Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Christian Engler, Deputy Regional Director and Head of the Agriculture and Food Security Domain, Swiss Development Cooperation (Vientiane), 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. She 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 Engler explains that he has only been in Laos for a year.

National interests come first. This is a challenge to managing the basin as a whole. There are lots of meetings, but perhaps not to the point of respecting nor honouring obligations.

Data-sharing – the MRC struggles to get data from its member countries, including Lancang flow data. There are lots of frameworks, but very few have any legally-binding aspects. Inclusion – of civil society and the private sector – is also a challenge.

Management of the river’s water is a challenge, and Mr Engler cites water quality, waste water disposal, pesticides and so on. While the latter is not such a problem at the moment, he thinks it will become a major problem. A new aspect is groundwater data, analysis and management. More research is needed on this.

The Mekong’s tributaries have not been systematically monitored. Dams are also a challenge. Switzerland has been involved in dam safety, and has detected problems with maintenance, reporting and monitoring of dam safety issues. There are no systematic analysis of the findings and contingency plans for when a dam breaks. This is a big problem in Laos, and the private sector needs to be more engaged and held to higher standards. The causes of the lower Mekong low river levels remains frunknown and uncertain.

Common standards across the countries are needed, including the private sector, and should be legally-binding. Mr. Engler also mentioned that there is no cross-border framework for managing navigation.

**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 regional approach can address critical opportunities in a more neutral setting. For example, issues that cannot be addressed at national levels can be addressed in MRC or ASEAN settings. Difficult problems such as civil rights or community resettlement. This is because of peer pressure at these high levels. He had thought, however, that ASEAN would have more convening power than it does. The Mekong is a transboundary area – it is best managed, and treated, as such.

Working with different governments has identified a number of entry points and opportunities for DP cooperation, joint funding and support.

Mr Engler mentioned HIV in southern Africa, where homosexuality and child marriage could not be discussed nationally but standards agreed in multi-lateral fora. These standards then translate to national policy. This approach could apply to civil rights and resettlement in the Mekong. In the Mekong issues addressed nationally cannot be discussed multi-laterally. Peer pressure and reputation play an important role.

**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?**

He identifies an MRC-China research project on mainstream flows, partnering with IWMI. Research can be a good entry point – floods and droughts for example have more of a ‘scientific flavour’ and are considered less contentious as a result. He mentions another research initiative with IOM on migration, from which results are now emerging.

He confesses to not understanding regional reluctances to share data with their neighbours.

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

Thailand and Vietnam are very active in the MRC. He feels that the current set-up is good, with a strong secretariat. They have quite clear strategic goals, and a two-year workplan. He feels that the MRC works well.

ASEAN, he comments, was not created to manage the Mekong, and is focussed more on maritime disputes. The Mekong basin touches a lot of people, and should, as a consequence, have more strategic value.

There is very little data or information about the LMC and as a result difficult to understand intentions and strategies. It seems, Mr Engler says, the LMC operates in parallel to the MRC. Switzerland, he says, encourages engagement between the MRC and LMC.

Mr Engler was uncertain of what improvements might be needed; suffice to say, it would require political will.

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

Measurable facts – such as fish, sediments, etc. If this is the case, then cooperation is easy. It would be a success if data were available, and trends within it positive.

If the MRC countries agree to minimum standards, and one country ‘blocks’ this, then this cannot be a success. All countries need to agree and implement min standards. He wants to see high-level agreements acted upon at the country level. He thinks that it is good to have hydropower scrutinised by the countries through the PNPCA process, but it does have to be more than just a box-ticking exercise. Civil society needs a more active involvement in the PNPCA.

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

Low water and flooding are where cooperation seems to have worked best. The next challenge will be cascade dam management.

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

The first one is national interest. Also, there is not enough transparency. He references too secretive Concession Agreements (CAs). Sometimes, not even national ministries know what is in them. Also, groups within the nations are a challenge, by which he means investor groups and rent-seekers. These could be foreign or provincial groups, or ‘the families’ – through which mining, land and forestry concessions, etc. happen. Who gets what for what and why? This is amplified at the regional level. Related to transparency, he mentions that Laos declined to share the results of the dam safety review with any of the other MRC member countries.

The inclusion of stakeholders at all levels – down to the community level - would be an enabler.

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

The political levels – the higher the more influence, within the government and the party. The second influence group are those with both a foot in government, and another in investment – such as the families or consortia. They can influence national cooperation with other states.

If we are looking at cooperation for sustainable development, then the INGOs are another actor. He mentions how Oxfam ‘gave voice to local groups at the MRC’.

But the biggest influencer is China. The LMC emerged from China, and it has its own path. Thailand, he says, is the second biggest influencer in the region. Laos followed exactly Thailand’s response to COVID. Currently, Thailand has the chair of the MRC Joint Committee. They know what they want and how to achieve those objectives.

Mr Engler was unclear how DPs could strengthen cooperation.

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

You can only sustain economic development if you sustain your natural resources. The whole green economy approach has merit. Because of is large biodiversity, water and forest resources, Laos has a unique opportunity in this respect.