Introduction
In the Mekong-Lancang basin, there is simultaneously tension and cooperation across a wide range of issues related to transboundary water sharing. These relate to divergent visions for the basin, ranging from the importance of healthy ecosystems and access to local common pool resources that are the foundation of local livelihoods including wild capture fisheries and small-scale agriculture, to plans for large-scale hydropower dams, irrigation schemes and navigation that emphasize the importance of national and regional economic growth. Transboundary water governance is complex in the Lancang-Mekong basin given the diverse range of state and non-state actors’ interests. Two key transboundary water governance are the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Framework. Recent research has highlighted the important role “reciprocity plays” in international law, institutions and international relations, including regarding the principle of Equitable and Reasonable Utilization (ERU) that is the cornerstone of international water law. Yet, how reciprocity is applied in practice in transboundary water governance is not well understood, and is the focus of our research activities in the Mekong-Lancang basin.

Conceptualizing reciprocity
According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, reciprocity is defined as “behaviour in which two people or groups of people give each other help and advantage.” In our research, we see “reciprocity in practice” in international behaviour in which two people or groups of people give each other help and advantage. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, reciprocity is defined as a principle of Equitable and Reasonable Utilization (ERU) that is the cornerstone of international water law. Yet, how reciprocity is applied in practice in transboundary water governance is not well understood, and is the focus of our research activities in the Mekong-Lancang basin.

We disaggregate the concept of “reciprocity in practice” to be specific or diffuse, positive or negative, and exclusive or inclusive. We apply our ‘reciprocity in practice’ framework to four contemporary issues in the Mekong-Lancang basin: commercial water abstraction, hydropower, navigation; mainstream hydropower; drought and flood management; and regional economic integration. While these issues have commonly been addressed in policy, practice, and academic studies, taken together we show how various types of reciprocity occurs simultaneously across them.

Findings and policy implications
We apply our ‘reciprocity in practice’ framework to four contemporary issues in the Mekong-Lancang basin: commercial water abstraction, hydropower, navigation; mainstream hydropower; drought and flood management; and regional economic integration. While these issues have commonly been addressed in policy, practice, and academic studies, taken together we show how various types of reciprocity occurs simultaneously across them.

Cross-cutting context
Customary systems, norms, and practices/policies/practice/standard/s
Direction
Collaborative action: Governance/advisory bodies, etc.
Direction
Collective action goes through individual phases: building awareness, creating a case,; mobilization/engagement/collective action/empowerment
Direction
Positive reciprocity: Actors are collaborative and generate mutual benefits, or ‘collective benefits’
Specific reciprocity: Limited exchange based on specific and reasonable action
Differentiation
Exclusive reciprocity: A limited range of actors involved in reciprocity, with high barriers to participation
Negative reciprocity: Activities and/or specific actions that generate mutual harm or ‘sacrifice’ benefits
Cardinal
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Research process
To explore the concept of reciprocity, CSDS organized a two-day Deep Dive in Bangkok on “Evolving Regional Architecture and Transboundary Water Governance in the Mekong Region” in September 2019, based on Chatham House rules. A total of 21 researchers from universities, think tanks and civil society joined the Deep Dive from all six countries of the Lancang-Mekong River. The main question addressed by the Deep Dive was “Could reciprocity be a basis for rethinking policies and strategies for cooperation on transboundary issues in the Mekong Region?”

The Deep Dive built from a research report and policy brief presented to government officials, scholars and civil society from across the Mekong Region at a Track 1.5 “Mekong Policy Dialogue” on “Evolving Sub-Regional Architecture in the ACMECS Region” held in Bangkok in June 2019, hosted by The Asia Foundation and the Australian Embassy in Thailand with support from CSDS. An academic article titled “Reciprocity in practice: the hydropolitics of equitable and reasonable utilization in the Lancang-Mekong basin” by Dr. Carl Middleton and Dr. David J. Devlaeminck was published in October 2020 in the journal International Environmental Agreements.

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Further Reading:
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