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To cite this article: Vincent Lagendijk (2019) Streams of knowledge: river development knowledge and the TVA on the river Mekong, History and Technology, 35:3, 316-337, DOI: 10.1080/07341512.2019.1680156

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2019.1680156

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Published online: 20 Jan 2020.

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Streams of knowledge: river development knowledge and the TVA on the river Mekong

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ABSTRACT
This article revisits how plans for the development of the Southeast Asian river Mekong took the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as a template. Existing literature focuses on the role of the United States administration, seeing their TVA-related activities as an internationalization of New Deal policies. This article, however, argues that the role of regional actors like the Mekong Committee, and of international organizations (IOs) such as the United Nations and the World Bank, was also essential. It shows that both regional actors as well as IOs cross-fertilized American knowledge with indigenous and colonial knowledge in plans for developing the Mekong.

KEYWORDS
River development; development history; Tennessee Valley Authority; international organizations; knowledge transfer

Early spring at the campus of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD. There is a certain tension in the air. In a speech entitled ‘Peace without Conquest’ on 7 April 1965, US president Lyndon Baines Johnson made a bold statement: ‘The vast Mekong River can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own [Tennessee Valley Authority].’ Johnson furthermore pledged a billion dollars for developing the river to the benefit of its riparian countries. Whether genuine or not, the president extended his invitation to the Soviet Union as well as North Vietnam, hoping to initiate new forms of economic cooperation that could lead to a peaceful settlement in the region.

Johnson’s initiative modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was not entirely novel, however. For one, many post-war development projects had taken the TVA as their mold. For another, since the 1950s regional actors had planned the development of the Mekong while taking a cue from the TVA, supported by international organizations (IOs) like the United Nations Organization (UN) and World Bank. Interestingly enough, the US had abstained from taking a leading role in that process before the 1965 speech. Johnson’s Baltimore pledge should be seen as an attempt at economic rapprochement with countries in the region as well as at regaining domestic support for his policy towards Southeast Asia. Its main effect was to further internationalize the ongoing Mekong efforts, however.

The current historiography only briefly mentions this episode and overlooks the international character, largely seeing it as an extension of New Deal ideas. With that, scholars have missed another strong international influence. It was not only American
ideas stemming from TVA but also colonial experiences that were prominent in the development of the Mekong. This speaks to the role of France and Japan as former colonizers in the region, but also to the imperial legacy brought by Indian engineers. In addition, IOs like the UN and World Bank had absorbed a considerable amount of former colonial experts and administrators. Neither World War II nor the Cold War presented a break with knowledge acquired in colonial settings, as Jessica Wang has argued. Clearly dams served various aims over time and space, ranging from colonial uplifting, to nation-building, and peace-making. The latter two elements became particularly prominent in the TVA’s international legacy after 1945, and dams were regarded to be its cornerstones.

Building upon work in progress on the transnational history of the TVA, and using a wide set of archival sources, this article analyzes how the Mekong became a hotbed for river development ideas. It argues that the flows of knowledge involved were not strictly American nor limited to TVA ideas. Instead such notions were re-purposed and repackaged within IOs and their experts working on development. Such conceptions also crossfertilized with ideas having imperial and indigenous origins. Apart from the various ideational sources, plans for developing the Mekong river also served different agendas. With the Baltimore speech, US interests for the Mekong’s development were clearly related to Cold War aims and national security. But at the same time regional actors supported by IOs hoped to improve the socio-economic situation in this recently decolonized corner of the world. While these streams of knowledge came together on the Mekong, they also came to serve contradictory and conflicting sociopolitical aims.

The article starts by discussing the TVA within a global context of river development. It pays particular attention to imperial sites of knowledge, in a double sense of the word. While empires like the British and Japanese relied on extensive water management, dam-building generally came with tendencies to subjugate nature, space, and inhabitants as well. American engineers also took stock of such imperial experiences. But the TVA also came into being in what many regarded to be the American and colonial South. The subsequent section analyzes how the TVA became the prime example for post-1945 planners, and especially how it became a central node in the development ideas of both the UN and the World Bank. Here ideas stemming from the TVA mingled with imperial and indigenous ideas on water management. The article then examines how these various flows of TVA-inspired knowledge, fused with other river development experiences, once again met at the Mekong river. Development plans, stemming from a set of different actors with various underlying aims, all took their cue from the TVA but could not come to a consensus. The last section of the article draws several conclusions on the various sets of knowledge involved in this episode.

The TVA within international and imperial river development trends

Most histories of the TVA frame it as a domestic program to combat the Great Depression as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. The TVA sought to develop the poor American South by putting the river Tennessee to use through a system of multi-purpose dams. Roosevelt was inspired by nature conservationalism and social notions of planning, seeking to improve the underdeveloped countryside. The troubles of the South stood out; in 1938 FDR singled it out as ‘the Nation’s No. 1 economic problem – the Nation’s problem, not merely the South’s’. The TVA was a federal response to this, as its dams provided electric
power, flood control, navigation improvement, and were accompanied by reforestation, agricultural and social programs. Governmental intervention brought electricity into rural areas, something the powerful private utilities had long refused.

A key component of the TVA was its insistence on the holistic notion of ‘grass-roots democracy’, the idea that regional actors and locals should play a role in decision-making. Since the TVA was directly responsible to the US president and neither a federal nor state-level organization, it always grappled with accusations of being socialist and incompatible with American values of democracy and free enterprise. Private Southern electricity companies argued before the House of Representatives that ‘[t]o take our market, is to take our property’. The grass-roots notion played a pivotal role in purporting the TVA as the democratic exponent of planning, in line with American liberal traditions. Despite these domestic tensions, the TVA gained global popularity as a development model after 1945. The TVA itself institutionalized parts of its technical assistance activities and the Tennessee Valley became a standard stopover for foreign dignitaries visiting the United States.

For some time now, the history of the TVA and its global post-1945 impact has been studied from a US-centered approach only. David Ekbladh has convincingly conceptualized the TVA as the synecdochical project that defined the ‘American Mission’ to democratize and develop the world along liberal lines. The need for a model for development assistance and the United States as a supplier are intertwined, of course. Emerging out of World War II as the most modern and potent superpower, developing countries initially looked to the US for inspiration and know-how. While there are good reasons for this bias – the US being a major aid contributor, financially, technologically, and inspirationally –, it downplays the role of non-state and international actors, as well as other influences.

Despite the immense popularity of the TVA (with both contemporary observers and today’s scholars), ideas of improving rivers were not just limited to the TVA nor to the US only. In the US the Bureau of Reclamation (BoR, 1902) and the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE, 1775) existed well before the TVA. Like the TVA they also took their experiences international after 1945. In addition, US river development thinking was part of a wider and global set of processes. Recent scholarship has singled out the 1920s and 1930s as a period of experimentation with many international connections between actors and ideas, facilitated by experts moving from one context to another, often channeled through government agencies or international bodies. This was no different for dam-building and river development knowledge. The 1930s saw the erection of large dams on the river Dnieper (Soviet Union), extensive planning for the river Rhône (France), and in the Japanese imperial sphere of influence. Both proponents and opponents recognized that the TVA was part of such global developments, and hence compared it to Soviet planning, or even fascist policy. Even those writing about the TVA in a positive tone recognized ‘red’ influences. Scribner’s Magazine wrote that ‘[t]he world has seen nothing like this project before, except in the case of Russia’s five-year plans. There are obvious sources of inspiration for the TVA in the Soviet Piatletka […].’

These water-related developments were not only connected to each other; many of them also had their roots in colonial hydrology. Exchange in water expertise already took place in the nineteenth century, if not earlier. One such place was the British Empire with India and Egypt as central nodes. The Indian-born William Willcocks (1852–1932), a household-name in British imperial irrigation, consulted on water projects in Mesopotamia, South Africa,
As the chief architect of the Aswan Dam, at 22 meters (72 feet) the tallest masonry dam at the time, he helped ‘inaugurate round the world an era of engineering on a new scale’, to use the words of Timothy Mitchell. Willcocks believed in applying modern technologies while respecting what he called indigenous irrigation systems. The Indian context in which he was educated and worked had much to do with that, as a long tradition of irrigation in India existed before the British arrived. Willcocks helped transfer Indian experiences to North Africa, propagating an integrated approach for the Nile, and the Euphrates and Tigris, by combining both irrigation and navigational improvement. These notions would also reach the United States. In 1875 US engineer George Davidson was sent on a federal irrigation mission to China, India, Egypt, and Italy to seek inspiration for remaking the American West. Jessica Teisch recently argued that India served as a prime example for irrigation projects in the state of California. Davidson was pivotal in the transfer of Indian hydraulic knowledge to the Golden State.

Other American technicians sought inspiration from foreign and imperial projects as well. John L. Savage, the BoR’s chief designing engineer in 1924 and instrumental for the Hoover and Grand Coulee Dams, had significant foreign experience. Nicknamed ‘Jack Dam’, he accepted a range of international consultancy jobs over the 1940s, including in Hawaii, and in Great Britain, and Australia, as well as in Afghanistan. His extensive 1944 survey of China’s Yellow River was the inspiration for the massive Three Gorges Dam, opened in 2003. Savage was hardly the only one. Hugh Lincoln Cooper, architect of Wilson Dam on the Tennessee river, was lead engineer of the vast Dnieprostroi dam in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Through him, Soviet influences also made it to the American continent.

More to the east, Japan also initiated considerable hydro projects outside its national frontiers. The remaking of the Yalu River bordering on Manchukuo and Korea epitomized Japanese colonial development expertise. Japanese dam-development in this area started immediately after the annexation of Korea in 1910. Work on the Sup’ung Dam commenced in 1937. In addition, engineers built the vast Fengman Dam in occupied China during the 1940s, producing electric power while providing flood protection and irrigation water. Fengman became a focal point for Japanese engineers and authorities, receiving a considerable stream of visitors. Similar to the Soviet Union and France, Japan also gained extensive hydro-engineering experiences during the Interwar years, primarily within the colonial setting, which would be of use in the post-1945 years – also on the Mekong.

These examples show that the TVA (and US river management in general) was not isolated nor unique. It also highlights the profound imperial imprint on water projects. Such projects are often seen as attempts to subjugate nature and control space. This was the crux of Karl Wittfogel’s famed thesis of ‘Oriental Despotism’. He claimed that large-scale hydraulic enterprises require vast resources and extensive bureaucracies, leading to a specific Asian type of political regime in imperial China. Historian Donald Worster has made a similar claim for the reclamation of the American West. This hinged on a relatively small power elite, namely the BoR, which effectively ruled over a large, anonymous, dependent population by controlling capital investments and expertise. The BoR used the West’s aridity and the necessity to provide water to justify its rule and enhance its authority. Others have supported this thesis, concluding that control over water is ‘intimately bound up with command over territory’.29
Similar claims have been made for the TVA. Sarah Phillips has argued that it held ‘exclusive jurisdiction over a single geographical region’. Not just dam-building in the South but federal involvement came to be seen as a form of imperialism – benign or not. During the 1930s many, including FDR, felt the American South resembled a colonial economy lacking modernization impulses. Southern Democrat and congressmember Maury Maverick argued that the ‘South actually work[ed] for the North’ as corporations extracted Southern ‘money northward like African ivory from the Congo’. Many saw modernization impulses from the federal government as showing the way – which most again saw as imperial. The TVA was seen a key part of this, as some contemporaries felt as if ‘Washington […] regarded the valley as a colony’. Others have argued that the racial divide in the American South bore strong resemblances with imperial settings around the globe, where white overlords ruled over vast colored populations. Tore Olsson has argued that apart from the color line, ‘in many ways Dixie bore great resemblance to stratified postcolonial societies of the Global South’, in terms of ‘inequalities in landownership, economic power, and political rights’. In that sense, dam-building in the US was not just touched by imperial experiences abroad but also bore a colonial imprint to many when it came to the American South.

With that there seemed to be a link between state-building and river-development knowledge since the late nineteenth century. This was the case for the British Empire but surely also for the US, with the BoR and the reclamation of the West. Jessica Wang has argued that World War II did not pose a break for social knowledge, and the same can be said for engineering ideas. Engineers have always been instrumental in nation-state-building in ways similar to imperial projects, trying to control territory and making societies legible and socio-economically viable. The rise of the interventionist and developmentalist state clearly built upon scientific and technological experts, including engineers.

The TVA’s post-war surge

Whether or not the TVA lived up to its initial aims to jumpstart the development of the South is up for discussion. Historian Nancy Grant argued that Norris Dam, a cornerstone project of the early TVA, did not live up to its expectations and ‘can hardly be judged a success in providing modernization’. One historian even claimed the TVA did not effectuate any significant improvements in the material standards of the American South during the first decade or so, as areas outside of TVA’s programs fared just as well or better. This is confirmed by Bruce Schulman who regarded World War II as the turning point. The war implied switching gears for the TVA in order to cater to the military efforts. TVA chairman David Lilienthal provided more thrust for industrialization efforts by working a defense scheme with Harry Hopkins – one of FDR’s main federal relief administrators – planning an increase in power production, but also airplane and gun factories. This also provided a training impulse for local workers. TVA’s dams were formidable assets in powering the facilities at Oak Ridge, one of the sites of the Manhattan Project. During the war, the waterways of the Tennessee River transported record-breaking amounts of freight and electricity fueled the American war effort. Although this occurred at the expense of the intended socioeconomic development of the Tennessee Valley, TVA propaganda legitimized this wartime shift in priorities by
alluding to ‘kilowatts to kill the rats’ (the rats being the Nazis and Japanese). While the TVA facilitated the defense industry, private corporations followed in its footsteps.

After the war, the TVA found a new outlet in the mushrooming development surge. Part of this was channelled through American actors and agencies like the Point IV program and subsequent organizations such as the Agency for International Development (USAID). Several presidents would propagate TVA-like solutions not just for development purposes, but also to mitigate tensions between riparian states. Truman had high hopes for the TVA in his Point IV program and provided support for a river-like solution of the Israeli-Palestine conflict. His successor Eisenhower extended that even further but to no avail. At the same time, the World Bank applied TVA principles to help draft the 1960 Indus Water Treaty (IWT) between India and Pakistan. This gave further rise to the belief that applying TVA principles could help engineer peace.

But this was hardly the only post-1945 influence that the TVA had. After World War II the TVA’s role as a template would gain further importance outside US policy circles. The TVA proved highly compatible with a new international discourse on development that strongly valued alleged universal solutions that were rooted in technical and scientific expertise. Buttressing this discourse, new IOs established themselves as ‘clearing-houses’ and conveyor belts of ideas on development and reconstruction. The TVA became one of the best-practices in the development tool box of both UN and World Bank. This is not to say that the post-war consensus on river development only evolved around the TVA. Both organizations saw a considerable influx of (former) colonial experts as well as indigenous expertise. One example of exchange was the UN’s 1949 Scientific Conference on the Conservation and Utilization of Resources (UNSCCUR). A trip to the Tennessee Valley was one of the conference excursions, several TVA-staffers spoke at the venue, and frequent references were made to it both during the opening and closing sessions. One participant thought of the TVA as a ‘fairy story’ and ‘one of the most inspiring events of the Conference’.

UNSCCUR was a meeting place for international experts on river development and dam-building, forming a cohort of development experts for years to come, and leading to several handbooks on river development. While the socialist world remained fairly absent from IOs in the first postwar decade, many other nations sent their river experts, too. Though TVA ideas figured prominently, they hardly were the product of US engineering only.

The World Bank was also strongly influenced by ideas from the TVA, playing a key role in the Bank’s technical assistance. Knowledge came with several key Bank staff members that were former TVA employees. New institutional arrangements at the Bank helped facilitate the circulation of knowledge. One such example was the Economic Development Institute (EDI). Set up in 1956, EDI was an educational program to professionalize the bureaucratic staff of development countries. Co-funded through the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, the EDI aimed to infuse Third World-officials with Western developmental ideology and hands-on approaches. Until 1962, the EDI offered a six-month course on preparing, planning and administrating economic development projects. One recurring field trip in the course was a week-long visit to the TVA. For the Bank, the TVA served as an important asset in transferring Western ideas on development, in a way comparable to the TVA at UNSCCUR.

Both the UN and World Bank helped form a cohort of post-1945 technical experts and consultants, which were not strictly US-based nor centered. Instead, ideas emanating
from the TVA became appropriated by other experts and mixed with other sources of knowledge. One such source was clearly colonial. With the dissolution of European empires, many scholars have argued, former colonial technicians and administrators found new employment in the emerging development apparatus. French, Dutch, and British colonial ministries became the organizational backbone for national developmental policies. \(^{50}\) Kirk-Greene has shown that many colonial experts also made it into IOs. Hodge calculated that roughly half of the last generation of the British Colonial Service made ‘a seamless transition from being late colonial technocrats to becoming postcolonial, international development experts’, ending up in UN organizations and the World Bank. \(^{51}\) Since Britain was the second largest stockholder of the Bank – after the US – they supplied approximately half of the initial staff until it would grow and diversify extensively under the McNamara presidency in the 1960s. \(^{52}\) This gave the Bank not only a significant number of former TVA-ers, but also a large contingent of postcolonial technocrats. The TVA became part of this maelstrom of ideas and continuities, turning into an international template that both US and non-US policymakers could tap into.

**A TVA on the Mekong?**

Many of these experts reconnected in the development of one of Southeast Asia’s most important rivers: the Mekong. This was a site where not only IOs and regional actors worked, inspired by the TVA, but where the US also promoted TVA-like solutions to mitigate the military conflict. In this process various forms of knowledge coincided, sometimes working together but also serving different interests. Clearly, the objectives of the LBJ presidency were not entirely aligned with those of more development-oriented actors. This latter category included Mekong riparian states, supported by former colonizers through the IOs discussed above. This makes the Mekong case an insightful one to observe how various streams of knowledge came together, including imperial and TVA-related notions of water management. At the same time, it is a locus where TVA ideas met after having followed different trajectories of knowledge circulation.

Prior to this TVA-inspired attention for the river, the French had already projected a key role for the Mekong in their Indochinese corner of the empire. In 1866 the French colonial administration established a *Mission du Mekong* which initiated what probably was the first systematic exploration of the river from a scientific, economic, and military point of view. \(^{53}\) Following a change of government in 1879 a more progressive *mission civilisatrice* aimed to improve the lives of colonial inhabitants through public works. Engineers consequently schemed railroads, roads, canals, and schools, much of which would be built in the Mekong Delta. \(^{54}\) Shortly after the war, and just before the region’s independence, colonial administrators created the *Fonds d’investissement pour le développement économique et social* as (what turned out to be) a final attempt to boost socio-economic development within the colonies. \(^{55}\) All the same few systematic studies and large-scale plans were made on the Mekong before the Second World War, though the river’s potential was recognized. As a colonial inspector wrote in 1949, ‘the Mekong will be developed [and] become a new Tennessee’ through international cooperation. \(^{56}\)

Post-independent Southeast Asia was not entirely stable. The French left the region in a hurry after 1954 and their Indochinese empire fell apart into Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Vietnam experienced internal strife leading to a separation in 1956 between the
North, controlled by the communist Việt Minh, and the South, increasingly supported by US economic and military aid. Laos and Cambodia also experienced communist insurrections. Arguably the most stable, both economically and politically, was Thailand. Never colonized by Western countries, it became a constitutional monarchy in 1932 and assumed a policy of modernization.

Despite these conflicts, countries took river development planning to another level. Together with Western support and under the aegis of the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), they laid the foundations for what became known as the so-called Mekong project. After an initial piecemeal phase when the BoR made a survey in 1955, an international group of experts traveled the Mekong basin in 1957, to eventually conclude the river had a vast potential for development. This led to the establishment of the Committee for Co-ordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin, or Mekong Committee, composed of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam, as an autonomous organization. It consisted of the Mekong Secretariat, housed in Bangkok and led by an Executive Agent, a position held by US national C. Hart Schaaf between 1959 and 1969. Its main tasks included the management and coordination of river development plans. Furthermore, each member government had a National Mekong Committee that helped setting and negotiating policy, made up mostly of former members of the ‘indigenous’ technical elite of colonial times. The Committee also had an External Advisory Board, featuring prominent international hydrological and developmental persons, providing advice and helping to raise capital for the project as a whole. This so-called Mekong Committee boiled over with optimism, writing in its first report that it was ‘convinced that the lower Mekong basin would add greatly to the economic development of Southeast Asia’. Other countries seemed to concur, as support was a global effort. Apart from considerable financial contributions from, for example, the United States ($2,2 million), assistance also came in kind. Iran provided 255 thousand gallons (965 thousand liters) of fuel, while New Zealand provided four jet crafts for river exploration.

The Mekong Committee used river basin manuals as the main guideline for planning. The first of its kind was published by ECAFE in 1955, entitled Manual of River Basin Planning. While intellectually indebted to the TVA, its author was the Indian engineer Kanwar Sain, who, in a sense, exemplified the fusion of TVA ideas. Sain was a leading international dam expert, having served on the Indian Central Water and Power Commission, working on vast national projects from the Damodar Valley to the Rajasthan Canal. The Damodar scheme was explicitly modelled after the TVA. In addition to various study trips to the US, he led a 1955 Indian mission examining Soviet technical facilities that might be of interest to developing countries, including water and power projects, and also studied Chinese river projects in the early 1950s. This global interest hardly comes at a surprise as India’s 1938 National Planning Committee took the Soviet Union, the Japanese Meiji regime, and the US New Deal as explicit examples – also for river development. Despite being a recent independent country, India thus built upon a long lineage of development projects.

The UN commissioned a second manual in 1958, authored by an international panel composed of Soviet, US, Dutch, and French experts. The 1958 report mentioned ‘the construction of dams on the Tennessee’ as one of the first multipurpose
river development schemes, and also regarded the TVA as the model for a river basin organization. Yet through its diverse authorship these publications of codified knowledge cross-fertilized TVA-ideas with experiences elsewhere. Both manuals insisted on long-term planning in various phases. The 1958 report was the most detailed on this, identifying subsequent phases for 1) preliminary investigation and organization, 2) general reconnaissance in order to formulate a preliminary plan, 3) implementation, starting with small-scale projects and so-called pilot projects, and 4) the construction and operation of major structures. The Committee would follow these steps.

With the 1957 study tour and the establishment of the Mekong Committee as the first phase, the next phase commenced around 1958. Its preliminary plan identified three priority projects: Pa Mong, Sambor, and the Tonle Sap. All three were situated on the main river, and called for costly and challenging dam projects. Pa Mong dam was planned in a narrow ridge on the Mekong between Thailand and Laos, some 60 km (37 miles) from the Laotian capital Vientiane. The 250 meter (820 feet) high multi-purpose dam would have an installed capacity of 1,800 MW and irrigate 1,500,000 hectares of land. The second priority project was Sambor, situated on the Mekong in Cambodian territory. Smaller than Pa Mong at 56 meters (184 feet), this dam was designed to have a 1,600 MW power capacity along with 150,000 hectares of irrigated land. The last project centered around Tonle Sap, the largest lake of Cambodia and long used as a natural storage facility of water. This site would specifically provide irrigation and land improvement of some 3,000,000 hectares of land, by reversing the flow of water in the dry season. All three projects would provide irrigation for agriculture, but also hydro-electricity to boost economic development. In addition, these would also enable year-round navigation on the river and help to contain seasonal flooding.

In addition, the Japanese government dispatched a reconnaissance team in 1959 to study several Mekong tributaries, resulting in the formulation of a preferred pilot project: Nam Ngum. Situated on a river by the same name and north of the Laotian capital Vientiane, Nam Ngum dam would produce power and provide irrigation water. The Japanese firm Nippon Koei ran point on Nam Ngum, founded in 1953 by Japanese engineer Yutaka Kobato. He had been an engineering consultant in Korea, Manchuria and Vietnam before the Second World War, and also surveyed rivers in the Dutch East Indies at the request of the Japanese occupation forces. Parts of his company were seized after 1945, but Kobato was able to restore his international contacts quickly through Nippon Koei, and became an oft-used consultant for Asian countries and IOs. Further underlining the lingering colonial legacy was the involvement of French engineering firm Société Grenobloise d’Études et d’Applications Hydrauliques (SOGRÉAH). SOGRÉAH had made hydrological studies for the Rhône during the 1930s, examined irrigation systems for French colonies in Africa, and had made coastal surveys in Indochina. After World War II, the firm was active in water-related development assistance, mostly in Africa and the Middle East, but also for the Mekong Committee. In short, various kinds of knowledge circulated and came together on the river Mekong – including knowledge derived from an imperial context – and thus competed and overlapped with US know-how.
US involvement on the Mekong

This extensive planning by regional and international actors is hardly acknowledged in current historiography, which sees the Mekong endeavor as a footnote and primarily driven by the US. Yet Washington’s role only became pronounced after 1965, with Johnson’s speech as the major turning point. Before that the US supported the Mekong Project but stayed at arm’s length. The State Department argued that the US were not ‘expected to take a leading and even directing role, here our strength is in being retiring and merely being available’. State avoided any overt interference and participation in the Mekong schemes in 1957, deeming it ‘advisable that the United States abstain from pushing itself into the foreground in Mekong development at this time’. While recognizing the project ‘to be a significant symbol with unusual political merit’, it expected ‘nothing even remotely
comparable to a Tennessee Valley Authority’ and thought the Mekong countries should be discouraged from such grandiose and ambitious planning. The US did endorse the project mainly because of the potential political significance but without playing a too active role.

This changed with Johnson’s Baltimore speech, which sought to turn the Mekong project into an instrument of US foreign policy. After the 1964 Tonkin incident, Johnson succumbed to military pressure and initiated a sustained bombing campaign to try and cripple and demoralize North Vietnam. The White House saw the Mekong as a pathway to economic development, hoping to ameliorate its status in Southeast Asia. A first draft of the speech circulated in early January, and spoke of the need to recapture ‘the imagination of the American press and public, [and] to pioneer new forms of international economic, political, and military cooperation’.

This seemed a reasonable goal as the American public grew increasingly hostile to US Vietnam policy, starting with men burning their draft cards, and moving on to teach-in protests, and several self-immolations. The Mekong proposal was part of what would become known as ‘The Other War in Vietnam’: one of modernization of Vietnamese society, its political institutions, its economy, and ways of subsistence. Thi Dieu argued that Washington felt that supporting the Mekong project could reduce the appeal of communism in South Vietnam, and possible lure the North into economic cooperation. The latter – though whether this was a genuine attempt at rapprochement or not – is hard to assess, mimicked conceptions of the TVA as a model that could help mitigate tensions in the region, in line with preceding presidencies.

As could be expected Johnson’s attempt to bring North Vietnam into the fold and initiate a peaceful and cooperative endeavor by stimulating the economic development of Southeast Asia was rejected by Hanoi. China was not interested either. The hope of bringing the Communist side of the Vietnam conflict to the table collapsed. The Mekong Committee countries were not immediately positive about US involvement anyway. Kanwar Sain, the Indian engineer also serving on the Mekong Committee, wrote that US involvement in Vietnam had ‘shattered the Asian confidence in the American leadership and direction’. In order to circumvent this, the Johnson Administration tried to plant the idea within the UN, meaning ‘that to the maximum extent possible, the concept must appear to be an Asian initiative’. As the Mekong project indeed was a regional initiative from the start, the White House idea signaled their renewed attention in light of the Vietnam War.

This implied that the White House could not ignore the existing international groundwork, nor could it do without the help of IOs. Subsequently US officials exerted pressure on the Mekong Committee, the UN, and the World Bank. Johnson asked former World Bank president (1949–1963) Eugene Black to act as broker between the various parties. He reportedly enjoyed great trust in international circles and had played a key role in engineering the IWT. Shortly after LBJ’s April 1965 speech, Black argued that the State Department should use existing institutions as much as possible. He hoped that the Mekong Committee would develop into ‘in effect, a Mekong Development Authority’, an agency more akin to the TVA. UN Secretary General U Thant supported Johnson’s initiative, but insisted on gradual implementation and working through the existing machinery. In other words, Thant turned down a new TVA structure for the Mekong’s development. The World Bank felt the pressure from the Johnson Administration, but hesitated to become more involved and finance projects.
Without support of both allied and antagonized states in Southeast Asia, and with IOs insisting on gradual development, Johnson’s ambitious offer gained little ground. In order to keep at least some momentum, Black strongly insisted that the US take the lead in financing Nam Ngum dam, by providing half of the capital. Nam Ngum was seen as the best project of the Mekong Committee thus far, though it was hardly a project comparable to the ‘big three’. While enjoying the support of the UN and the Laotian government, the World Bank had refused to finance Nam Ngum twice (in 1963 and 1964), because it expected that only modest investments in power and irrigation development were justified at that time. It also lambasted the tricky political situation in Laos.

With the renewed Mekong interest of Johnson, the Bank experienced very strong pressure from the White House. As USAID’s involvement in Vietnam became ‘seriously discredited’ and Congress became increasingly critical, the Bank seemed a serious alternative for US foreign aid. Clearly, the US as the largest shareholder held some sway over the Bank’s policies. The Bank’s Director of Operations, J. Knapp Burke, wrote that he was ‘buttonholed’ on this subject by Secretary of State Dean Rusk. As Catherine Gwin has argued, US influence on the Bank ‘has been important but not absolute’. With the Bank not succumbing to that pressure, the strong financial backing of the US was more than welcome to the Mekong countries.

At this stage, all parties in favor of developing the Mekong river took inspiration from the TVA in one way or another. The White House was arguably most explicit about this as Johnson made clear in his speech. Both the UN and Bank also had an imprint of TVA-elements as made clear in the preceding section. Finally, the Mekong Committee, largely working with UN manuals as their guideline, also took their cue from the TVA. With these TVA-infused knowledge flows meeting in Southeast Asia, a consensus did not necessarily emerge – neither over the technical steps of planning, nor over the socio-political aims underpinning the Mekong project. This turned the ambitious Johnson proposal into a dead letter, and partially explains the slow progress of the Mekong Committee’s work.

But with the Johnson Administration pledging half of Nam Ngum’s costs the stalemated project moved forward. The World Bank, too, announced its willingness to be involved under certain conditions. In early April it offered to administer the funds for the dam, freeing the way for the so-called Nam Ngum Development Fund Agreement signed in May 1966. Nine countries took part: the US, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Japan, Laos, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Thailand. Besides financing the construction of the dam annex power station, the Fund would finance a transmission line from the power station to Thailand. Seven of the countries (all besides Laos and Thailand) provided a combined $23 million in the form of gifts. Thailand would provide $1 million worth of cement for the building of the dam and furnish its neighbor with electricity during the construction period, which Laos would eventually repay with an equal amount of electricity. The World Bank would administer and provide general supervision of the project, while feasibility studies of Nam Ngum were arranged by the Mekong Committee and financed by the UN Special Fund and Japan. Again, while the US acted as the main contributor, its role remained rather limited within this multilateral scheme.

The signing of this document gave rise to celebratory feelings. The Laotian government saw it as a huge step towards ‘a hitherto unknown economic development and
a definite improvement of the social well-being of the population’, who had ‘not enjoyed
the advantages of modern science’. The Thai government was less explicit in expressing
its enthusiasm but nevertheless saw Nam Ngum as a step towards bigger projects on the
Mekong river. The Mekong Committee regarded it an indicator of success for the
‘Mekong Spirit’, and a stepping stone towards bigger and bolder dams on the main river.

Despite the success with Nam Ngum, the overall progress of the Mekong Committee was
lackluster. Despite many and often grandiose plans for damming the Mekong, little (on
riparian rivers) to no (on the mainstream) concrete has been poured to date. One needs to
underline the changing perspective on dams and their overall role in development. While
dam-building enthusiasm remained high during the 1950s and 1960s, increasingly strong
protests were launched over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. Since the early 1970s, the
Mekong Committee therefore devoted more attention to socioeconomic development of the
people living in the Lower Mekong Basin. This also included studies on resettlement resulting
from the construction of the dams, including Pa Mong, and the ecological consequences of
Mekong river development. Yet the first bigger dams are only being built at the time of
writing, with the Xayaburi and Don Sahong dams under construction in Laos, while the
Chinese have already erected several dams in their stretch of the Mekong. While the
consensus in the Western world has turned against large-scale dams, with the World Bank
even stepping out of several major projects, these vast concrete proposals remain on the
drawing boards in the Mekong basin. Laos in particular still seems destined to become the
‘hydro-battery’ of the region.

In this light, and with the US involvement again moving to the background, Nam
Ngum would effectively be the only tangible outcome of Johnson’s Baltimore proposal.
While LBJ hoped to boost the region’s development in a more pronounced way, and to
mitigate tensions arising from the Vietnam conflict both in the region and at home, Nam
Ngum almost seemed like a consolation prize for the US in several respects. The war
dragged on, and domestic criticism on his Southeast Asia policy remained vocal. To
complete the circle, Johnson again connected the Vietnam War with the Mekong’s
development in a March 1968 speech. In it, he not only announced the end of aerial
bombing in Southeast Asia, he also told the American public that he was not seeking
reelection, essentially tying his political credibility to the armed conflict in Asia. While
talking about US aims of peace, self-determination, and economic progress in all of
Vietnam (both North and South), Johnson again brought up his Hopkins speech,
repeating that ‘the United States would take part in the great work of developing
Southeast Asia, including the Mekong Valley, for all the people of that region’.

Conclusions

If taken seriously at all, the Mekong project is often seen as a US-infused and TVA-like
endeavor. Yet this article shows that it built upon a layered set of ideas, and a much wider
range of actors. In this, US and TVA concepts were important, but complemented by other
visions with a significant colonial imprint, in both direct and indirect ways. Indirectly, such
imperial legacies were at work in US experiences, both stemming from global and domestic
origins as US engineers took stock from imperial projects since the late nineteenth century,
but also as the development of the American South was branded to be ‘colonial’. This
included the TVA. But while Olsson and Zimmermann, and others, showed how US-
inspired development projects mimicked the racial divide in the American South, this was not so much the case in the Mekong basin. The Mekong Committee, though having a strong Western imprint, saw significant regional expert representation. Japanese technicians played key consulting roles. In addition, UN top officials involved, including U Thant, were non-Western. Though not a case of equal representation, the Mekong project did not resemble the strict segregation of either Dixie or imperial settings. The influence of the French with their colonial river commission, of British water management, of Japanese dam-building knowledge, and of Indian river development experiences also left their mark on the Mekong Committee’s work, and the IOs involved.

In a similar vein as Wang, Engerman and Unger have claimed that seeing development as a more global project also stretches its temporal boundaries to well before the 1940s. In doing so, it lessens the priority given to US-led development projects which became prominent in the 1950s and 1960s. The Mekong river is one example of a case where such ideas found an outlet, and where all actors involved took the TVA as a central example in their plans in one way or the other. This case nicely illustrates how knowledge stemming from the original TVA experience found different pathways to Southeast Asia, undergoing various transformations and alterations along the way.

For the United States, the legacy of the TVA became part of the foreign aid apparatus, starting with Truman’s Point IV program. The TVA itself also assumed an active role in providing development assistance. At the same time, several US presidents used the TVA as a path to development while seeking to improve relationships between antagonistic riparian states. Following the example of the Indus Basin, presidents set up such development-diplomacy missions for the river Jordan. TVA development ideas thus came to serve domestic and security agendas from the start, as they had already done during the New Deal era and World War II.

Yet at the same time TVA ideas became firmly embedded in the development toolboxes of both the UN and World Bank. Here these ideas mingled with river development experience from elsewhere – including colonial and indigenous knowledge. Many former colonial administrators and technicians found a new home in IOs including the Bank and the UN. Other influences came from experts working within the IO setting, with the prominent post-war role of the Indian engineer Kanwar Sain being illustrative here. Much of the river development knowledge was codified in several handbooks for river development, and the Mekong Committee used these as their template for planning.

While taking its cue from the TVA, the Mekong Project did not necessarily evolve around direct US involvement and insistence. This has been the main argument in the existing historiography, however. Before the US became more involved in 1965, it was the Mekong Committee that was the institutional arm of this river development endeavor, working with IOs and a diverse international group of countries, including former colonial powers such as Japan and France. Stronger even, and in contrast to the reigning view in the literature, Washington initially refused to be (politically) tied to the project, while supporting the Mekong efforts through technical assistance.

This changed with LBJ’s Johns Hopkins speech, as the US stance of non-engagement with the Mekong project changed with the escalation of the Vietnam War. President Johnson’s announcement to provide a billion dollars in 1965 went as far to suggest that the TVA would be eclipsed by the Mekong. Yet LBJ’s peace-through-development suggestion was rejected almost immediately by non-allies. Instead of a unilateral effort,
this development at the Vietnam War ‘front’ required an international underpinning. To make a Mekong impact, Washington had to rely upon the existing international framework spearheaded by the Mekong Committee, and even find additional actors like the World Bank. In the end, this strengthened the international character of the Mekong project more than it helped US Cold War aims in that region. At the same time the depth to which the White House went to support the project shows how serious LBJ felt about the Mekong development – something not recognized in existing literature.

This also shows that although many of the ideas and knowledge underpinning the aims and intentions of actors in the Mekong endeavor came from the TVA model stemming from the US, they were not woven together in a seamless fashion. The different circulations and appropriation of knowledge stemming from the TVA thus followed various diverse pathways, before converging on the Mekong river.

Notes

1. “President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Address at Johns Hopkins University.”
2. Johnson, The Vantage Point, 132.
3. David Lilienthal’s famous book on the TVA had a special annex on this for its anniversary edition, see Lilienthal, TVA, annex C. On this, also see e.g. Ekbladh, The Great.
4. The episode receives some sparse attention in VanDeMark, Into the Quagmire, 122–124; Adas, Dominance, 330–331; and Elkind, Aid Under Fire, 7.
7. Quoted in Schulman, From Cotton Belt, 3.
10. Martin, “TVA and International Technical Assistance,” 8–9; and Kunkel, Empire of Pictures, 86–89.
11. Ekbladh, The Great. One such example is described in Cullather, “Damming Afghanistan.”
12. David Biggs work on Mekong river development has also singled out the BoR’s influence. See his “Reclamation Nations”; Quagmire. Chris Sneddon’s recent book also is worth mentioning here, Concrete Revolution. While putting forward the appeal of the TVA for Tanzanian development, Heather Hoag’s article also highlights the foreign activities of the BoR. See her “Transplanting the TVA?” To some extent, the TVA and the ACE are related. According to the first TVA chairman Arthur Morgan, the initial idea of Roosevelt was to make the TVA the planning body, while ACE would be responsible for the execution of such plans. See Morgan, The Making of the TVA, 18–19.
13. See for example Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings; Patel, The New Deal; Tyrrell, Transnational Nation; and Grift, Couperus, and Lagendijk, “Experimental Spaces.”
22. Dorn, “Hugh Lincoln Cooper.” Also see Hughes, American Genesis, 264–267.
23. Moore, “‘The Yalu River Era of Developing Asia,’” 118–22. Noguchi would emerge out of the war as the leader of the Japan Nitrogenous Fertilizer (or Nitchitsu), one of the big zabiatsu companies. See Mimura, Planning for Empire, 27.
24. Moore, Constructing East Asia, 150.
25. For French post-war use of river development experiences see Boudeville, “Aménagement.” For the Soviet Union, see Lagendijk, “Divided Development.”
27. Smith, “Rehabilitating a Renegade?”; and Peet, “Introduction to The Life and Thought of Karl Wittfogel.”
29. Beinart and Hughes, Environment and Empire, 120. See for example Coopey and Tvedt, “Introduction,” xxi; and Reisner, Cadillac Desert, chap. 2.
30. Phillips, This Land, 252–253. For a similar argument, see Pritchett, The Tennessee Valley Authority, 131.
32. Schulman, From Cotton Belt, 7.
34. See for example Zimmerman, Alabama in Africa, 20; and Clune, “From Light Copper,” 281.
36. A similar image of the region characterized by a “rigid and total racial system” is put forward in Katznelson, Fear Itself, 134–135. Phillips made a similar point in her This Land, 80.
38. Grant, TVA and Black Americans, 266–267.
40. See note 32 above, 92.
41. Hughes, American Genesis, 381–398.
42. National Archives of the United States, College Park, MD (hereafter: NARA), Record Group 179: Records of the War Production Board, 1918-1947, “Kilowatts to Kill the Rats. TVA Power Gives Us Aluminum for Planes.,” 1942.
43. See note 32 above, 94.
44. Lowi, Water and Power; Allan, “Hydro-Peace in the Middle East.”
45. Haines, “(Inter)Nationalist Rivers?”; and Alam, “Questioning the Water Wars Rationale.”
46. Lagendijk, “From American South.”
52. Mason and Asher, The World Bank, 68; and Sharma, Robert McNamara’s Other War, 42.
54. Biggs, Quagmire, 4, 30–34.
Souvannavong (chairman, Laos), H.E. Sonn-Voeun-Sai (Cambodia member), Dr. Boonrod Binson (Thai member), Mr. Pham-Minh-Duong (Vietnam member), 31 August 1959 – Progress Report No. 3.


69. This is the case in for example Ekbladh, “Mr. TVA”; VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 123–25; and Adas, *Dominance by Design*, 330.


77. LBJ, IT 68, Box 18, Folder IT 80 Asian Development Bank, Memorandum for the Secretary, 6 December 1965.


80. LBJ, White House Subject Files, International Organizations, Box 18, Folder IT 80 Asian Development Bank Memorandum for the Secretary, 6 December 1965, authored by J. W. Barr, 4.

81. United Nations Organizations Archives, New York, NY (hereafter: UNARMS), S-0200-2-1, “Notes on Meeting held at United Nations Headquarters at 9 a.m. on Monday 19 April 1965.”


83. LBJ, NSF, Files of McGeorge Bundy, Box 9, Folder Chron File, 1–15 June 1965 (1 of 2), Memorandum for the President, “Rebuttal of Congressional Attack on $89 Million for Southeast Asia,” 8 June 1965.
84. WBGA, 182920B, Letter Michael L. Lejeune (assistant director, Department of Operations, Far East) to Phouangphet Phanareth (Sec of State for Finance, Laos) 14 May 1963. The second reject: WBGA, 182920B, Off Mem A.D. Spottswood to Gordon Street, 8 June 1964, “Nam Ngum Project – Laos.”
87. Gwin, “U.S. Relations,” 243. Also see Sharma, Robert McNamara’s Other War, 13–16.
92. Laos hydroelectric power, ““Battery of SE Asia” Laos in the Spotlight”; and Stone, “Mayhem on the Mekong.”
93. Lyndon Baines Johnson, “The President’s Address.”

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, under a VENI scheme (Dossiernr. 275-53-007); Moody Research Grant from the Moody Foundation to conduct research at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library [9561247].

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