Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Dr Laurent Umans, First Secretary, Water Management and Climate Change, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Hanoi, Vietnam, October 22, 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?**

At the broad level, the need to link politics, policies and projects. Geopolitics have become apparent. There have always been competing claims and interests on the river and its basin. In any future World Bank endeavour, the relations between policies (across governance levels), politics and projects will need to appear. For example, the relation between energy policy and final hydropower projects; or biodiversity policies and eventual nature conservation projects. There is a two-way link between plans, projects and policy.

Projects should be purposively designed to strengthen policy. Dr Umans lists a variety of technical challenges: climate change, land subsidence in the delta, sediments, etc. These need to feed into policies and “into the field of power relations”.

He then refers to what he calls an ‘abstract challenge’. Many of those involved in sustainable development are growth (quantity) and extraction-oriented, and focus less on the quality of growth. He thinks a slightly different discourse is needed, in which the river is seen as a living being, and has living rights. Its tributaries could be seen as the arms of this being. Dr Umans feels that this resonates with European history, and that of indigenous people. The river has its own heart (the flood pulse), and it creates and nourishes life. He hopes that this narrative can nourish policy – including that of international development.

Indigenous insights are complementary to our expert approaches – and it is important to not just stick to this expert narrative. Mekong Vision 3.0 should be able to accommodate these other perspectives.

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

Coordination is not just about committees. It is the outcome of practices that enable cooperation to happen. We tend to focus on the inputs to coordination, and not to its output. Coordinated action is where actors work together to determine common goals for the common good. It is not always clear what the advantages are to working at the regional level; or how the latter links to the national level. So, we must link to what is seen as the ‘regional character of the river’. ‘Regionalism’ is now stuck to national borders. We cannot, at the moment, really talk about the ‘the region’ because there is no regional identity. It might, Dr Umans remarks, be better to have a transboundary rather than ‘regional’ focus.

The people are the entry point into regional identity. You often see initiatives that contribute to regional identity, but then the states will need to play a key role in the creation of any supra-national entity – to engage and be willing to engage in and create a regional perspective that then guides national (independent) activity. In Asia, this has a lot to do with their non-interference principles. The OECD countries are more willing to intervene in the form of ‘cooperation’ and compromise national sovereignty.

Kim Geheb [Mekong Futures] asks Dr Umans about the so-called ‘Mekong Spirit’. He replies that he has not seen many cases where the national position has been given up for the common good. He references Elinor Ostrom, and the importance of her work to the formation of institutions for the greater common good. There have been lots of interventions in the name of non-intervention.

The MRC has a lot of potential for promoting action for the common good.

**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 is very clear, and the member countries are very active in this process. It is an example of an institution that has the acceptance of everyone. But then, transboundary EIA strategy has not been agreed upon within the MRC. Maybe water diplomacy is less visible in the MRC. Dr. Umans says he looks forward to a strengthening of ‘water diplomacy units’. He says that this should not just be housed in regional ministries of natural resources and environment; there is a lot of scope for ministries of foreign affairs to be involved, and supported by the MRC – which it has a mandate for. Water diplomacy is also important for the region’s geopolitics.

The last user in a river should be happy with the quantity and quality of the water received.

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

Dr Umans says that he is only really familiar with the MRC. The opportunities here, he says, are the same as those for cooperation and coordination. Perhaps the World Bank can point out that it is counter-productive. That the US, Japan and Korea all have their separate initiatives. The river is not just a living being, but also a social body – people and societies interact with the river. We in international development should also be operating (supporting) as a collective being – giving up institutional identity for the collective good.

**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 outcomes of coordinated action and practice. For example, on the financial side. Every country has its own practices of financial management. If cooperation happens, then you will see changes in these practises and a co-evolution of institutions towards financial management ends.

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

Maybe it all started with flooding, which was seen as a problem decades ago. Technical problems have been effectively tackled. Institutional problem has been mediated by the MRC – such as the procedures – with spin offs to leverage implementation.

Water diplomacy has not been effective. So too, uptake of the MRC’s Council Study has not been effective (measured as degree of uptake). Dr Umans is also concerned about the link between a highly effective MRC secretariat with less-than-effective government agencies.

That the member states are willing to 100% fund the MRC by 2030 is a clear indication of cooperation success.

He refers to Vietnamese staff being cycled through the MRC Secretariat, and then returning to their home-based government positions, and that this has resulted in positive changes within these ministries.

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

The traditional relationship between China and Vietnam prevents cooperation. This is not really a deep trust relationship. The difference in capacity also prevents cooperation – for example, relatively high capabilities in Vietnam, as compared to Cambodia or Vietnam.

Highest level political commitment is an enabler. It helps, Dr Umans argues, that most of the regional prime ministers are all from communist parties. While other Vietnamese agencies might be reluctant to engage with China, their respective communist parties have formed a bridge. He sees the parties as being the most trusting agencies in the two countries.

The idea of IWRM has enabled developers and academics to work together under a broad frame.

The non-party relationship between China and Vietnam is very distrusting. He considers three ‘fault lines’ in the relationship: (a) their common border; (b) the East Sea; and, finally, (c) the Mekong. The latter has, Dr Umans says’ ‘been cooking’ over the past 1-2 years. Because of the similarities between the two countries, however, there is a basis for cooperation.

Dr Umans does not think that the Red River is such an issue between China and Vietnam, in part because the Chinese dams have prevented flooding in Hanoi. The way China uses this river has been more complementarity with Vietnam’s needs.

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

I tend to think the party. The government does what the party prescribes. The extent to which the party is involved in the Delta (for example) is a bit of a question for me, however, and the importance of the Mekong is uncertain.

Academics in Vietnam are influential. This emerges from their Confucian heritage. The careers of civil servants are determined by the merit that they acquire, which is based on their capacity to mobilise science for their jobs. Science is the basis for the state to make decisions.

The private sector construction companies can leverage their financial (employment) power to leverage government decisions and may also be important actors.

International actors are still present as influential actors, but that influence has been diminishing.

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

There are different ways, but they depend on how natural resources are valued. Different calculations will be more conducive to bringing about this balance.

Natural resources are more than just ‘resources’. This implies that they are useful to us, and touches on their intrinsic value.

The Netherlands, Dr Umans mentions, has a ‘Water as Leverage’ programme.