Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Assist. Prof. Kanokwan Monorom, Director, Greater Mekong Sub-region Social Research Center, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University (Thailand), 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 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?**

Several challenges: (a) unequal relations between up- and downstream countries. By ‘upstream’ Prof. Monorom references China. Economically, there are huge gaps between them. It is in this gap that the big countries are making decisions about Mekong issues, particularly hydropower. (b) In theory civil society and non-state actors are supposed to be engaged by their respective government, but in practice, this process is not meaningful. There is not much space for local knowledge. (c) Marginalised people never know what is going on – for example, why the water levels are low, or why the flows change so rapidly and substantially, or why there have been such drastic fisheries reductions. There seems to be no communication between up and downstream countries (particularly with respect to water releases), and in particular, no communication between the upstream government and the downstream communities. (d) Science is not a basis for decision-making in the Mekong.

**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 is ‘collaborative benefit-sharing’. There must be some arrangement for multiple stakeholders (both state and non-state) to manage the river’s waters. When it comes to opportunities, we have to ask who these are opportunities for? For institutions? For academics? For everyone? Cooperation means everyone has equal opportunity to express their views and suggest alternatives. Benefit-sharing is also about cost-sharing, and managing both of these in a cooperative framework. IWRM is one example of a framework that tries to capture these points.

**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?**

The Mekong countries have been trying to cooperate for benefit-sharing for many years, but only at the top level – at the diplomatic level. Not at the bottom levels. This is why it has not been successful. Benefit sharing has been a diplomatic process not a technical one.

Civil society is always asking why they do not know anything? They want to know who is in charge, and they feel unrecognised and left behind. In all of the Mekong countries, it is the same – and not just in Thailand. ‘Cooperation’ is only talked about at the top level – people at the bottom level do not even know what the ‘Mekong countries’ are; they do not know what the LMC is. The governments do not carry the voices of these people to the top-level meetings. The Thai National Mekong Committee never comes to talk with them. If the World Bank wants to do Mekong Vision 3.0, this will be a key challenge for them. There are 25 river basins in Thailand, and each has a river basin committee. These are chaired by the provincial governor, and 80% of members are officials: these are not devolved enough. ““Sustainable development is important because nobody understands what it means”.

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Sometimes, International Rivers may be invited to these meetings, but never domestic CSOs. In Thailand, the River Basin committees never go far enough down. The communities with whom she works have never heard about these committees.

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

They need more stakeholder participation. If there are lots of platforms to enable this, it would be good. Different platforms have different goals and mechanisms with which to achieve sustainability. Maybe we need to reconceptualise what sustainable development is. ‘Sustainability’ is very contested. For local people, they feel that it is about sustaining their lives, the right to use their natural resources, and the right to manage these (including the Mekong). For the government, sustainability is the SDGs, which they employ at the planning level (eg national development plans), and not at the practical level. They (the government) use very fancy words to explain sustainability – that it is managing resources so they can be used by the next generation.

There is a huge gap between (sustainability) theory and practice, and the World Bank needs to realise this. The definition of poverty is also contested – here, they also used fancy words, like ‘multi-dimensional poverty’. These are not neutral terms. Who defines them? Who benefits?

“Sustainable development is important because nobody understands what it means”.

‘Cooperation’ is also a very good word – it’s very promising, and looks very compromising (by which Prof. Kanokwan means, ‘suggestive of compromise’). For me, cooperation means equal opportunity to cooperate – why should people not be allowed to say what they need to? What is ‘Mekong cooperation’ anyway and at what level?

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

We should look at outcomes – long-term impact. For example, if we have downstream villagers who have the opportunity to be informed and consulted when water is released from upstream dams, this is an out*put*. But if this process also results in a mechanism to cope with these impacts, then this is an out*come*.

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

Cooperation can be effective if there are agreements in place such as navigation, compared to sustainable hydropower, where the guidelines remain contested and have been released. Cooperation can be successful if the institutional arrangement is in line with the agreement. Prof. Kanokwan references Thailand’s ambitions to divert water from the Mekong mainstream for its Kong-Loei-Chi-Mun project. But, she says, they have to ask the other Mekong countries for permission (this is not technically correct. They have to inform the other countries, but none of the latter can prevent Thailand from going ahead with the project). This project is Thai national interest, rather than thinking about how the downstream countries might be affected. The national plans for the individual countries are a big problem for Mekong cooperation – it is because of these that they will never fully cooperate.

Different national development objectives and plans do not consider effects at a deeper level (i.e. basin level). This is the main impediment and obstruction to cooperation.

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

The first issue preventing cooperation relates to legitimacy. If you are ‘eligible’ to cooperate, then you are allowed to talk. The trouble is, who decides who is legitimate in this process? The second is national laws – each country has different laws with which to regulate the Mekong. The third is whether or not governments recognise the rights of their people as provided for in their constitutions – if this is recognised, cooperation can be successful. Prof. Kanokwan discussed transboundary ESIAs, and thinks that these could be a mechanism for participation – if so, then they can enable cooperation.

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

At the 2018 Greater Mekong Forum on Water and Food, Prof. Kanokwan attended a session being led by representatives from the LMC’s Water Cooperation Centre. It led her to realise that “the most influential person in Mekong basin cooperation is whoever drafts their cooperation agreements”. Cooperation is ‘real’ for those who have the right to speak about it, but not for people in tiny communities.

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

This won’t happen – they are parallel paradigms that will not, at some point, meet. If they are to meet, then they should be looking at accounting for the micro-scale – this would be an alternative way of managing the Mekong.

Another possibility is to incorporate social responsibility in the private sector. A third is a focus on what Prof. Kanokwan calls the ‘informal economic sector’ which references peoples’ natural resources collection (subsistence production). It is with this economy that those who depend on the Mekong engage. We need to bring this onto the table, so that they can continue to rely on the Mekong. This needs to be discussed in a very serious way.

John Ward (Mekong Futures) poses a question about gender, and that Prof. Kanokwan is the first interviewee to have raised this. Women have very limited opportunities to participate in Mekong decision making, she says.