Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Prof. FENG Yan, Master Supervisor and Director of Transboundary Water Resources Laboratory at the Asia International Rivers Center, Yunnan University, November 2, 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 Xiawei Liao (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. He 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?**

Climate change is now challenging the water resources of the Mekong. Population density is generally high. Urbanisation is also a challenge, particularly in the upper basin. Amongst the six countries are those whose infrastructure is lagging behind. We know that there is severe pollution. She references saline intrusion in the Mekong Delta and ecosystem deterioration in Cambodia. So too, the distribution of water over time and space varies from upstream and downstream. In the upper basin, there is lots of rainfall during the summer, but less downstream. Drought will be more severe in the future. So, these are some of the distinct challenges, which are getting more acute.

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

What does sustainable development mean? Each riparian has a different understanding and challenges depending on population, water security. Water cooperation can be leveraged to support cooperation in other SDG. There are some institutions with a good foundation, such as the MRC. An example of good cooperation here is their navigation programme – she discussed shipping for a moment. But we need to ask if it is actually transboundary cooperation. In some local areas, there are positive outcomes, but at basin scale, not really. Many people think that we do not have science-based decision-making. But China has now committed to data-sharing with the downstream countries. There is progress in cooperation, but we have to see if a joint basin development plan emerges.

**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?**

There are dozens of frameworks to promote each of the Mekong countries. But most of these are focussed on economic development and trade. Very few are focussed on water or the basin – such as the MRC and the LMC. The GMS focusses on the environment, but how much does it focus on water?

**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. The GMS framework focuses on environmental protection including water. They only become aware of water if it is affected by their activities. Water is also central to the MRC. China has also supported transboundary cooperation focussed on capacity building, but this is not enough. The trade-based frameworks do not focus enough on water, fisheries, or water pollution. The latter has only gained attention in the past two years, via an inter-governmental platform for monitoring established by 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?**

A balanced ecosystem with integrity. There are those who argue that there are ulterior motives behind these various cooperation initiatives; there are also those who create barriers to cooperation. These ‘little disputes and arguments’ are not conducive to river basin cooperation or achieving the SDGs. All problems – floods, droughts etc. – can be addressed and solved through cooperation. Typically, only one voice Is heard.

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

There is a lot of interest in economic growth and trade. But there is not enough attention to water. We see progress in transportation and connectivity cooperation. But water, and upstream-downstream coordination is difficult. Each country has its own development targets, so regional priorities are not consistent across the basin. Is there enough water for downstream irrigation to meet increasing population due to hydropower development? We can start simply – focussing, for example, on drought or floods. The MRC has been looking at this, but without good results.

In April and May, there were media reports saying that there was not good cooperation between upstream and downstream countries, but it should be remembered that the LMC has only just started.

It is possible for the countries to agree on a common goals and interests around complex problems. For example, fish biodiversity We need coordination around water-sharing – there is enough water; it is more a space and timing thing.

There are a dozen transboundary rivers and 100 tributaries that cross borders where China is upstream and downstream countries are often under developed. The Canada -US water agreements are an example that China is learning from. Joint planning and water quality monitoring is progressing with Russia. Indian cooperation is moving slowly. Matching the river development goals of China with downstream countries is a challenge.

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

Cooperation is a general trend, but there are factors that influence its rate. Every country has different economic growth needs. When they implement their plans, this hinders cooperation – but every country has a right to development. National economic interests dictate decisions.

Another challenge is knowing the water account. People have different understanding of drought. There has been a huge reduction in precipitation. We all face climate change. But we do not have a real scientific basis for explaining drought. This results, Prof. Feng argues, in different perceptions of the drought and what/who are responsible.

She mentions the WLE Dams Database which, she says, shows that total reservoir storage on the upstream is similar to that of the downstream – so this cannot be seen as the cause of drought. It is possible for us to establish the scientific basis for why drought has arisen. Once this has been established, then we can talk about water-sharing.

There is, Prof. Feng says, an overlap in the MRC and LMC mandates. How, she wonders, can we coordinate between the two? Can we strengthen some of the areas that the MRC is good at. The LMC has the benefit that it includes all six countries. But there are those who say that the LMC may weaken the MRC.

The MRC has a long history. By creating it, the four countries showed their intention to collaborate around water resources. Kim Geheb (Mekong Futures) asks why China has not joined the MRC? Dr. Feng replies that, back then, when the MRC was created, there were those who felt that the China should not be a partner. Without the involvement of China there is large technology gap. But it is a dialogue partner of the MRC. ‘Back then’ China has its reservations about the MRC and wanted to hold back to see how this multilateralist approach would work. But she is concerned that the outlook for water governance in the Mekong is confusing because of the LMC/MRC overlapping mandate.

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

The general public who are affected the most. The countries that share the basin should be the most influential actors. China and Vietnam are possibly the most influential countries in the basin. Vietnam is the most downstream country, so perhaps it should be the most influential.

When it comes to Mekong Vision 3.0, we need to prioritise research institutions. And then the financial institutions, followed by independent third parties. Sustainable development, Prof. Feng points out, is still development, and we need money for it. Hence, the importance of financial institutions. We need to have a scientific basis so that we can know where we should start – to know what it is that we want to achieve.

Maybe the EU, South Korea and the US would be willing to contribute towards Mekong Vision 3.0. Prof. Feng says that it would be her preference to work with independent, neutral, third parties.

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

We need short-, mid- and long-term coordination and integrated plan that is practical and *implementable*. Such an approach should consider economic growth taking into account the environment.