Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Dr Zhong Yong, Chief Executive Officer, Water Cooperation Center, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism (Beijing), November 3, 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. Dr Zhong gave authorisation for this interview to be recorded, but asked that permission be sought if the recording was to be used for anything.

The interview was introduced by Marcus Wishart (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?**

There are many challenges. The uneven distribution of rainfall in time and space, and more. This has been intensified by climate change. Drought has caused significant economic losses to the Mekong people. Water has become one of the key issues in the sustainable development of the Lancang-Mekong (LM). How, Dr Zhong wondered, can we create a shared dialogue on how to do this? All the LM countries have a right to economic development. Rapid economic development has led to natural resource declines. Sustainable growth needs to be shared by all Lancang-Mekong countries. It is the responsibility of the LMC to promote the development of the individual countries’ people and narrow the development gap. Countries have a right to develop their economies.

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

Shared benefits and responsibility for shared prosperity. Reciprocity and trust are necessary. We are required to adopt more scientific management. Regional cooperation mechanisms play an important role in this, such as the MRC and the GMS. With increased socio-economic improvements, there is also increased willingness to cooperate. Dr. Zhong has 20 years of involvement in transboundary cooperation. He senses, he says, a strong willingness amongst the six countries to cooperate. He really thinks that all governments – and even NGOs – are willing to sit together in discussions to find good ideas to promote cooperation.

The countries are facing are facing similar challenges when it comes to water resources, for example, floods and droughts. Underdeveloped water infrastructure leads to lower productivity. Many local people do not have access to clean water; food production is not stable, and farmers could earn more with irrigation and other facilities. The LM “collects the countries very closely”. It is a large, complex river, and therefore more cooperation is needed.

The six leaders have committed to sustainable development in a joint 2019 statement. Within sustainable development, it is necessary to strengthen water governance with a comprehensive approach that includes the environment, and social and economic outcomes. Reciprocity is important for any cooperation if it is to last in the long run it must be based on mutual trust, respect and benefit-sharing – in which everyone benefits. Dr Zhong pointed out his expertise in the field of reciprocity, and draws our attention to the 2016 paper he published on the subject[[1]](#footnote-1).

**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 many examples since the start of the LMC. They now have a five-year action plan, a programme document that guides cooperation, principles, priorities, financial and intellectual support, and institutional arrangement. This means sharing benefits and expertise, and to help each other to face these challenges. The latter “is the most fundamental support for the quality of river basin management”.

To strengthen water cooperation. The First Ministerial Meeting (of the LMC) was held in December 2019, in which the ministers agreed to respect each other’s rights to economic development, and the right to decide on how to utilise their own water resources. Joint studies have occurred, as has data and information-sharing.

The LMC holds regular ministerial meetings. The next one will be in Vietnam early next year (notwithstanding the pandemic). This would be the second one. ‘Concrete implementation’ occurs via the Joint Working Group. All decisions of the ministerial meetings will be supported by the Water Cooperation Center.

We have an LMC Water Cooperation Forum. The first was held in Kunming in 2018. The second is delayed due to the pandemic, and is now planned for the second half of 2021.

More than one thousand colleagues from the Mekong countries were invited to China by the Water Center for capacity building or for the Forum. They have also sponsored five batches – some 140 young professionals – for master’s degrees in China. Many Chinese experts have visited the Mekong countries to gain counsel. There is very good mutual trust for future cooperation.

China has been sharing hydrological data in the wet seasons. Recently, they have agreed to share data year-round. This emerged from a request from the lower Mekong countries. Population growth has resulted in greater water demands, and so more information is needed to plan for this. Information-sharing plays an important role in mitigating flood and drought. There should be transparent and comprehensive information-sharing because now, big challenges like drought and flooding do not just affect one country. How can we manage these disasters, and benefit more? Information-sharing is not easy amongst the six countries, but there is strong will.

In September (2020) there was a special meeting of the Joint Working Group to establish the basis for information-sharing. It sought more concrete actions to achieve this.

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

Why are there so many frameworks? Water is very important, but most of them are rooted in other issues. The different mechanisms have made good contributions to the Mekong countries. Dr Zhong has visited the other Mekong countries more than 50 times. Two experiences stand out, of which the first was when he was invited to Thailand as an expert, to advise on the Chao Phraya floods 2011; and then in a similar capacity to Myanmar for the 2015 Irrawaddy floods. People lost lives in these floods, and their homes. Factories and industries were affected. Dr Zhong was most impressed by the poor families, living in 10 square metres, their houses leak – these are people who could benefit so much from this water, so why are they living like this? But they have no budget, and no effective institutions to manage these waters. The local people have a right to food security and to access clean water to prevent COVID-19. So, I think that whatever mechanism that wants to improve local peoples’ living standards is welcome.

The LMC was set up by the six countries with strong will, and will bring strong support to local communities. There are still big challenges – we are open; we will work with any of the mechanisms that would like to improve the local living standards. But why do local people know so little about the LMC? The LMC has focussed more on action and less on communications. We want to improve on this by working with the World Bank.

Dr Zhong was at a workshop where there was a person for whom everything about dams was wrong. If the public has no understanding of the benefits of dams, then they will get a very wrong message. Hydropower provides energy and flood control; they can save lives, improve navigation conditions and food supply. They can also improve ecologies during the dry season. In Thailand, the local people are taught that dams are bad. Local people need to have clear, balanced information – but they are misled. Dr Zhong wants the LMC Water Cooperation Centre to play a role in providing this balanced perspective.

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

“The LMC is a cohesive and centrifugal force for co-operation”. We have recognised difficulties and challenges. Efforts should be made to improve water security. The sign of our success is the livelihoods of regional people. We are doing water safety projects. It is not the business or privilege of other (outside) countries to improve living standards – this is the responsibility of their governments.

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

Water challenges have become a global challenge. Climate change is especially serious in this respect, introducing uncertainty and complexity, and is a major problem in this region. In Laos, we have drought in the north, and floods in the south at the same time. In one country! This complicates things. How can we face this kind of challenge? Two months ago, there was an MRC report that came out that water infrastructure as a key challenge. We need more capacity building, more transparent information-sharing, and more coordinated management. We need evaluation and forecasting – for better benefits – with limited skills. Both I and Dr Hatda (CEO of the MRC) think that more cooperation is needed.

The LMC is six countries while the MRC is four. Naturally, there is overlap. But we can support and learn from each other. Overlap is not a disadvantage. Dr Zhong references the MOU between the LMC and the MRC. Sustainable development is a common goal.

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

The technology deficit prevents cooperation. Data and information are not transparent enough, and there is limited infrastructure to build coordinated action for floods and droughts. But the six countries pay close attention to water cooperation. I am confident that we can face these challenges. The political will is there to improve living standards. Our cooperation is supported at government and grassroots levels. The six countries have clear cooperation. We *know* each other and respect each other.

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

Governments – like the left-hand and the right-hand; all the Mekong countries are equal.

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

At the first ministerial meeting, all the governments paid close attention to water infrastructure to meet the needs of the people for sustainable development. There are differences between the countries – in terms of culture, their different development stages. Any responsible government has an obligation to improve livelihoods and to protect them from flood and drought.

We need water for everything – this means that there are some contradictions. This is normal. Responsible government must be truthful – and transparent – to their people. Water infrastructure might affect some of us, or some ecologies – but this is our only choice for food security. “There is no absolute democracy”. Any action we take will affect somebody. Sustainable development does not mean ‘no change’. In our society, we have to evolve with ecologies. We need more scientific understanding; and we need to take into account future generations.

1. <https://doi.org/10.2166/wp.2016.229> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)