Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Dr. John Dore (Bangkok), Rhonda Mann, Director, Somsanith Mounphoxay (Nit) and Thipphavone Chanthapaseuth (Thip) (Vientiane), October 28, 2020.***

**Notes**: Unless indicated as a direct quote, these notes are not verbatim, and reflect the interviewers’ interpretation of what was said. The participants in this interview also agreed to provide a written response to the interview questions.

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?**

Ms. Mann: This is tricky. Some of the frameworks have a geography in the basin, some more focused on the relations between the countries that share it. The impact of the pandemic on the six countries, and its knock-on impacts to the economy and ecologies. She talks about a new Australian initiative called ‘Partnerships for Recovery’ that responds to the pandemic, and development assistance that pivots and responds to the pandemic. The initiative responds to three key challenges: health, stability and economic recovery, especially for the vulnerable and urban job losses. Covid has amplified existing challenges, and creates new risks to value chains and food supply.

Dr Dore: Value, health and governance are in steep decline. Pre-Covid, there were other sustainability issues. He mentions that the Mekong’s tributaries are more than just a series of gauging stations. These issues are, however, just one slice of the larger SDG set. The Council Study, MRC BDP and the Mekong Delta are some initiatives to examine an expanded set of sustainable development issues. The SDGs guide sustainable development: is the focus just on water, whole of the basin or all SDGs?

**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 Dore: there are very serious political challenges to sustainable development. Is ‘cooperation’ the best phrase to use? Increasing regionalism is only Track 1. Not all of it is inherently good, or more important than bilateralism. While it is not new, but getting more attention now, perhaps “because of geopolitical heat”. All of the regionalisms and frameworks come from different places. DFAT has been updating its knowledge ~~or,~~ and revisiting the different regionalisms, objectives and their motivations (referencing The Asia Foundation’s Mekong Policy Dialogues initiative – that DFAT supports). We have a broad view of regionalism, and it is not all Track 1 – for example, cooperation within the ‘knowledge community’ and NGOs. Of course, there are opponents to these perspectives.

Ms. Mann: Australia sees the importance of transparency and inclusion in regional cooperation. They see ASEAN as a key element of the regional architecture.

Dr Dore: Wants to know if Mekong Vision 3.0 will only be focusing on Track 1. Shelley MacMillan (World Bank) responds by asking where DFAT focusses. Dr Dore replies that it is in the public record that DFAT has for years provided low-key support to the NGO sector, and the knowledge community – such as the WLE and MPOWER. We have been resourcing many different regionalisms across the Mekong. There are many different actors in the water-food-energy space. It has been beneficial to Mekong citizens to learn from each other, and not just from the MRC.

Ms. Mann: Australia is also working with ACMECS.

Dr. Dore: Yes, we agree that cooperation is very important for the sustainable development of the Mekong. But there are other pathways that can take you there (or not).

Marcus Wishart (World Bank): The modalities of the World Bank mean that that they do not have the discretion to respond to these other (non-state) actors.

Dr. Dore: There are different groups that can come together with different goals. The SAWI was cited as an example of Track 2 support. People come to issues from different viewpoints and orientations, and using different approaches. They don’t seem to come at problems by different perceived problems: that is an absence of commonly perceived problems.

NOTE: DR. DORE THE MEETING LEFT FOR ANOTHER MEETING AT THIS JUNCTURE.

**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?**

Ms. Mann: Explains that she is new to her position. Nevertheless, she mentions the design change to the Xayaburi emerging from the PNPCA process.

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

Ms. Mann: The advantage of the MRC is its convening power, and how it consults and agrees upon developments. The advantage is that it works across countries and their political engagements. As for opportunities, one is the greater strengthening of a broader range of views in the PNPCA or guidelines.

Nit: The MRC is more about peace-building, and a knowledge hub. Some actors will prioritise the environment, and are then seen by others as anti-development. We need to understand the complex web of benefits, costs and agendas.

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

Ms. Mann: Cooperation has occurred around the PNPCA. This is an example of success. It represents change in the ways to mitigate impacts “and strengthen the benefits”. But there are a range of pressures and factors that may have contributed towards the latter outcome. She also mentions supporting civil society to engage with government to change policy to take into account a wider range of views.

Year-round data sharing of river flows (LMC to MRC) is recent indicator.

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

Nit: It depends on how certain actors see a problem and how powerful that actor is. If China sees it as a problem, they then channel resources in that direction.

Ms. Mann: Wonders if there has been such a proliferation of cooperation frameworks because of different actors coming at a problem in different ways.

Nit: Framing a problem in such a way as to come at it in a different way is very difficult. The Lao Government has 18 different ministries, and it is hard to get them all into a place where they all feel that they are getting the same benefits, as well as exposed to the same costs. Problem perceptions are a function of power (e.g. the China-Lao railway and Lao Hydropower).

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

Ms. Mann: Different levels of trust prevent cooperation. And different competing priorities, capacities, transparency and understandings of the problem.

Nit: Multiple different sources provide enablers. For example, the US-China trade war is not an enabler *per se* but can contribute to cooperation. Controversy (e.g. geo-political) can initiate cooperation.

Ms. Mann: besides the reverse of what she said earlier, she mentions transparency as being an enabler; as is the agreement of different actors to work on a problem. But then a certain level of trust is needed.

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

Ms. Mann: Governments, and the “sovereignty of decision-making within their borders”. But then, the regional architecture – MRC, ASEAN and the private sector – has a level of influence. This varies between and within countries. Kim Geheb (Mekong Futures) asks who in the private sector she considers influential. The different financial institutions (World Bank and national investment banks) that support large infrastructure, Ms. Man replies. Funding is subject to different social, economic and environmental standards. There are different policy areas within which they operate and, through these, they influence sustainable development. Also, infrastructure developers and their level of engagement and the relationships that they have with other actors.

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

Ms. Mann: All governments globally are asking this question. ‘Balance’ is definitely the right word – each government will come at this from a different perspective, and whatever ‘balance’ means to their countries.

Nit: The ‘how’ is the difficult part of this question. People want to take short-cuts, there’s corruption, and a lack of long-term vision. Everything is a part in a big engine with lots of moving pieces.

Ms. Mann: COVID will influence how that balance can be achieved, how government approach it, as will the different stresses placed upon their economies. She thinks that it will amplify the tensions between economic growth and ecologies.

Nit: Financiers adhering to higher standards is one way. John Ward (Mekong Futures) asks about corruption, and if it is a type of cooperation (collusion), and if it is on the ‘dark side’ of cooperation. Nit agrees, but also says that those who do not like corruption will not engage with it. NGOs delegations are coopted into Track 1 where implicit cooperation may actually be coercion.