Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with Mr Niwat Roykaew, Founder and Chair, Chiang Khong Conservation Group and Mekong School on Local Knowledge (Chiang Rai), 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?**

The biggest challenge is engagement. The people along the Mekong have no rights – to, for example, manage the resources of the river. The second big challenge is leveraging the knowledge we have to develop the Mekong. Right now, the biggest motivation is economic development. But there has been so much research that shows that this does not work. Look at EIAs – these are always conducted by just one party.

The current structure of the Mekong River’s development includes the MRC, the LMC and the LMI, and is only conducted by the state – no one else. This is not very effective because it is focussed only on economic development. The PNPCA process is not working effectively because it seems like a public hearing. The MRC has no authority to intervene or to cancel a dam that is not good. The PNPCA is just a rubber-stamping exercise – it cannot stop anything.

The Thai government seems not to have an interest in the sustainable development of the Mekong – even though it has eight provinces bordering the river. There is more interest in the Chao Phraya. Government agencies are not, Mr Niwat says, up to date on things. He wonders if they even know that there are 11 dams along the Mekong mainstream in China, and that there are two more on their way. They seem not to know. Mr Niwat speaks of the current drought, which he attributes to these latter dams – but the Thai government says that it is waiting for a report from the Chinese government. This is not good enough. The Mekong is no longer a natural river, and this is not good at all. We need now to discuss water releases, so that these can support the river’s ecology.

Also, the laws – these are not issued fast enough to respond to the changing situation. He references the Xayaburi dam, which, he says, saw a lot of money moving from Thailand to Laos. Thai law does not address Thai investments in Laos, so developers and funders are not subject to the same standards as those operating inThailand.

It is very important to list all of the challenges we are facing and to invite all the stakeholders to discuss them. He explains that his initiatives are looking to establish a council for the people living along the Mekong. It will meet on December 1-2, 2020 in Chiang Rai, and will include civil society, and academics. He thinks that the Chinese and Thai states will be there because ‘they are very interested in these things’. Representatives from all of the eight Mekong provinces will attend. This is an effort to promote and advocate for the participation of people in the development of the Mekong. And also so we can know where the people stand with respect to this development. The power now is in the hands of the state and the private sector. If the council is a success, it can be an example for other countries. Vietnam has expressed an interest.

All of the MRC staff are from the state. Its policies are for the state. There is no public involvement.

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

We have been hearing about cooperation for so long, but there is no clear definition of what it is. The opportunities for cooperation are only for the state and the private sector. There are no opportunities for the people to participate. Cooperation is between the government and the rich people with access to financing.

**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?**

In my experience, there has been no example of this yet. If there were, it would be an example of local people cooperating to conserve fisheries or something else.

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

These mechanisms belong to the state and the investors, and focussed on economic development, when it should be on conservation and on restoration.

**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 starting point is to open the space for candid dialogue and sharing. But the Mekong has now moved onto the political agenda. We have to accept that the importance of the Mekong is its environment and resources – but people only look at it politically. It might even move onto the international security agenda. But we should be putting nature and development on the table.

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

A successful model for solving the Mekong’s problems is to use the knowledge base to come up with solutions. It should not be just China’s perspective, or that of the US; but the bottom line is we have to ask what the Mekong people want or need – not China or the US. It is the people who live with the Mekong who matter.

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

The domestic political factors in each of the counties prevent cooperation. For example, the Thai (people’s) council can talk well with its Vietnamese counterparts; but not with their Lao counterparts. In Laos, they are reluctant to talk about politics and administration openly.

It is big organisations who can promote local people and support them with knowledge and capacity building that can enable cooperation. Mr Niwat wonders if an AEAN Council for the People would not be a good idea in this respect.

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

There is no single one. If you want effective sustainable development cooperation, there must be collaboration between governments, academia and the people. There cannot be a ‘most influential actor’ in this arrangement.

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

If the government achieves all of the SDGs, then the Mekong will be sustainable.

In the past, we talked about mega-projects to development. But this kind of talking is now obsolete. Building the dams is just about money. “Dam is money, not power (electricity)”. Developing the Mekong by focussing only on money will get us nowhere.