Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Dr POONPAT Leesombatpiboon, Executive Director, International Affairs Division, Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Energy (Bangkok), 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 request to record this interview was declined.

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 development issues are more complex now than before – especially when dealing with multiple objectives. Water supply, hydropower etc. and all of the different stakeholder groups, who have different objectives. We cannot go in one direction to meet our goals; we need to take an holistic approach.

The lack of understanding of stakeholders are particular areas of focus. If you ask environmentalists, they want the protection of the river, which may then lead to antagonism; policy makers “want to bring the better life” and they may not have many options available to them if they want to increase GDP. We need to balance between these for peace and development.

Stakeholders may have access to different sets of information. The platforms that have been set up to bring them together often result in antagonism based on different information. We need to find a peaceful way, and which institution should be responsible for this. How can the people be educated? They have to know what alternatives there are if they are to be told that they have to sacrifice something. The government needs to be committed to the people if we are to have trust. If you promise jobs, and then you do not provide this, then they will not believe you next time. This is a serious problem. But the commitment is not just for the government to provide – the people have to provide this as well. Dr Poonpat provides an example of affected people accepting a compensation package and then, later, demanding more. This too does not, he feels, result in trust. Trust is bi-directional

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

The Mekong River is an international river. It is very important for all of the countries that share it. They must cooperate for peaceful life. But how can this be done. People might not have enough information for a long-term perspective. What will sustainable development provide the countries? And will ensure that options are realistic and do-able for the short- and long-term benefits. Most decision-makers are responsible for their peoples’ lives and how these can be improved. Agriculture for cooperation must be done in a sustainable manner. And then water for peoples’ lives, so that they have access to good quality, clean water. And, finally, hydropower for peoples’ lives, so that they may have electricity.

**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?**

Dr Poonpat thought that the MRC’s procedures were an example of this. Each of the member countries has to follow these.

He discusses the regional power trading initiative under the GMS, to support power trading across the region. This can create ‘true development impact’ that can create more benefits. Thailand is connecting with Laos, China and Myanmar, he says.

At the moment, Dr Poonpat says, Laos is seen as Thailand’s main export supply. Referencing Myanmar, he says that Thailand can help to ‘bridge the gap between supply and demand’ with their grid. For example, enabling exports from Laos to Myanmar.

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

There are, Dr Poonpat feels, too many frameworks, but there is a different rationale to each one of them. So, the relative advantages will differ. The MRC focusses more on the environment and livelihoods; ACMECS is more about economy, infrastructure and ‘the social life’; the LMC focusses on connectivity, infrastructure and capacity-building, providing training opportunities in its various focal areas; from time to time, the LMI also provides capacity building, but also gender, SMEs, and ensuring that hydropower works at maximum efficiency.

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

‘Success’ in the context of the Mekong refers to the livelihoods of the people. Development should bring ‘better life to the people’. But Mekong benefits are not just for those who live in the immediate river area – beyond the basin, power production serves to electrify countries and contributes to energy security, both of which Dr Poonpat considers important.

How can we ensure “that projects can bring the peaceful life of the people in those areas?” Cooperation and collaboration are what are needed. Dr Poonpat says he does not want to see the Mekong becoming a source of conflict. It should be a source of cooperation.

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

To be effective, “we shouldn’t jump to conclusions on the first day”. Any large dam project will impact peoples’ lives. Information-sharing and the process of listening to people in these areas is necessary. Then compromise is possible. He suggests that, perhaps, public hearings are a way to do this but worries that this may not be efficient enough. Focus groups could be an alternative.

At national levels, diplomatic channels are needed to create sufficient understanding – you do not want a project to cause problems in the future. There have to be communications mechanisms between countries and with the people. “If you are too silent, people will question you and it can turn into a serious problem”.

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

Trust. This can enable and – its absence – prevent. “You need to do things in a transparent and accountable manner”. Effective institutions are also necessary – that can deliver development to the areas where projects will happen. And then political will from the governments is very important, that sends a clear signal to the stakeholders and the people.

Dr Poonpat worries that there may be people in project areas who really understand the issues very well. But then the project takes too long, and they die or they move away, and the next generation do not understand the issues as well; and they are then in opposition, destroying the trust between the developer and the people. Also, financing – if this is reduced for any reason, this can also destroy trust.

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

Dr Poonpat cannot say. Each stakeholder can influence each other and play a role in bringing a project to success. Often, the people do not trust the government, so a third party is needed to ‘confirm the message. International organisations can play this role – such as the World Bank and the ADB. Academics can also play this role.

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

This can be achieved through international commitments – at least, those that have entered into Thai policy. For example, the UN defined carbon levels. The energy sector is moving towards lower carbon levels through renewable energy. The people need to use less “in the right and wise way”. In terms of economic development, we can lower the costs to the environment and improve development.

So, for the government, it is about complying with these international commitments.