Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Mr TEK Vannara, Director, NGO Forum for Cambodia (Phnom Penh), 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 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?**

The main challenge is the imbalance between economic and environmental development. There are six countries and so there are six perspectives, each with their own economic priorities – and the economy is always prioritised. They never use environmental indicators or assessments in their planning. There are no environmental values indicated in EIAs. The economic losses of natural resource utilization are not included. If these are included, then it favours the policy-maker. There are no limits to development – for example, to set aside certain amounts of land, or forest, to conserve the Mekong.

There are many actors involved – and Mr Tek lists multiple frameworks of which he is aware. They need to agree together what the limits to development should be, in full consultation with the people, to develop a master plan for the Mekong. This plan should make clear that the tributaries, and connectivity between the river and the rest of the basin.

We would like to see rules for the international banks. The World Bank has recourse mechanisms, but many others do not have this. With many developers and ‘money owners’, if people have concerns there is no way for them to express them. Enabling this should be prioritised.

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

As it stands now, it is government-to-government, and government-to-private sector. This cooperation is good. But cooperation with the people is not good. Some of the things discussed at the MRC are good. Here, at both the regional and international agendas, we can see where the people are. This is not the case with the LMC. The people should be prioritised for discussions on the mainstream dam projects. Many people do not understand the reports from the PNPCA process, because they come in English. And the reports can be very long. Some people do not even know what EIA is. And the time for consultations are very short.

We want more engaged regional cooperation so that people can react. Some people have resources, so they can react. The countries should align transparently, accountability and with consultation to address all actors equally. We want all actors to have a common mechanism and basin that includes all developer plans, dams and operations.

Mr Tek references the MRC’s Mekong Development Strategy (BDS), which he approves of. There are many types of consultation, he says. But they differ in terms of quality. With the PNPCA there are many consultations, but then you have all of these problems with the language the reports come in. Also, the perspectives of the people are not reflected in the PNPCA report recommendations. Mr Tek references what he says are the ignored community recommendations around the Don Sahong hydropower plant (on the mainstream in Laos). Knowledge management is biased against local communities. There is generally no response or action by developers to the PNPCA.

**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?**

Mr Tek thinks that the MRC is a good mechanism. The LMC should, he says, be integrated into the BDS. The MRC has produced a lot of information which is useful for planning. Even though all the countries prioritise economic development, the MRC addresses the environment. Each country has their own development plans

The World Bank, Mr Tek says, has a focus on river basin organisations. But we want to see that they are workable, that they have the capacity to respond to basin challenges e.g. forested watersheds, river flows to support fish populations and community ecotourism. Also, the World Bank wants sustainability, and we also want to see community environmental management systems kept in place.

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

We appreciate the various mechanisms, but their treaties do not address conflict, dispute resolution or transparency or accountability. They just talk about cooperation and information-sharing. Also, there are no recourse mechanisms for the people.

**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 governments and the people know the master plans within which they can all participate. All parties have to understand the big picture, and to know and respect the rules and regulations and that all actors are recognised. Cooperation would also be successful if benefit-cost sharing emerges. There needs to be sufficient resources for all to enable collaboration. All actors must have mutual respect and trust.

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

Cooperation is prevented when people do not agree with development. If problems are identified (by anyone), JICA will stop their project, and resolve the matter before continuing. But with some projects, the information is secret and there are many unknowns. So, Mr Tek thinks there should be regulations to ensure project plans are disclosed. These will reduce problem complexity. He speaks favourably about the recommendations of the World Commission on Dams, and feels that these should be applied. Large-scale projects should have an environmental focus – and not just on the economic perspective.

Common property needs to be guaranteed. An example of common property is water of sufficient quality – if people are poor, they should not be made to buy water that they cannot afford.

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

The MRC’s 1995 Agreement contains articles on consultation – but then the results are not implemented. They should use mediation to move forwards. Without treaties, then there’s no progress. Benefit-sharing enables cooperation.

We need information disclosure, inclusive decision-making, transparency, and indicators that we can use to evaluate if developers are addressing their action plans. We need regulations to ensure that they deliver on their action plans. The Cambodia National Mekong Committee and the government could enforce these, with the MRC addressing this at the regional level. The important thing about treaties is that they introduce third parties into the process, which is helpful if there are any disputes.

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

This is linked to the resource flow – whoever has the best access to it is the most influential. The Mekong belongs to its countries. We have different cultures, economies and environments. And different capacities.

But the people also have influence. He mentions a ‘Mekong Peoples’ Council’ that could engage with the MRC. If people only engage for, say, a day, then it is not really consultation. But with a council such as this, then the people could engage over the long-term, and understand the issues better, and be empowered. He seems to suggest that the people would only be influential if they are organised – around such a Council, for example, to have an equal voice in negotiations. Access to information is also critical. Mr Tek calls for ‘bottom-up consultation’. With top-down consultation, decision-makers do not have the full picture – like how the people are connected with the environment. The people also need to be aware – so that they have the big picture, and they can understand it and then talk freely.

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

We need limits. For example, a limit on how many dams there should be. And “to give space for Mekong environmental sustainability”. In addition, we need benefit-sharing. With the existing dams, how can we share the benefits into, for example, fisheries, or sharing the money that ‘they’ get from this infrastructure. There needs to be an openness to balancing economic development with sustainable development. We need to ensure that a basin master plan addresses connectivity (of the people with nature?) and equitable benefit-sharing. It is difficult, Mr Tek concludes, to obtain sustainability “when you only go country by country”.