

Mekong Basin - Stueng Saen, Kampong Thum, Cambodia
(Credit: WorldFish/Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



How good is the Blue Peace Index?

By Bob McMullan
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At [World Water Week](#) in Stockholm last month the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) together with the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) launched the first edition of the [Blue Peace Index](#). The index is described as, “a tool...for improving transboundary water cooperation and management of shared water resources.”

The question “how good is the Blue Peace Index?” is not meant to be a ScoMo type rhetorical question, nor a query about the quality of the work of the esteemed EIU. Rather, I am concerned to establish how much extra value the index adds to the discussion of the very important question of water resource management in the water constrained environment of the twenty first century.

There is no doubt that water resource management is a crucial development issue at the moment and will become more so as the impact of climate change becomes greater. The underlying idea of Blue Peace, which emphasises the threat of conflict over cross-border boundary issues, is also valid and important.

Most of this is already known. What does a comparative index add to the debate?

The EIU describes the objectives of the index as to:

- incentivise stakeholders to improve their performance by tracking, and publishing, their progress in this space;
- highlight the optimal policy and management solutions available to respond to transboundary water opportunities and challenges;
- increase awareness of the concept of Blue Peace in the broader water management and peace-building communities;
- spur a public debate on the desirable goals and best practices for sustainable water management; and

- provide a tool for a holistic assessment of drivers and conditions for sustainable collaboration over time.

These goals are attempted by a [framework](#) of 26 measures across five domains: policy and legal frameworks; institutions and participation; water management and instruments; infrastructure and financing; and cooperation.

The publication of the [first index](#) recognises the risks and challenges inherent in structuring a composite index of this sort. First and foremost, it acknowledges the limitations driven by the need for simplification. Such an approach necessarily focuses on what is measurable and comparable across different countries and circumstances.

Nevertheless, the undoubted significance of the issues involved suggests the benefits will outweigh the limitations if the index can generate the incentives, awareness and debate for which the authors and sponsors aim.

As the index will be expanded in the next edition it is too early to make a definitive judgement. In particular, the next edition is expected to include a tool to measure developments over time.

However, as the basis for an interim judgement we can look at what the first edition has to say about the Mekong basin. (The others assessed this time are the Amazon, Sava, Senegal and Tigris-Euphrates). The EIU scores the Mekong third of the five basins assessed. (The Sava basin in Central and Southeastern Europe gets the highest rating, and the Tigris-Euphrates in Western Asia the lowest.) The Mekong's score is highest on "water management instruments" (second) and lowest on "infrastructure and financing" (fourth). As well as aggregate basin-wide scores, individual countries are also assessed. Amongst the countries of the Mekong, Thailand scores the highest, coming third of 24 countries assessed. (Slovenia gets the top score, and Syria the lowest.)

The major challenge for the Mekong basin is seen as the absence of a River Basin Organisation (RBO) that includes all the riparian states and which covers the entire basin with its tributaries as well as the main stream.

The first index also outlines opportunities for improvement in the management of the Mekong basin which will be interesting to monitor over subsequent editions.

On balance the Blue Peace Index is a positive development, but it clearly has a long way to go. Most obviously, it needs to be more comprehensive. A transboundary study which does not include the Nile, for example, is not the finished product. Beyond this I think it needs a few more iterations to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the constituent elements of

the Framework. The real test will come when it has a few editions of comparable data and attempts are made to assess the extent to which they have achieved their objectives. I very much doubt it will be able to achieve all its objectives. But it is always the case that you don't have to be able to achieve everything, to be able to achieve something.

It seems to me that the index should contribute positively to increased awareness of the importance of transboundary actions in response to the global freshwater crisis and their importance for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. There are also reasonable grounds for optimism about the ability of the index to highlight possible solutions and spur public debate. These would be worthwhile achievements if they can be accomplished.

Whether it is value for money is a question only SDC can answer. However, as the index develops and evolves I am optimistic that it will make a positive contribution to global development efforts, including in our region.

About the author/s

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