Abstract
Since the transition to a quasi-civilian government in 2011, there have been significant political and economic shifts in Myanmar with implications for the governance of the Salween River basin. These include renewed momentum behind the peace process, deepening economic trade and investment with neighboring countries, and new possibilities for the pursuit of longstanding plans for large hydropower dams.

In this paper, we present a political economic analysis of water governance of the Salween Basin. We frame our analysis utilizing a “pathways approach.” Our analysis of a development pathway entails analyzing how different actors’ visions for the basin are being formulated and acted upon, including the narratives produced, and the decision-making processes invoked. We draw on an extensive literature review, expert interviews conducted over 2016 and 2017, and participatory engagement in meetings.

We analyze three major divergent pathways in this paper with implications for the Salween Basin: large hydropower dams, including the relationship with the peace process; water transfer from the Salween to the Chaophraya basin; and proposals for a Salween peace park and local-level development. We show how some pathways have historically been given privileged consideration by national-level government policy makers, in particular for large hydropower dams. We argue that there is a need for careful consideration of multiple policy goals, including related to: peace and security; decentralization and community participation; and food, water and energy security.