Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Dr Pech Sokhem, Director, Cambodian Development Research Institute, October 26, 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 Virak Chan (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?**

Six countries with six different sets of interests and motivations. There is even diversity within the countries – between sectors, for example.

In addition, there is a super power at the top of the (Mekong) system, and Vietnam, at the bottom of the system, is an emerging power.

The region has a history of conflict and war. The most recent the Vietnam/China dispute). There has been a polarisation of the various platforms. The creation of the MRC, Dr Pech feels, was a reflection of the Cold War (viz the 1957 Mekong Committee), which was why (in his mind) China and Myanmar were excluded from its membership. Hence, there is a real lower Mekong focus, which serves to exclude China. All information and unilateral development in the lower Mekong is now coming from China. The World Bank and ADB are trying to catch up, but China and its investment banks are a more attractive source of financing.

Private and national investment banks enable short cuts for development, with less stringent safeguards (or poorly defined standards for EIAs or SIAs).

How, Dr Pech wonders, can we ensure that all the various cooperation frameworks apply the same rules? There is a lack of unity in the application of rules, or information-sharing. The victims of all of this lack of coordination are the poor.

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

Regionalism or multilateralism is very relevant. COVID is causing regional isolationism to protect national interests. Even during the American War, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand still managed to talk. The construction of Laos’ Nam Ngum (1) dam emerged out of this dialogue. Regional cooperation now falls under all the various frameworks, which remain important to helping the countries understand each other.

Talking is important as a start (to cooperation). Talking without action is also a problem, but you have to start somewhere: to to share views and to listen to each other.

Dr Pech wondered if the delegation that represents Cambodia at the MRC actually represents the country given how fractured it is. There has to be a harmonisation of the country’s position, he argues. A stronger or better process is needed, and ‘real good father’ discussion is required.

Coordination is the biggest challenge in Cambodia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinates at the highest level, with the technical ministries playing lesser roles. Each ministry has its own perspective, he says. Before the meetings, they will try to hammer out a national position, and then the head of delegation will do all the talking. But the other problems is that the people change all the time, so that there are different people for different meetings [which might not mean much if there is a strong national position, but does matter when there is not]. It is difficult to ensure consistency.

In Cambodia, the LMC is coordinated by MOFA, the MRC by MOWRAM, and the GMS by the Ministry of Planning. These different objectives do not translate as a coherent national position.

So, we need to explore a stronger unification of position within the countries. But, Dr Pech wonders, do they actually want to harmonise amongst themselves? The same situation of fractured applies to DPs: USAID, World Bank, ADB for example.

When Dr Pech was the Director of the Technical Services Division at the MRC, they had signed an MOU with China to share data, and there was great celebration. But nothing happened then. Since then, there has been only slow movement. The LMC sees the MRC as a legitimate body, Dr Pech says. There has been a change in attitude amongst those who push the process in Beijing and Yunnan. But progress on data sharing is still disappointing.

Even within the most downstream of the countries [Vietnam] there is inconsistency. Between, for example, the relatively anti-dam position of MONRE versus the pro-dam perspective taken by the Ministry of Energy [actually, the Ministry of Industry and Trade].

In the MRC, a strategy for transboundary ESIAs has been on the table for 20 years. The MRC has data, but it is incomplete – for example, fisheries. But it is still better than nothing. The MRC belongs to its four member countries, so if they want it to play a larger role, they have to create it.

**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 – in particular, shared data and capacity building. It is through the MRC that the next generation of water professionals is passing. The MRC is a platform for discussion. They should, however, have done more to addressing the unfairness of one country benefitting more from the development of its natural resources at the peril of other countries.

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

There are always opportunities. While there are merits to them, I see problems with the proliferation in all of these cooperative frameworks. Each has its own alliances and goals, which just leads to a zero-sum game. All of the ‘shared destiny stuff’ is rhetorical and overly optimistic. This needed to be translated into reality, and requires better coordination.

ASEAN has a stronger and bigger convening power (than the MRC) but is dominated by non-Mekong countries (Dr Pech mentions Singapore and Malaysia). It is the differences between and within countries that needs to be addressed.

John Ward (Mekong Futures) says that there is very little evidence of evidence-based policy-making. He wonders if all of this data and research is therefore of relevance. Perhaps we need to understand the politics more.

Dr Pech responds that the knowledge base is fragmented, which is a problem. Knowledge management needs to focus on appreciating the knowledge, and how it informs decisions. It is more the culture and political economy, which tends to be self-interested. The relationship between knowledge managers and policy makers is always a challenge.

The knowledge base stated with the 1957 Mekong Committee, with a focus on basin development, hydropower and irrigation. Much of that initial knowledge base disappeared with the relocation of the MRCs. Improved data management is necessary, especially quality data that can inform policy.

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

Workshops and meetings (joke). How has the decision been made? How have the needs of vulnerable groups been addressed? And how has it all been translated into action? These are the kinds of questions that need responding to if we are to assess whether or not cooperation has been successful. We need a more robust M&E system. For some, its all about whether or not the funds have been expended or disbursed – such as for the World Bank. In addition, we would also want to know if alternatives have been considered?

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

Capacity-building seems the most effective. But transboundary water governance is more than capacity-building alone.

Dr Pech cites the example of transboundary EIAs, which, he says, the countries consider to be a ‘political hot potato’. So, then they delegate to technical issues. How long has it taken for the MRC to publish its hydrological year book? So, even with technical data, it can be complicated. As a consequence, we sometimes have to use incomplete data, which just uses up more money, more time and more frustration.

Meetings can also be very useful, and Dr Pech feels that the pandemic may have taught us the benefits of online meetings. In-person meetings use up a lot of budget and there are alternate motivations for attendance (DSA as supplementary income, shopping, airline points). We need a good mix between in-person and online meetings.

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

A lack of understanding and suspicion prevents cooperation. While Vietnam has been chairing ASEAN, they have wanted the Mekong to be prioritised. People then think there’s some kind of hidden agenda. Everyone thinks that China has a hidden agenda with a history of mis-trust.

Confidence and trust-building enable cooperation. But we never achieve it. Real political will and stronger leadership is needed. Development partners are still playing this role, providing financial support and ‘a little bit of dictating’ and figuring out what roles the countries should play. If you want to weaponise the Mekong, you won’t get cooperation.

Geo-politics in the Mekong has become much more complicated because of the ‘Cold War’ between China and the US and other regional points of tension. “We have become hostage to the super powers”.

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

China – and there’s no doubt. It has tremendous influence in Laos and Cambodia. Vietnam has a more complicated relationship with China. It tries to show that China is not influential, but you look at the volume of trade between China and Vietnam, and that makes China influential. For Laos, the countries that buy its electricity are influential. Also, SOEs, investment banks, and private investors from Russia and elsewhere. The ADB and World Bank are no longer as influential as they used to be.

Now, a road can be constructed in Cambodia in two to three months by cutting corners. It used to take much longer. “The development of the Mekong today is decided in Washington, Beijing or Manila”.

CSOs are also influential – but not as influential as these other actors (above). This is because of their capacity, and the political systems in the Mekong countries that prevent them from operating.

Mekong Vision 3.0 needs to level the playing field for these more vulnerable actors.

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

The countries promise to achieve the SDGs by 2030. But how to achieve the proper balance is very difficult. I don’t think Cambodia wants to achieve middle-income status on the one hand, and the SDGs on the other.

All of the previous epidemics have been because of forest clearance. Covid is not the first epidemic, nor will it be the last. In New Delhi, they can now see the sky and the stars because of the lockdown. So, we need to use this COVID-19 opportunity to move towards carbon-neutral countries by 2050. The emphasis is still on economic development, without consideration of rural households and preserving/conserving forests and soils. As natural resource degradation continues, increased health care costs and social disruption will make achieving SD more difficult. It is very complicated, but now is the time for us to consider a carbon neutral future.