Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Dr Diana Suhardiman, Senior Researcher - Policy and Institutions; Governance and Inclusion Research Group Lead, International Water Management Institute, 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 Klomjit Chandrapanya (World Bank), who summarised the World Bank’s 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?**

First, the current institutional arrangement is disconnected across scales, and between institutions. Things then run in parallel without connecting. Second, problem definition – there are no agreements on problems. For some, hydropower is a problem, for others, it is a solution. Until this is addressed, everyone is talking at cross-purposes. Third, too many actors – governments, NGOs, etc – so there are so many overlaps and duplications between mandates, and their collective efforts are not integrated. This creates dispersion, and ensures that there is no common vision. Where there are visions, they do not represent local people: “Representation becomes blurred”.

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

An equal partnership and a level playing field, with equal access to decision-making. Mechanisms are needed with checks and balances. The opportunities are there, and lie in the existing capacity, and interest. It is more about weaving this in a way that can heterogeneity.

**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?**

These exist. Dr Suhardiman references the PNPCA process, as is the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Mekong Mainstream Dams. These cannot be regarded as ‘management’ – but they are a step in the right direction. As is the MRC, as a forum for discussion, to consider management options and how this should occur. The PNPCA process serves a s reference point, slows unchecked development and needs institutional support. When it comes to hydropower, there need to be links to the developers who are responsible for carrying out the EIAs, and SIAs. It is also important that these should be monitored and evaluated. But these are not linked to decision-making processes. The PNPCA process happening up at the MRC level is unrelated to the ESIAs. Right now, these are parallel processes. There is an assumption that the link is there. The MRC assumes that it will happen under the NMCs. But, in Laos, the LNMC is under MONRE, while hydropower is MEM’s mandate, and MONRE will never win an argument with MEM. This is an important gap, which needs to be addressed if we want improvements.

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

It is good that the frameworks are there. Compared to other basins, the Mekong is quite advanced. But in terms of improvements, the frameworks need to be more meaningful, which, for Dr Suhardiman, means that buy-in is possible for everyone, and that people can see how their perspectives are represented.

With the LMC and MRC, there are geo-political issues – to the degree that one has to wonder if their real goal is water management. But then we have to start looking at interests and politics.

**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 first level is the inter-country level. Here, if the countries have a level playing field, and the platform will need to be able to absorb power asymmetries. When I talk about a level playing field, I am thinking about things like equal opportunities to gain access to and process information. It is very hard to get access to information on the Chinese dams. How, under such circumstances, can discussions and deliberation occur? The second level is local, and success here refers to the extent to which local communities and actors are represented, the capacity to process information and have opportunities to convey their perspectives. The production of knowledge is a political process.

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

The collection of quantitative data and establishing data platforms – for fisheries, hydrology, etc. From a cooperation perspective, this has been quite effective. But when it comes time to use data for decision-making purposes, then the data gets politicised.

Science is often perceived as the solution to everything. But, in the decision-making space, this is not necessarily the case. Policy processes are regularly regarded as neutral, but they are never that. The politics in here can be more undermining than data. So too, knowledge collection and production is also political – for example, in the choice of methodologies.

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

Interests and factors can both enable and prevent cooperation. For example, politics can do both.

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

What do you mean by ‘influential actors’? If it is about who can set up cooperative frameworks and mechanisms, it is the development partners. But if it is development and outcomes you are focussing on, then it is the governments. NGOs and CSOs are influential in ‘open spaces – international NGOs more than local ones. Researchers a very heterogeneous. Dr Suhardiman references debate around the establishing of a World Heritage Site for the Nu (Salween) River in Yunnan, where there were those academics who opposed it, and others who supported it. Academics are not a consistent actor group. When studies are released, we cannot automatically assume that it is an uncontested viewpoint.

When we talk about the science-policy interface, it is an interface, with contrasting views and ways of doing things. Hence, it must be balanced (and not, say, resolved). In the Mekong, science has become highly politicised.

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

It has to be linked with poverty reduction. For example, I cannot see how hydropower revenue is the same as poverty reduction – how does this revenue link with, say, education, health care or other social provisioning? Economic growth is not a stand-alone indicator. The relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction needs to be unpacked.

John Ward (Mekong Futures) asks why GDP is the primary metric of progress. Dr Suhardiman replies that people would rather not make things too transparent for many reasons – corruption, or politics. Where does all the revenue go?

Dr Suhardiman expressed the hope that Mekong Vision 3.0 will be much more representative of the people in the region.