Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Angela Hogg, Regional Environment Office Director; and USAID/RDMA, October 21, 2020.***

**Notes**: (a) Unless indicated as a direct quote, these notes are not verbatim, and reflect the interviewers’ interpretation of what was said.

The interview was introduced by Klomjit Chandrapanya (World Bank), who summarised the World Bank’s (WB) history of engagement in the Mekong, and provided a background to the Mekong 3.0 initiative. He then handed over to the Mekong Futures interview team.

**Question 1: What do you think are the current challenges to sustainable development in the Mekong –Lancang region?**

USAID has a focus on transboundary environmental issues – the challenges that cannot be addressed by one country alone. Unsustainable extraction and use of natural resources from across the region endangers economic growth.

The need for individual countries to propel their own economic growth forwards may make sense at the individual country level but not regionally. Amongst the challenges that Ms. Hogg mentioned hydropower, forests, sand mining, and impacts on the flood pulse, unintended consequences and lack of shared management enabling equal opportunities for riparians to meet development objectives. USAID has also been looking at the potentials of low-head dams. We are concerned with a lot of the infrastructure – they are not against it, but would want transparent data platforms that all stakeholders can access. She feels that the most complete data possible is needed, and regional spaces for where data can be shared. There needs to be, in particular, data-sharing between upstream and downstream countries.

There is asymmetric information availability on floods and droughts. This puts individual countries at a disadvantage.

There is insufficient inclusion of civil society in dialogues. They want their platforms to be available to civil society to understand and debate trade-offs – as well as the private sector to address externalities, which can be very powerful.

John Ward (Mekong Futures] asks a question about the capacity to analyse data beyond just data gathering. Ms. Hogg mentions SERVIR-Mekong as an example of USAID-supported initiatives in this respect. High quality data is needed, but she acknowledged that information-overload could also be a problem.

The Mekong Infrastructure Tracker, an online platform (created by the USAID supported Mekong Safeguards Project) was introduced to stakeholders. She said that it can reveal the impacts of infrastructure, and can help countries to decide which infrastructure should be developed. Ms. Hogg described it as a planning tool.

Ms. Hogg mentions that they have recently signed an agreement with WWF that will look to support civil society to access data, and use it to gain influence.

**Question 2: What does regional cooperation mean to you? What are the opportunities for regional cooperation to support sustainable development in the Mekong- Lancang?**

Looking at challenges that need multi-country solutions. This can be done through a variety of fora – networks, the private sector, different types of engagement or civil society. Many different platforms, Ms. Hogg feels, can be a good thing.

There are many opportunities. She identified the MRC as one, the region’s only treaty-based multilateral. They are exploring the possibility to strengthen regional institutions to allow them to better support their ‘client countries’ and the purposes they were designed for. So too, drought is a crisis that is attracting much interest – this too is an opportunity. There are also options to work with other DPs who share the same interests– she mentions working with DFAT on the low-head dam initiative, and fish passage demonstration with Japan.

The COVID crisis has revealed system weaknesses. There is an opportunity to rethink these systems, to create resilience, new institutions and value chains.

John Ward [Mekong Futures] asks who identifies the challenges? The DPs, or the countries? Ms. Hogg replies that it depends on the initiative. The WWF initiative she mentioned earlier was based on consultations. Other institutions might have goals worthy of USAID support, and it seeks to deliver this to help them achieve their visions. But sometimes, they will support a specific issue proposed by an individual agency.

**Question 3:** **From your experience, are there examples where some or all of the Mekong-Lancang countries have cooperated to yield a clear and positive trans-boundary river management outcome?**

The MRC work around flood management and forecasting to safeguard lives and property. This example is also one where a willingness to share information is revealed.

Less controversial problems are ones where everyone agrees to share data. For example, resource rights, access and use.

Ms. Hogg says that they are still working out how they should coordinate with other (US) partners on their Mekong-US Partnership.

**Question 4: What are the relative advantages/merits of the different mechanisms for cooperation, and do you see any opportunities for improvements?**

We see the merits of working with institutions that have been endorsed by their countries. These have advantages. The likelihood of longevity for these institutions, Ms. Hogg says, is higher. She sees a triangle of government, society and the private sector as being a necessary framing for activity. Externalities need to be brought into decision-making. She points out that for many of the countries, engagement is described in law, so they also look at how they can support these countries to follow through.

Civil society and their contribution to development decisions is typically not endorsed by Governments: this need to be reconciled.

**Question 5:** **In your opinion, when cooperation occurs between Lancang-Mekong countries, what indicates its success? How do you know if cooperation is successful?**

We are grappling with this. USAID is very bilateral, so success tends to be measured very much at the country level and indicators are tangible. Success at the multilateral/regional level is a different thing and requires very different metrics. We want to see improved outcomes for citizens; inclusion; and well-managed resilient systems.

Ms. Hogg wonders about the legal frameworks governing regional initiatives – if individuals are to be held responsible (for infringements), at what point will ‘regional law’ switch over to national law. Coming at problems from the top can provide cover for individual countries. At these levels, countries don’t want to be standing alone.

At regional levels, things are highly complex – it all gets fuzzy. However, it does not have to be a ‘I win and you lose’ situation. There is a ‘win-win’ place. All governments care about is staying in power – so they have to respond to their constituents [whoever they may be]. As such, undermining one’s natural resources in the long-term has security implications. If you undermine your agricultural sector, that can spill into your political space. Long-term planning is necessary.

John Ward [Mekong Futures] asks if trans boundary cooperation can be achieved by aggregating examples of bi-lateral cooperation? Ms. Hogg responds that we need to build bi-lateral relations but more for regional cooperation: high level fora can be a cover for individual nations: multilateral training sessions, however, can facilitate a chance for exposing commonalities and solidarity, which can spread upwards.

Kim Geheb (Mekong Futures) brings up time horizons and the prisoner’s dilemma. A thought experiment: if two countries cooperate they can achieve 50% each of their objectives: but if one defaults they can achieve 100%. Trust is central to the decision. Ms. Hogg responded that these decisions undermine national security, especially economies tied to rain fed agricultural systems. It may be 100% but only for one year: 50% may be for 10 years meaning greater benefits over a longer time horizon. Incentives and political weighting that address longer time horizons may be effective. Political weighting is not always the same as those of external actors.

Kim Geheb (Mekong Futures) remarks that there is a current emphasis on biophysical data, analysis and projections: less so on how reliant communities respond to change or collapse. Social and economic-livelihood dimensions often more compelling re national security. Ms. Hogg agrees that the socio-economics of the region is very important. She wants to see it pushed into the transboundary decision-making space: connecting biophysical changes with livelihood consequences. Understanding the motivations, beliefs and drivers of decisions is critical. What happens to livelihoods and nutritional security when the fisheries collapse? Studying these kinds of questions reveal the potential instability that unsustainable development might cause. Aligning (harmonising) laws and policy between sovereign states is important and a step towards transparency and consistent social safeguards.

Ms. Hogg mentions indigenous people, and her concerns that governments do not treat them equally. And yet, the majority of natural resources in the region are managed and exploited by them. They are also the first exposed to impacts, and remain under-represented.

**Question 6:** **From your experience, for what types of Lancang-Mekong problems has cooperation been most effective?**

Where the trade-off is not huge. Disaster risk reduction, maybe. Or issues where there is already a joint agreement in place or a common vision/objective. It is more difficult when it revolves around things that drive economic development. This takes more work to address. Where joint agreement has already occurred, this simplifies things. External co-actors (impartial observers?) may facilitate cooperation.

**Question 7:** **In your view, which factors prevent cooperation? And which factors enable it?**

If challenges are similarly perceived, this enables things. Jointly agreeing on what the problem is. If there is a shared understanding – and an appreciation that it cannot be solved alone – then cooperation is possible. It is not, however, that simple. While there may be common agreement on the problem, there might not be on the solution.

**Question 8:** **From your experience, when Lancang-Mekong countries cooperate for sustainable development of the basin, who are the most influential actors?**

Host countries, civil society, and there is a role for academia. The private sector is also an important actor. They can see that their supply chains are at risk if they do not address certain sustainability issues. Responsible businesses are a strong incentive for governments. If you want a more business-enabling environment, you need more transparency. Some businesses – like agribusiness – may have very long-term horizons, and are therefore keen to secure their supply chains. Stronger enforcement of national laws likely to harness to diversity of the private sector.

**Question 9:** **In your opinion, how can governments balance natural resources sustainability with economic development goals?**

A lot of what we are talking about is lining up to this. The countries are very dependent on their natural resources for their economic growth – if the natural resource base collapses, so will their economies. It’s about bringing this (latter) information into the equation. Often technical counterparts understand the ripple effects of development decisions but these are not translated into policy; a function of power asymmetry.

Also, how do we elevate this knowledge into these conversations? Those who understand or hold it do not have a seat at the table where decisions are being made. Ms. Hogg considers how, in her view, COVID has emerged as a result of infringement into the world’s wild areas.