Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Douangkham Singhanouvong, Director, Living Aquatic Resources Research Center (Lao PDR), October 27, 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?**

There has been a lot of change in terms of the environment. Especially water levels – these are at their lowest ever. This may be because of climate change or other human interventions. There has been a lot of development in China and up-country (in Laos). Mr Douangkham is uncertain if the water levels have dropped because of the latter, or because of 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?**

Cooperation can be many things. One thing we can do right away is information-sharing, be this data or experience. As for opportunities, we can talk together in both formal and informal ways, to discuss problems, and to learn from each other – at workshops or exchange visits.

**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?**

Over the past four years, the MRC has supported the lower Mekong countries to learn about transboundary water resources management. Especially between Laos and Thailand. Mr Douangkham references a project in Bokeo (Province, Lao PDR) that looks at how we can manage our shared resources. Mr Douangkham thought it important to establish a group to work on a master plan to manage water resources from provincial, district and local levels so that they can manage their natural resources by themselves. In Bokeo, the local authorities would have liked to continue this project, but the MRC ran out of funding.

Mr. Douangkham references a wide variety of challenges – pollution, sand mining, etc that affect fisheries habitats. The water is shared, so if two countries cannot agree on tools or guidelines, then it cannot be managed.

As for fisheries, he feels that there has been good cooperation between the countries. He has worked with the MRC on fisheries research since 1997. The MRC has enabled very good cooperation between the countries. They have held various fora, so that people from other countries, experts and many stakeholders can get to know each other and to share information. ASEAN also convenes things, but he has never attended one of these events. They (LARReC) use the MRC fish database, as well as contributing to it as the supervising data collection in Laos.

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

So far, he does not think that there is so much difference between the mechanisms. They all give the same attention to sustaining the environment. In the future, Mr Douangkham looks forward to more fora “to make us work more closely together and identify solutions”.

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

Cooperation can occur at any time. Under the LMC, we have started to have good cooperation. Again, he references exchange visits and information-sharing. Now, we can talk with Myanmar – face-to-face discussions. This indicates success. He also sees visits and meetings at different levels happening. For LARReC, the focus is mainly on science cooperation. He recently sent staff to China on an exchange “to learn how to do fisheries research”. The Chinese are willing to support LARReC.

He is now working on a fish passage project (led by the National University of Laos and Charles Sturt University) supported by ACIAR. The project looks at how fish can move upstream, which is a problem with all the water infrastructure. When it comes to getting eggs back downstream – we still do not have this kind of technology. The project is focused on getting fish up.

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

Hard to say. The countries need to look at the benefits. Upstream countries might hold back water so as to generate electricity; or they release too much water during the wet season and not worrying about the downstream countries.

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

Mr Douangkham does not see anything to prevent cooperation. Maybe funding – that is why we need World Bank support.

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

This depends on the level. At the high level, it can be the president or the prime minister. Or authorities at lower levels. This cooperation is mainly the responsibility of the MRC.

Mostly, Mr Douangkham thinks, the government will listen to their (LARReC’s) recommendations. It might not be 100%, but mostly. Now we would like to include fish passage into the fisheries law. This will focus on fish passage for agricultural infrastructure, and not for hydropower – this is not our mandate; that is MEM’s responsibility. They (LARReC) are working closely with the Department of Irrigation for this.

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

This is quite a political question. If we look at the government’s vision, we see that Laos wants economic growth because we are still the poorest country in Asia. That is not to say that the government ignores the environment – but we look at the economy first. Our natural resources are nearly destroyed, so we see that we need to preserve it. We talk about sustainability for everything, including in agriculture and aquaculture. We go step by step – our people need more income. It is hard to say that we need to protect natural resources when this is the case. Sustainable development is very nice, but in practice, it is very hard. The government does its best to achieve it. Everyone – globally – agrees that we have to achieve it.