Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Prof. LU Xing, Director, GMS Study Center, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Yunnan University, October 30, 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 Qiong Lu (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?**

The primary challenge is scarcity, which is increasing. In the past there was so much water. This is not the case now. In southwest China, rainfall has reduced by 20%. So, competition for water resources is increasing. The second challenge is the Mekong’s flows. So, it is a question of both volume and distribution.

There has been huge development in the Mekong Delta. You need to assess how whole changes in the economy create new types of impact. In turn, this changes the nature and the magnitude of the demand for water. On the Tonle Sap, there has been big changes to the governance system as well – by transferring 35 previous private sector fishing lots to 500 community managed lots. The private sector lots may have been more economically efficient, but distribution was not fair. The Mekong now has a regulated flow. It is no longer natural flow. This then has impacts in other ecosystems, such as wetlands.

The primary driver of all these changes is market forces. He says that we (scholars) have not given much attention to what he calls the ‘invisible user’ which is the agricultural sector. This uses 80% of water use in the Mekong. The second main driver is hydropower. In national policies, economic development is the priority rather than conservation.

What, Prof. Lu wonders, do we mean by ‘reasonable use’ in international rivers? When there is plenty of water (water is viewed as a freely accessible resource), this does not matter, but when there is scarcity, water needs to be valued.

Water rights are demarcated via treaties as substitute. India and Pakistan is an example: where dam agreements are in place, seasonal flows agreed and there is a monitoring system.

**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 occurs when water is a key part of the inter-state business on international rivers. Prof. Lu also feels that it is important to have scholars’ voices included in an advisory role. In the Mekong, sovereignty is very strong. States respond to internal pressure, and they have to think about their own societies. In Thailand, for example, civil society resistance has prevented development. The MRC can do little other than facilitate discussions around the 3S (an international basin) for example. Can six countries discuss water allocation? And can they use water ‘reasonably’? I do not think so. Water can be used far more efficiently, but it is not because it remains perceived as (and is) free. Water saving technologies for example is almost absent.

**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, the MRC: at least for the four lower Mekong countries, have a platform. If the countries want to use the river, then they have a platform and a process by which they can discuss this. The LMC’s agreement to share water is very big progress. The LMC has also been active in capacity building for droughts and flooding. Prof. Lu hopes that we will have more collaboration around the Mekong. The Chinese government, he says, has shifted in a positive direction. But he would like to see it go further, to assessing ‘reasonable use’ and then on to ‘equitable use’.

Kim Geheb (Mekong Futures) asks what the difference is between collaboration and cooperation. Prof. Lu responds that collaboration involves building the same principle; it is the ‘equal way’ – the principle of how to do things.

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

The primary mechanism is the LMC because it includes water in its core business. For the other frameworks, water is not their core business. They only become aware of water if it is affected by their activities. Water is also central to the MRC.

**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 are different indicators that can reveal success: collaboration, information-sharing, expressing concerns to each other, and using water fairly and equitably. Also, if water is being used wisely at multiple levels, from the local to the national. Cooperation needs to be evaluated in the “real” world.

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

Prof. Lu focuses on pollution management, which, he says, is a concern that all of the countries have. In China, there are very strict pollution controls. Pollution is not a controversial issue, because, he says, it is very clear who is responsible. He references the response by local government in Laos to pollution arising from banana plantations. He also thinks that the ‘reasonable use’ of water is a non-controversial challenge, although he acknowledges that there is no consistency in how people and countries perceive ‘reasonable use’. He also believes that there is regional recognition of increasing demand for water. John Ward (Mekong Futures) says that there are projections that water pollution will increase across the Mekong, and asks if Prof. Lu believes that existing cooperation mechanisms can cope with this? Prof. Lu says that they cannot – they are good at monitoring and detection, but not resolving it.

Prof. Lu cited the example of how the management of pollution in Dali lake has changed, using participatory based nature friendly remediation. May be a case study for other countries.

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

Cooperation is prevented by a lack of state’s understanding of each other’s concerns. Often, it gets too political and needs to be de-politicized. And do those at the table *really* understand the Mekong? Prof. Lu does not think so. He feels that regional-national interests need to be looked at, and feels that (we) scholars can look at this to help improve understanding – to create a more enabling, mutually-understanding, space within and between countries. There is also impunity for countries when they “export external costs”.

**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 issue and at what time it is addressed. Prof. Lu identifies the international community as a primary influencer, and argues that their meetings and discussions can be a way to air concerns and to share information. As a second important influencer, ministries in the individual countries, but, again, it depends on the issue – ministries of energy are influential in the energy sector; ministries of environment in the environmental sector, etc. Do not under-estimate civil society, Prof. Lu cautions, as well as scientists – although the latter groups are, he feels, often ‘invisible’. Public opinion is also very important, but he is not sure that it results in decisions. He agrees (in response to a comment from Kim Geheb) that the market forces he mentioned earlier are also influential. Market forces, he says, respond to and address social needs.

The media can also shape public opinion. Agriculture is the no. 1 influencer, followed by hydropower. Domestic water use is often a matter of survival: life and death.

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

In just five years, China has changed the orientation of the state toward the environment – not just at the Party levels, but up and down the country’s governance structure. He references the work he is doing on Dali Lake in Yunnan, where the local government’s response to the lake’s environmental problems has been robust. To obtain sustainability, we need an ideology followed by policies, and then technique. We must not see environmental protection only as a cost, but that it also has benefits that are not mutually exclusive of economic development.

There are institutional costs associated with this and communities need support.