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“From Local Watershed Management to Integrated River Basin Management at National and Transboundary Levels”

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SPEECH

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am not sure if there is any success that I can refer to in the management of the river basin that I am living in as well as other river basins that I have experiences on?

As a person living in the Mae Klong river basin which is about 546 km. long with an area of 30,000 sq.km., as a senator in the Thai Senate Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Environment, as a member of The Thai Senate Standing Committee on Corruption Investigation and Good Governance Promotion, and as Chairman of The Sub-Committee on Water Resources, I must admit that there are all kind of problems starting from a small stream in my home town called “Lam Pra Dong” which is just behind my house connecting to other bigger canals, then rivers, and it may also be connected to the international river like Mae Kong or Salween.

The problems include sedimentation, construction of infrastructure like roads, dikes, water gates blocking the waterways, polluted water from communities, factories and chemical fertilizer, droughts and floods, landslides, erosion from the top of mountains down to the sea. No one is really happy.

WHY? This is because of the intervention by the outsiders. In my country the Royal Irrigation Department has been established more than a hundred years ago. So far we have relevant agencies from the top of the mountain down to the sea all together 22 agencies under 9 Ministries. In addition we also have the so called “sacred areas” where no one can touch under many Departments and Ministries. Can you imagine how messy it is? It is like a monkey being trapped with a net and the monkey tries to get out of it, but the more he tries, the worse the situation becomes.

The government normally promotes “hard structure” from small scale like water gates to huge infrastructure. Often the government officials, who are the mechanism of the national administration, requested me that please do not make too many criticisms as this makes them feel uncomfortable and it may also make their bosses losing their face.

I said don't worry. I grew up in a government official family. I do understand what the government agencies do are just the end, not the cause, of the problems. The root cause of many problems is really the policy makers who have to be accountable for what they have decided on.

For people from the Western society, they may not understand what face losing means, as this is really the culture of Asian people. I said it does not matter as the Ministers normally have many faces already; losing one would not cause any problem for them really. For us it is the right of the people and legislative body to monitor this. If everyone is honest, why worry?

Thailand is one of the leading countries in ASEAN that built dams and water gates (large and small), established watershed and river basin committees. We have constitution and progressive laws related to natural resources and environmental protection. We have experiences, lessons learned and lots of environmental cases in the administration court that we used to set norms and laws for people participation and public hearing processes, EIA to study and prevent impacts leading into the decision making processes. The point is the government will have to be more accountable to what they have decided to do and this includes all line agencies and government officials.

If the number of problems is the indicator of success in watershed and river basin management, I can really tell you that Thailand is the most successful country for this. We have many hundreds or thousands of conflict cases in water, energy and natural resources management caused by intervention by the outsiders.

Natural system demonstrates the cycle of changes which leads to dynamic equilibrium. Buddhist people call this Dhamma or Absolute Truth. If we accept the fact that the nature will balance itself, we only need to adapt ourselves to fit the nature. We should try not to change or control the nature too much. I see this is the kind of thinking that people living in the river basin should adopt.

The wise people should not waste their time fighting with or trying to change the nature, rather they should use their wisdom to try to live in harmony with the nature. Live is so short and we are on this planet only temporarily.

Let's look at the people who never have enough and never be satisfied with anything. They think letting the water flows naturally is a waste. They don't see what is carried by water, sediments, minerals, nutrients, etc. If people are not satisfied with what is given by the nature, especially water, by looking at the water from just one dimension which is water quantity, they will start thinking about building larger dams or multipurpose dams to solve the problems of energy, flood and drought, irrigated agriculture expansion, etc.

Think of Thailand, it has been more than a hundred years and we can only expanded irrigated areas for about 38 million rais. But the non-irrigated areas are still more than 100 million rais.

We have dams in every river basin in our country. There are many controlling gates, but we still cannot solve the drought and flood problems, and it is getting worse. Last year 40 out

of 76 provinces were flooded, although they are located in irrigated areas. Nothing can really be managed or controlled, I think. While one group demands for more dams, other demands that the dams should be open to let the water flow freely to rescue the fish.

What direction we are taking?

Should we continue with mono-cropping many crops a year, using more chemical fertilizer, insecticide for many million baths per year? Should we continue consuming water and energy with no limit in the name of development? Can we not live the same way we used to live with water before by having traditional houses on high pillars, using boat or raft for transportation?

While fish and animals are disappearing, the mega companies claimed that they can be replaced with aquaculture with artificial breeding. But these animals are also fed with artificial food.

In the name of development, everything from the mountain, forest, river down to the sea has to be managed. We are saying this as if there had never been any kind of management before in our history.

Our fishers believe that there is spirit that protects big fish like giant catfish in the Mekong River. Other things like big trees and mountains are also protected by the spirit. We also believe that the nature has its own way or solution that human being may not understand. Before we kill animals or make any landscape changes, we have to pay respect or worship the spirit to get permission to do so. If we do it appropriately, we and our family will live a happy life. If we have no respect to the spirit, we and the family may end up with disaster.

These are the “Invisible Hands” that manage the rivers, mountains, forests and sea. It is the kind of management that we have in our culture and is embedded in our way of life. They are not the “Invisible Hands” of Adam Smith. It is much more difficult to understand and much more difficult to see.

Nowadays, our children are changing. They have become difficult, ambitious and materialist with no limit following the globalization process. It is not the world with no boundary, but rather the greed with no boundary or limit.

I would like to conclude that the principle of water management no matter it is a small watershed, tributaries, or water basin within a country or international, the only principle is how to keep the water flows freely without blocking it into different portions.

Development flexibility can be done with soft structure or decentralized small structures, not with large infrastructure. It has to be harmonized so that the balance is dynamic.