Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Suon Seng, Director, Center for Development-Oriented Research (Cambodia), 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?**

Whoever the public sees as benefitting the most from the Mekong. So far, it has been state to state. But sustainability is not just the government. We have to combine the micro (households and communities) with the macro (national level).

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

When we see that regional cooperation is cross-country and bilateral. But regional cooperation needs non-state actors, both within and across borders.

Cooperation means collaboration between state and non-state. For the state to engage with the non-state is an opportunity, and draw them all in to the development of strategies.

But they have different interests. Governments see cooperation as macro-benefits, not the micro. We might then forget the small village suffering from drought.

**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?**

So far, information on the flows. Since the 1995 Agreement, there have been two to three results. The first is conflict avoidance around the Mekong’s waters. While we (in the countries) do not always agree, we have a platform. Second, information-sharing, both data, but also the concerns of different stakeholders. Third, consensus around the use of the river. Hydropower, for example: some people see it as good, some not so much. For me, it is good that we continue (discussing).

We cannot expect Lao hydropower to share the benefits with Cambodia. The Mekong is common property, but there are boundaries. Each country has the right to use its own water resources – for transboundary cooperation, for example. But there is still much to be done.

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

The 1995 Agreement gives too much to the state role. There need to be additional voices, such as those of academia, so as to bring knowledge into reach. There is not equal cooperation in the MRC. Mr Suon wants to see more roles for CBOs. It is hard for them (the CBOs) to find a way to collaborate. They are, he says, always ‘under the NGO’. How can farmers in the different countries understand one another? He sees collaboration as scale, first at the ground level, then moving up to think tanks, and then up to the governments. Now, the private sector is moving into this collaborative structure, but, he says, they cannot ‘compromise on the loss of benefits’. Governments see the private sector as creating jobs.

There is ‘free thinking’ in regional universities, that lies outside of the MRC. We cannot rely on the MRC to criticise itself. Within the MRC, we see a lot of compromise between state and state. Academics can dig deeper (and be more inclusive?).

He describes a presentation he once delivered in Kunming looking at small-scale irrigation. But it was explained to him that this was too small-scale. He talks about how Cambodia designates different ‘sizes’ of irrigation schemes, which do not even include the lowest (village) levels. But the micro is where farmers work and invest, and this is where irrigation works best.

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

There needs to be both qualitative and qualitative indicators. Amongst the qualitative are when we see less complaining amongst the people; and when the people are willing to share more information. When they do not share, then we know that they are not happy. Also, more consensus – while it might not be complete, everyone can agree. As for quantitative, this would include things like the number of people affected by disasters, or economic improvements.

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

People see more the disaster, more than the benefit. And one disaster is not enough – there has to be a series before there is collaboration. The Mekong is natural, so we cannot complain when the disaster is manmade. Early warning is something, but it is not enough. Development should include mitigation, and these plans presented to the public. Kim Geheb [Mekong Futures] asks what the difference is between ‘collaboration’ and ‘cooperation’. Mr Suon replies that cooperation is more about strategic design, while collaboration is more about ‘in hand work’.

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

The benefits and burdens of collaboration combines with levels of thinking or knowledge. Mr Suon considered the mercurial property rights around the Mekong. The water is, he says, a public resource, while the land on its banks is common property. Water is common property only within sovereign borders, but not across borders. So are fish. If fish migrate from Cambodia to Lao are they Cambodian or Lao fish? This is why the Mekong countries continue to have a problem. The level of understanding is a barrier. This can be ~~can be~~ improved to include socio-cultural interests.

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

The governments, if we look at this from the formal perspective. They have the final decision. Knowledgeable individuals can be influential, but not much. Influence is when the people see it for themselves, and not because of someone else. An authority can order people to do things, while an influencer can get action through discussion. Reputation, respect are important attributes of an effective influencer-facilitator.

China is playing the game all around. The MRC can bring the countries together to talk to China. China is a big country and is upstream. One country cannot talk to China alone. At the same time, if China wants to collaborate with the Mekong countries, it must also work with the MRC. If the lower Mekong countries do not collaborate with each other, then China will approach them individually and favour individual countries.

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

We see economic indicators as a measure of success – which then prioritises economic development. If we used natural resources indicators, we could give more weight to them. In the Cambodian National Social Economic Development Plan, there are 130 indicators. Most are economic variables, or ones measuring the spread of infrastructure. Why do natural resources have less weight? Because people understand that these are needed for economic development. One way people think is that if we are going to do development, then we have to leave out conservation. But others feel that natural resources conservation will provide economic development.