Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Professor TIAN Fuqiang, Associate Professor, Department of Hydraulic Engineering, Tsinghua University (Beijing), November 6, 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 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?**

First, rapid socio-economic development and a very large population in the basin – about 70 million; and second, climate change which increases the hydrological extremes in the basin. We have published several papers on this. The main risk is that the flood risk is increasing in the near term. And then, drought – especially severe drought, is occurring more frequently. Prof Fuqiang argues that upstream dams can help to mitigate this, and the same is true of drought. Finally, there is also a capacity shortage. While we have established several cooperation frameworks, we still need additional capacity.

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

Resources are unevenly distributed across the basin. Upstream, there are very large hydropower resources; lower down, there is agriculture and fisheries. Water connects all of these things. Prof. Fugiang had a PhD student who looked at the water-food-energy (WFE) nexus in the basin. There is, Prof. Fuqiang says, a ‘synergistic opportunity for cooperation’. Dams provide an opportunity to address all the WFE facets. But, upstream dams contrast with downstream agricultural demands – a balance is needed between the WFE elements. Even fish can benefit from the re-operation of demands. If we use the infrastructure properly, we can even address ecosystem needs. If the river’s flood pulse is replicated (through dam operations), fish production from the Tonle Sap could increase 75%. The trade-offs between hydropower and fisheries is, however, significant. There are also trade-offs between hydropower and other water uses. We do not have a basin-level mechanism to address this. Perhaps this is something Mekong Vision 3.0 should address.

**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?**

Prof. Fuqiang references the 2016 supplementary releases from Chinese dams (to supply additional water to downstream, drought-affected countries. The 2015/16 and 2019/20 droughts in the basin were the most severe in 220 years. The supplement was not management, but an emergency response. But it was still a very good example of cooperation. If the upstream dams can collaborate through some mechanism to provide more regulatory supplements, this would be a good thing.

If we had long-term forecasting, dams could then better plan for releases. We have no mechanism for this long-term forecasting. The LMC is a new initiative. The Ministry of Water Resources (China) is trying to work with the MRC to address this forecasting issue.

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

To address the challenges (that he mentioned above) we need the ‘3 I’s’ – Information, Infrastructure and Institutions. Infrastructure is necessary to address flood, drought and fisheries production. The flood pulse also needs to be restored. We will need more storage to address this. I have already discussed Information – this is needed to manage the infrastructure. As for Institutions, the LMC works ‘beyond water’. It addresses many things; there is also the GMS. These platforms all focus on different aspects of the cooperation spectrum.

The basin is in good shape from a cooperation perspective, but we need more. More data sharing, more action on dam operation, and research. We still don’t have common ground on some facts. We need collaboration on some of the critical things that he has already mentioned. There are many different opinions amongst international experts. Sharing knowledge is a first step – and then we can move on to looking at the frameworks working together, for example, the LMC and the MRC.

There can be a flood control effect if all dams in the basin are deployed, particularly in the mid-stream (but not downstream). But getting all of the dams in the basin to cooperate is very difficult.

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

‘Benefit’ should be the key word. There are lots of benefits to be gained from transboundary water cooperation. Prof. Fuqiang references Claudia Sadoff and David Grey’s benefit-sharing paper, which he endorses[[1]](#footnote-1). Achieving this – the benefit-sharing as described by Sadoff and Grey – would be a success.

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

It is relatively easy to cooperate. This regularly happens around humanitarian issues, such as floods or drought. There is a clear causality here between cooperation and humanitarian problems. He refers to this as the ‘hazard problem’.

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

Trust between the different countries. To promote this, communication is needed between countries, communities and different levels. There is a lot of academic cooperation in the Mekong Region. We work with actors in Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, and we’re trying to do more. On water, our group has done a lot in the ‘broader field’. It established the Asian Universities Alliance, with 15 universities in 14 Asian countries.

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

Governments dominate. We are in good shape now between China and the downstream (Mekong) countries. There is a will to cooperate. This is a good signal. Under the LMC, students have been supported to come to China for master’s degrees. I have PhD students from Thailand, and this capacity building can provide long-term influence.

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

Any human action has an impact on natural resources. This should be evaluated in advance of the intervention. If we have this principle, maybe we can achieve the balance. But it is not easy. China has experienced rapid economic development over the past 40 years, and has derived lessons around the impact on resources, especially water. When we have enough resources, we can recover. But we can do better with the lessons we have derived from the development period. ‘Balance’ is subjective, and different people will have different opinions on what it is, and we should allow them to have these. In China, we have a lot of experience with flood control. When we build levees to manage floods, then people move closer to the water, and this increases the risk. So, we have had to come up with different approaches for how we do things, rather than just building more levees.

1. https:// doi.org/10.1016/S1366-7017(02)00035-1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)