholders – at the very beginning - with a clearly and realistic defined scope of what to expect during and after the dialogue (Huntjens, Lebel, Pahl-Wostl, Schulze, Camkin, & Kranz, 2012).

An important finding of this study was the importance of following-up on the immediate outcomes of a dialogue. For example, in the IJsseldelta an agreement was signed in 2007 by 11 governmental organizations, with the intention to work together to implement the Masterplan; another 11 non-governmental organizations supported the plan. This example shows that following-up requires outcomes that have some form of 'buy-in' and commitment from stakeholders, as shown in varying degrees in our case-studies. Huntjens, Yasuda, Swain, De Man, Magsig, and Islam (2016) assert that commitment from stakeholders can be facilitated by the identification of a zone of possible effective cooperation (ZOPEC) during the dialogue, in particular, it requires a collective effort by different stakeholders to indicate possible avenues for further collaboration and specification of required follow-up steps to which they are willing to commit.

This study also found that contextual factors can significantly modify the effectiveness of dialogues and thus need to be carefully considered in design. In the Mekong case, the constraint was a culture of government; in which key international organization and national governments were used to deliberate with each other and international consultants, but not with a wider group of local stakeholders. In IJsseldelta, residents were initially mistrustful, as central government agencies had not listened to them in the past; but when given a genuine opportunity to contribute, they were fully committed. In the GBM case, the project's logic in relation to evidence-based policy making, as well as the a-political role of IUCN, were clearly important in the success of the dialogue processes; not only in Hilsa conservation, but in other project activities too. More research about contextual factors and how they influence mobilization of citizens, and the effectiveness of different dialogue formats and tactics, is needed.

Apart from these less common observations on the importance of follow-up and context this study also found further supporting evidence for the role of individuals, informal actor networks and stakeholder competencies that are consistent with previous studies.

Individuals often play an important role in securing interest in a dialogue event; keeping a conversation moving forward constructively, and in securing decisions and next steps through proper follow-up. In the IJsseldelta case, Provincial Deputy Rietkerk was able to keep things together and push the process forward according to Hans Brouwer from the Rijkswaterstaat. In the Mekong case, John Dore, then with IUCN Asia's Water and Wetlands Programme and Chair of the M-POWER network, used his social capital and networks to secure participation of a diverse group of stakeholders that otherwise may never have met. Influential individuals and leadership are regularly identified as an important ingredient in successful dialogues (Huitema, Lebel, & Meijerink, 2011). At the same time, this creates tension for deliberative objectives if leadership results in domination, or too strong an effort to build consensus; thus key issues remain off the agenda and differences remain unresolved. Outcomes secured this way may be insecure. How tensions between leadership, facilitation, and meaningful participation are resolved is key.

Informal actor networks were visibly important in some dialogues, but less so in others. Networks can connect actors in different ministries, countries, and between government,

private and not-for-profit organizations. Networks were important in all phases of dialogues, including preparation and for making timely responses within the often tight frame around key events, as well as in follow-ups to secure gains made from the dialogue in all. In the GBM case the dialogue itself, like in M-POWER case, was after several years of research process, in which the conveners had built extensive networks.

The capacity, influence, and power of stakeholders affects the ways they engage. Open, interactive planning with a lot of stakeholders require a certain attitude and competencies from the stakeholders involved. These competences include: the ability to give and take; to wheel and deal; to go beyond its own stake or out-of-the-box thinking; to decide upon outlines without knowing all details; to make compromises; to trust each other; and so on. But there are limits. In the IJsseldelta dialogue, conveners also felt that deadlines were important for increasing the speed of the process and to move forward. The exercise could not be sustained for too long or citizen engagement would wane. The dilemma is that complex water problems may take a lot of time for different parties to work through. Who bears the costs of participation is thus a major design issue (Huitema et al., 2009) that depends on purpose and other incentives available.

This study had several important limitations. Only three cases were examined. The cases were compiled post-hoc, and although in each case the authors were somehow either involved in the dialogue process and/or were able to carry out interviews with those who had been, the collection of data for different projects limited the depth of possible analysis. For simplicity, we selected as units of analysis, one or a tight cluster of closely related events as a focus of our analysis of dialogues. In practice, all of these 'cases' were part of a much larger and less coherent collection of activities, meetings, and networking that might constitute a 'dialogue process.' A more historical, long-term analysis of individual cases was beyond the scope of this analysis, but undoubtedly would reveal further insights about the building of trust and dynamics of relations, and changing understanding of actors involved. Another important limitation was that effectiveness was not systematically assessed. Together with a limited set of cases, this implies we cannot draw strong conclusions about the design of dialogues without more work.

8.   Conclusion

This study shows that effectiveness is clearly dependent upon not just the quality of participation and facilitation, as is widely recognized, but also on the preparation and follow-up actions by conveners and participants around main events and quality of information provided to participants. There also appears to be important contextual factors that modify effectiveness of common dialogue strategies, which deserve further systematic exploration through comparative analysis. Scholars have pointed out the importance for example, of culture in water management (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2008), whilst others have focused on the complexities (often of power) involved in bringing civil society groups and Government agencies together (Markopoulos, 2012), both dimensions to multi-stakeholder dialogues that are crucial to understand and which require further elaboration.

Engagement in water governance issues takes place at different levels and distances; from formal decisions and negotiations over plans, to strategies and allocation of benefits and risks. In water resources management and development, the luxury of consensus is rare, but willingness to cooperate and desire for integration is growing. Multi-stakeholder dialogues are a promising complement to more conventional top-down ways of exploring water management and resource development options, establishing rights and responsibilities, and working towards agreements on plans, strategies and allocations. Consistently making dialogues more effective remains an outstanding challenge; this study contributes some experienced-based insights into improving their design.

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