Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Drs Sonali Sellamuttu, Paul Pavlic and Matthew McCartney, Senior Researchers, International Water Management 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 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?**

Dr Sellamuttu: Climate change and related aspects are taking on a bigger emphasis, especially in the preparation for the COP-21 meeting. Linked to this is the CGIAR’s Two-Degree Initiative, that will focus on mega-deltas, including the Mekong’s.

Dr Pavlic: Regional work on water insecurity, and a better understanding of drought.

Dr McCartney: Climate change intensifies challenges and risks for flood and drought, the impacts of land use change (mentions land concessions), river (sand) mining, and governance, and how these challenges will be managed. Governance issues are complicated by vested interests and the fact that the basin is shared by six countries.

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

Dr Sellamuttu: Bringing together the different actors – government, civil society, private sector, and with knowledge brokers such as the CGIAR playing a role.

Dr Pavlic: Our view, as researchers, is to provide impartial knowledge to the debate.

Dr McCartney: For starters, countries working together to find solutions. Ideally, it would be in an ‘optimal’ or integrated way to address these challenges. The MRC is an attempt to do this; while the LMC is new and starting afresh. The process should be science-led, Dr McCartney feels. It is not the only facet, but an important one. The MRC is trying to generate evidence-based decisions. Governments at least pay lip-service to evidence-based decision-making. There is, he feels, greater recognition that droughts and floods are impacting development. One would hope that the place of evidence in decision-making will increase in the future.

Dr Sellamuttu: It is not that simple. We have to take into account the political economy – this can push decision-s-makers into places where they do not take into account evidence because it does not fit into their narratives.

Dr Pavlic: It is very complicated. We expect immediate responses, but it does not happen that way. Ground water was floated as a challenge in the 1970s and 80s, but nothing was done about it until the 2000s. The Lao government’s response to the banana problem in its north (Chinese-owned concessions, over use of pesticides, non-payment for Lao labour), however, is an example where a government did respond quickly to the evidence. Responding to questioning from John Ward (Mekong Futures) on whether or not the government is responding to a clear objective and an acute problem. Dr Pavlic agreed. The problem was identifying suitable alternative options for banana farmers.

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Dr Sellamuttu: In Myanmar (where she is based) that the Advisor Group of the National Water Resources Committee ‘displays a sense of wanting to engage in the Mekong’. They seem interested in the lessons of collaboration, and applying these to the Irrawaddy.

Dr McCartney: Research findings will not be taken up by the government just because it is good research. Working through the CPWF and WLE has taught us importance of boundary partners and impact pathways. Their fora were an attempt to get people talking together – researchers need to do more to exchange their messages. It also needs to recognised that it is opportunistic – researchers need to recognise and seize opportunities as and when they emerge.

Dr Pavlic: It is important to try and understand policy-makers, and to respond to their needs. We need to get onto the right foot.

Dr Sellamuttu: Theories of change geared towards specific actors. Really tracking from the outset specific individuals who you are targeting for change. She mentions ‘most significant change’ stories as a way of tracking change. The sustainability of changes also needs to be followed up.

**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?**

Dr Sellamuttu: It is important to look at how lessons are learned, and the cross-fertilisation of these. And, after the project is finished, to return to the site to see if some of its outcomes still remain. Dr Sellamuttu references the MRC’s SIMVA project, which seems to have been effective cooperation, even if it was knowledge gathering.

Dr Pavlic: There are lots of groundwater examples. Worked by the CCOP and by MRC on capacity building – meetings to share experience. There are very limited cooperation opportunities around groundwater.

Dr McCartney: There are many activities that to a small extent contribute to cooperation. He mentions the IUCN’s (BRIDGE) 3S project – lots of meetings and discussions in pursuit of transboundary water cooperation, but he is not sure if it was lasting. He also references the Xayaburi, and how it resulted in a redesign following the MRC’s PNPCA process. Perhaps the latter is an example of compromise through cooperation. He also cites China releasing water during the dry season or drought as an example.

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

Dr Sellamuttu: There are merits to each. For example, the MRC has its dialogue mechanisms, while the LMC has theirs. She also recalls the (WLE-implemented) Mekong Forum on Water, Food and Energy which, she says was a different type. It would be useful, she feels, to move from the policy dialogue aspect to the more technical – connecting better research-for-development with policy and decision-making processes. This could be an area of improvement.

Dr McCartney: The MRC has been a valuable attempt, although always hindered ‘by some of the binaries involved’. The LMC is perhaps a more valuable attempt to bring all of the Mekong countries together. This needs to be linked with investment. The ADB would do well to link into some of these platforms. The link to money and investment is essential.

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

Dr Sellamuttu: This depends on the indicators, and perhaps some of the other unplanned things that happen along the way that contribute to it. Indicators might refer to the numbers of people moved out of poverty.

Dr McCartney: Sharing data and information. This is an indicator that countries are engaged together in decision-making processes. The MRC is an attempt to balance sovereign rights. There are processes within it, but do the countries really share data? Many MRC processes get bogged down in bureaucracy, and countries taking months and months to do anything. Perhaps another indication of success is if decisions taken are non-contested after they have been made.

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

Dr Pavlic: Where everyone stands to benefit; when there are losers, then things tend to break down – for example, when upstream users impact downstream ones.

Dr McCartney: tangible benefits, such as hydropower. This may be a ‘sufficient trade-offs’ because they get the benefit of power, even if the dam affects them. Countries will always make decisions in their national interest. Laos might – hypothetically – not build a dam if it improves its relations in the region. So, there are tangible and intangible benefits.

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

Dr Sellamuttu: The main problem that prevents cooperation is the different political agendas. For example, the differences between up- and downstream countries. Also, national priorities can be problematic. Situations where there’s political will to take advantage of win-win opportunities is a key enabler.

Dr Pavlic: Not all Mekong countries are equal, and all are different. China, at the top of the basin, has a very loud voice. National interest is there in the Mekong countries, but they also need to trade. This ‘glues countries together’. There are, it should be remembered, things that link the countries together beyond just water.

Dr McCartney: Common interests and commonly perceived problems drive cooperation. Perhaps climate change will drive cooperation because they need to work together to resolve it. It often comes down to money, and whether or not they feel that they will be better off working together than alone.

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

Dr Sellamuttu: Those connected to the highest economic gain – economic growth and development. For example, the energy sector is a more influential sector than the environment, fisheries of agriculture.

Thailand and Vietnam exert influence over Lao PDR and Cambodia because of their economic development.

Dr McCartney: Different countries have different capacities to influence development. You would have thought that the upstream countries have the most power. But economic power introduces some interesting dynamics.

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

Dr Sellamuttu: The countries are trying to embed and mainstream the environment into the sectors that have stronger bargaining power – trying to show that the environment is valuable. She references the SDGs, and wonders how SDG 15 [Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss] links with the other SDGs.

Dr Pavlic: Scientific advice needs to be heeded. Also, balancing short-term benefits with long-term gains.

Dr McCartney: You cannot have your economic development without your natural resource base. It isn’t a dilemma – these things are the same. He thinks that the need to manage water more sustainably is coming. Science needs to make the case that economic development is not in conflict with sustainable economic development.