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River basin info system crucial

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"LEARN from our mistakes," urges Junichi Yoshitani who works for Japan's Ministry of Construction. He should know. Before Japan's 1997 River Act came into force to allow free access to information and public participation in decision-making on impending projects, the ministry faced hostility and strong resistance from local communities.

Although some of the projects would have benefited local communities in the long run, the latter fought hard against the ministry simply because information was not forthcoming. Admitting that the Japanese government machinery - as recently as 10 years ago - was a typical top-down, bureaucratic set-up, Yoshitani says decisions were made excluding the very people who would be affected by them.

Not surprisingly, it took the ministry 28 years to build a dam across the Nagara River to control flooding. It was first proposed in 1968 but mounting protests against it delayed the project. It was only in 1996 that the Nagara Dam was completed.

Public criticism against the ministry drove it to change the way things were done. What are the lessons learnt from the long, bitter battle? Yoshitani responds succinctly: "The government cannot keep data and technical reports confidential."

On the other hand, the ministry has found, albeit late, that when information was released voluntarily and unconditionally, opponents stopped protesting.

Access to information that is current and accurate - as opposed to propaganda to gloss over mistakes - is therefore crucial when it involves the management of land, forests and water resources. Otherwise, public mistrust of the government grows deeper even as the current water crisis worsens. This was the resounding message heard at the recent seminar on "Establishment of River Basin Information System" organised by the Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

DID deputy director-general Dr Hiew Kim Loi says making informed decisions on water resources cannot be over-emphasised. To improve resource management, public agencies must work together to develop a one-stop centre where data on land uses, forests, rivers, lakes, groundwater and other vital resources can be sourced simultaneously. Hence, the need to establish a river basin information system.

Information technology holds the key to overcoming the problem of duplication of work among State and Federal agencies while saving time to retrieve data.

IT also allows some room for transparency and accountability. With the right IT application, obtaining crucial data, especially when it involves land conversions, degazetting of forest reserves and logging of forests designated as water catchment areas can be detected quickly.

With IT tools such as the geographic information system and the use of computers linked to satellites, hot spots (such as forest fires and open burning) and the extent of environmental degradation can be easily unearthed. This in turn will enable prompt action to be taken.

The creation of a river basin information system is therefore crucial. In fact, the success of the proposed National Water Council - to be headed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - and the State-level river basin authority for the respective 150 rivers nationwide hinges on

the availability of data.

The sooner we get on board the information superhighway on resource management, the better.

A systematic river information system will allow individuals from different discipline to sit together for a common purpose, exhorts Dr Mohd Fadhlillah Mahmood of DID's river engineering unit.

To integrate river basin management, he says, the current practice of collecting and collating data must end. Firstly, ways must be found to reconcile the different formats of storing information as some are in numerical forms while others are maps and structural plans.

Most of the existing database systems are for the exclusive use of the respective government agencies. These discourage information-sharing, giving rise to the common problem of presenting an incomplete picture of the situation.

The Federal-State dichotomy over natural resources also hinders prompt decisions to be made. Says Mohd Fadhillah: "Data on river basin is largely in the hands of the Federal government but it is the State government who decides the fate of the rivers with its choice of land uses."

Further, most of the information stored at State-level is still in non-digitised form. There is a danger to it because no one knows for sure which set of information is the most current one when critical decisions have to be made.

To help Malaysia overcome its data collection problem, JICA has stepped in. Team leader Makihiko Otogawa says the Perak River basin - which among others, has four hydroelectric power dams across it - has been selected for a pilot study in river basin information system upon the Malaysian government's request,

With JICA contributing over 60 million yen to the project, sophisticated computer hardware has been acquired to help technical experts do the groundwork.

Given the multitude of parties involved - directly and indirectly - in the management and utilisation of rivers, Otogawa has projected that the project proper will begin in the year 2001 and end in 2020.

The establishment of the fundamental devices, he says, will begin in the 8th Malaysia Plan (year 2001-2005). They include the setting up of the systems for hydrological-gauging, data processing and data transmission. This will be followed by the installation of automatic water quality-gauging system, radar rainfall gauging system and satellite system in the respective 9th, 10th and 11 Malaysia Plan periods.

While the move to create a river information system is lauded, it remains to be seen how technocrats are going to disseminate information to the public. Will they disclose the data without fear or favour? Or will they play the role of gatekeepers?

Experiences in developed countries have shown that it pays when governments allow access to information on developmental projects that affect communities.

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