Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Anders Imboden, Development Assistance Coordinator – USAID Laos Country Office,***

***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?**

Broadly, weak governance domestically. In Laos, weak rule of law, and an absent civil society. This weak governance means that investments take precedence over the law. Weak governance can play into the hands of many, but Mr. Imboden is thinking particularly about the PRC.

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

The medium through which the countries work through is the national state. They drive decisions. Nevertheless, there is very little transparency. The MRC is the region’s only treaty-based organisation. It is imperfect, but there is nevertheless transparency to how it works. This is an important opportunity.

In thinking about opportunities, we have to ask, opportunities for whom? The MRC is accessible to all of its member countries – and their people. Transparency is inextricably linked to accountability [so a focus on accountability is an opportunity].

**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 PNPCA, which Mr. Imboden feels is a positive process. But he referenced what he called ‘the creative re-use of material produced for the Pak Beng by the Pak Lay proponents [this refers to the discovery by a regional NGO that the Pak Lay proponents had copied and pasted material from the documents submitted to the PNPCA by the Pak Beng developers]. This turned the spotlight on the developers. The media then also becomes important [to highlight the story]. Regarding the importance of the media, Mr. Imboden references a newspaper article that claimed that China Southern Power Grid (CPSG) was ‘taking over the whole of the Lao electricity grid. The Lao government launched an unprecedented campaign to refute this. As a consequence, media is important, and the governments can also recognise this.

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

He has already referenced the MRC and the LMC (to a lesser extent). ASEAN is a tough nut to crack. It is very consensus-driven. It also has high credibility, and so inherently useful. But Mr Imboden was not sure how this could be improved again. For Laos, ASEAN is very important for its engagement.

It is important that China engages with its downstream neighbours. But the LMC opens the door for China to do other things, which Mr. Imboden considers malign.

Returning to the tole of CSPG in Laos’ power grid, Mr. Imboden says that this is a problem because it involves a foreign government controlling what is strategic infrastructure. We have to worry about whose interests are being addresses under this arrangement. He also references Laos’ debt, and how this is a big concern for the US.

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

The ability of people to play some sort of role in the management of the resources upon which they rely.

We tend to think in terms of trajectories and moving along them. With every PNPCA, we are constantly concerned about any ‘backslide’.

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

Hydropower is an example of a visceral and obvious problem, and the PNPCA has been an effective way of addressing it, Mr. Imboden feels. The dams affect so many things.

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

Strong inclinations for non-interference in the Mekong countries. The inability to use regional platforms for shared decision-making arises from sovereignty. The uneven abilities of regional civil society to address their own government also affects cooperation. There are probably many shared concerns across regional CSOs.

“The consensus-driven thing is frustrating”. But when consensus is obtained, then it is impressive.

Laos cares a lot for the MRC, and sees it as important to its own credibility.

We are seeing the impacts of climate change. Hopefully, this is a wake-up call, and we can also hope that it is seen as a shared concern. No one country can solve climate change by itself.

There are those who say that the MRC legitimises decisions that have already been made.

We look for opportunities to engage all the time. Outwardly, the Lao government is always saying positive things about the MRC – which then gives us space to discuss things; given that we both share this perspective, this helps us.

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

Whoever’s behind any given project. It isn’t just one party, but the PRC is behind a lot of it. China is absolutely influential, and Mr. Imboden sees the Chinese government working through the LMC.

What is less clear is who the main actors are on the Mekong tributaries. They are cumulatively important.

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

Lao depends on natural resources; and it is mainly agrarian and its people mainly subsistence farmers. Sustainable development must be achieved. Laos is reportedly a communist nation, which represents an immense opportunity. It would be nice to see civil society involved as well. Laos is an interesting laboratory in which to pursue sustainable development because here, everyone is supposedly on the same page (because the country is communist).

In the Lao debt crisis, it is the creditors who hold all the cards – and they are the party. China, Mr. Imboden says, never attend the development partners’ roundtable meetings. Laos keeps things bilateral with China, and keeps the relationship very insulated. “We’re trying to be good friends, but in the end, it’s their call, right?”.