Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Thomas Parks (Country Representative), and Benjamin Zawacki (Senior Program Specialist),***

***October 21, 2020.***

**Notes**: 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?**

Mr. Parks: There is a lot of geo-political competition, which provides the opportunity to connect with a wide range of multilateral partners. But it also forces countries to make choices that they might not have otherwise.

There are also large transparency challenges. In water governance, transparency has been a challenge.

Differences between countries. In Laos, the rule of law is weak, so water is vulnerable to capture by internal and external elites. Thailand is keen to be a regional player – even trying to shape safeguards in Laos.

Mr. Zawacki: he agrees with Mr. Parks. Geopolitics overlay a variety of technical sustainable development issues. He adds, servicing, navigating and negotiating the 13 frameworks is a challenge to sustainable development. It takes great time and energy to do this, and if sustainable development were to emerge from this, it would be ‘happenstance’.

The water levels on the Mekong (whatever their cause) have been a huge challenge to sustainable development.

Mr. Zawacki also identifies the on-going disconnect between government and civil society. These two sets of actors do not speak the same language, and do not agree on what sustainable development is, let alone what ‘sustainable’ is or even ‘development’.

At government-to-government levels, there seems to be agreement on what sustainable development is; the same is true amongst very diverse NGOs and CSOs. But these are two different parallel tracks, with no connection. There is no common SD lexicon and distrust. Governments look more at economic factors, while CSOs/NGOs more at the environment.

Mr. Parks: points out that all of the region’s countries have to report on the SDGs.

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

Mr. Parks: there are five small- to medium-sized countries in the lower Mekong, and they need to cooperate with China to manage the river’s ecosystems. Cooperation is a way for them to address this challenge.

In terms of opportunities, there are already many efforts. Each mechanism has its own focus; most are driven by external actors, and offers opportunities in, for example, health or education. But when it comes to water governance, the governments will not be able develop collective action by giving up sovereign control over their water resources.

Mr. Zawacki: of the 13 frameworks, three deal with water. Most of the frameworks deal with the Greater Mekong Sub-region as an *economic* geography. The MRC and the LMC together are not necessarily the best combination for water governance. Indigenous ideas need to come forward.

Mr. Parks: points out many of these frameworks are run by diplomats – this disincentivises saying ‘no’ to them, and possibly reducing their number and diversity.

Mr. Zawacki: the ministries of foreign affairs are dependent on (so-called) ‘announcibles’. Sustainable development is mal-apportioned – there is little investment in smaller (but highly relevant) technical ministries. Sustainable development is only small ring of the development onion.

Laos is the only country that is a member of all 13 frameworks. Myanmar has chosen not to join the MRC, perhaps because they see greatest benefit in remaining an observer. “It’s a lot harder to break commitments once you’re in them than to make them”. He doesn’t think that there will be any attrition (i.e. a reduction in the number of regional frameworks) because, for many countries, they would see that withdrawing would be seen as a geopolitical mistake. For Laos, being a member of so many frameworks is considered essential for its credibility.

There is cultural propensity to not say no: and countries will join these frameworks to diversify partnerships even if they are viewed as tokenism.

There is distrust between Vietnam and Thailand re water and energy and to a lesser extent Thai-Cambodia.

**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?**

Mr. Parks: obviously, the MRC. But outside of the MRC, he is not sure. There may be some examples we do not know about.

Mr. Zawacki: there is the example of Thailand deciding (unilaterally) to not go forward with the Mekong Channel Improvement project (and blasting rapids to allow for deeper draft vessels). Thailand said that was because of local resistance; but China was probably not happy about this. Nevertheless, China portrayed it as an example of it listening (and acquiescing) to its partners’ needs.

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

Mr. Zawacki: some are better than others. The LMC, we should remember, has done a lot. It pledges and then delivers. It has done more in five years than the MRC has done in 25.

The more successful frameworks tend to be the ones with greater focus. The ACMECS 2019 Master Plan has so many demands - ‘a shopping list’. The countries do not know what they are getting by contributing to it.

Mr. Parks: we are comparing apples and oranges. The frameworks are all very different. ACMECS is just an idea and there is no activity. It is a receptacle for DPs and useful only for gaining a political perspective. The Mekong Japan framework is the most transparent. The LMC is mostly platitudes and press releases.

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

Mr. Parks: ideally, an improvement in development outcomes – especially for natural resources; and countries abiding by their agreements. But you have to recognise that what a diplomat sees as ‘success’ will differ from what a development person will see it. For developers, development is a means to broader cooperation.

Mr. Zawacki: just completing projects could be seen as successful. But is it really successful, and for whom? It always comes back to definitions. It is important to remember that, for officials, they see success; they see that livelihoods have been improved.

NOTE THAT AT THIS JUNCTURE, MR PARKS LEFT THE INTERVIEW. THE INTERVIEW WAS COMPLETED BY MR. ZAWACKI.

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

The biggest overlap between the 13 frameworks is infrastructure connectivity. The number of roads, dams, rails has multiplied exponentially. This doesn’t really happen without cooperation. You can, of course, point at the transboundary problems that result as a consequence of this cooperation, but this is besides the point.

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

The absence of trust is the main variable affecting cooperation. Geopolitical factors tend to hinder this, depending on circumstances. The number of frameworks introduces “death by meetings”.

“The countries are six shades of authoritarianism”. This should imply that the potential for trust exists, but that does not turn out to be the case because of border problems, historical reasons or whatever.

What Is a priority for one country (e.g. the Tonle Sap) is not a priority for another (Thailand, who have power supremacy).

Trust is the ability to rely on what has been said – without necessarily having to follow up and verify. And the level of trust depends on the problem and the consequences. Intention is also a critical factor of trust.

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

Governments – but who within these governments. There is variation between people, departments and ministries. This is even true when funding comes from outside. It is rare to see people ‘on the ground’ as influential. Mr. Zawacki remarks that his analysis of the current Thai protests suggests that the latter will not result in change “because they don’t have the numbers”.

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

The silver bullet is to conflate the sustainable development of natural resources with the economic development. The two cannot be mutually exclusive. Deciding between economic development on the one hand, and sustainable development on the other is a false choice.