Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Messrs. Hisaya Hirose and Takahiro Suenaga, both Second Secretaries of the Embassy of Japan to the Lao PDR, October 13, 2020***

The interview was introduced by Klomjit Chandrapanya, 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 Hirose: There are two key challenges. First, regional stability for development; and the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Second, quality economic growth. In the Tokyo strategy, quality growth focusses of connectivity and sustainable growth.

The Tokyo Strategy is an initiative of the Japanese MOFA, with consultation with other Japanese ministries, and in consultation with Mekong country ministries.

Mr Suenaga: The Tokyo Strategy does not include China. Insofar as the Mekong River is concerned, the strategy calls for a ‘green Mekong’ and addresses pollution, water management and climate change.

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

Mr Hirose: There are many schemes here, for example, the LMC and ACMECs. There is a need for cooperating with these, and their coordination. Over the past ten years, Japan has invested over 600 billion Yen in the region, and the Mekong countries have expressed their gratitude for this. We want to continue contributing.

Mr Suenaga: the main aim of Japan’s cooperation is for all Mekong countries to optimise their national development strategies and to improve livelihoods.

Each year, Japan holds two high level development meetings. After every meeting, no schemes emerge. Each scheme is completely independent, and reflects whatever the proposing country thinks that they are skilled at. For Japan, it is environmental management.

**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?**

Mr Hirose: I do not know of any examples.

Mr Suenaga: The MRC is a successful example, but it represents only four of the Mekong countries.

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

Mr Hirose: we have many schemes and many barriers. There is high interest in the region, from countries, the private sector and NGOs. Each stakeholder never knows the whole picture. We need to meet together to discuss, so that we can all see the bigger picture.

Mr Suenaga: Each country has an advantage, which they pursue. If all of these schemes were integrated, coordination would become very difficult.

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

Mr Hirose: This question is difficult to answer. It is important to gather the opinions from the various stakeholders. But meeting together can be difficult. And after every meeting, new schemes emerge.

Mr Suenaga: There are no indicators in Japan-Mekong cooperation. Maybe we can defer to the planned outputs and outcomes identified in the MRC’s annual working plans. At present, Japan mainly provides bilateral support. Each project has a purpose, but not specific indicators of progress.

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

Mr Hirose: ‘Hard efforts’ – such as ‘hard connectivity,’ which is building infrastructure. But it is not all ‘hard’. We also train recipients how to use and manage this infrastructure. And then there is ‘soft efforts’ – such as other types of training, or creating circumstances suitable for Japanese investment.

Mr Suenaga: Japan sees its work in climate change as being part of risk reduction for its recipient countries. This is important for the Mekong countries, given recent drought and flooding. Japan provides assistance towards this through the MRC. At last year’s G20 meeting in Osaka, Japan committed to supporting marine plastics reduction, and towards water pollution control.

For Japanese companies, the Mekong Region is very important – it is both geographically and culturally close to Japan. One country here, however, does not offer sufficient protections for the private sector. The Japanese government is working to reduce risk for its companies.

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

Mr Hirose: There are so many schemes here. This prevents cooperation. For Laos, their development of large infrastructure must reflect the government’s budget. They don’t consider this. Sometimes this makes the problem bigger than it was before. We need quality development with not so much large-scale infrastructure that increases Lao PDR government debt.

Mr Suenaga: Lack of information-sharing. Not enough information from some of the upper countries, so then the lower countries cannot make decisions because of lack of information. This also affects the MRC.

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

Mr Hirose: China a big actor. China has the budget and a lot of huge projects in Lao PDR, such as the railways and the expressway. The budget is also very huge, and the number of projects is also very huge. We need to talk with them to discover their intentions.

He hopes that Japan is a trusted partner. He thinks that Japan has a good relationship with each of the Mekong countries.

Mr Suenaga: The individual countries should be the most influential actors (parity in influence and decision making?). This is his hope.

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

Mr Hirose: The four pillars of the Tokyo Strategy are an effective way to balance sustainable and economic development. Especially the strategy of hard and soft efforts. The realization of the green Mekong approach is another – such as disaster risk reduction, water management, and the sustainable development of aquatic resources.

Mr Suenaga: It is important that each government has effective development strategies. For example, in Laos the government is considering its next National development plan, and prioritises green growth – including Mekong water resources. Cooperation with the public sector, and civil society is also very important.

Mr Suenaga [in response to Shelley’s question about the Tokyo Strategy, pointing out that it was issued in 2018, and wondering if there’s been any adjustment to it in light of COVID]: the Tokyo Strategy provides Japan with direction, which will not fundamentally change despite COVID.

Mr Hirose [in response to Shelley’s question regarding Japan’s engagement with China]: we try to communicate with their embassy but cannot get the exact information. We need to communicate our bi-lateral plans. Japanese and Chinese private sectors need to cooperate.