Mekong Vision 3.0: Stakeholder Consultations

***Interview with HE Te Navuth, Vice Chair, Cambodia National Mekong Committee, October 20, 2020***

**Notes**: (a) Unless indicated as a direct quote, these notes are not verbatim, and reflect the interviewers’ interpretation of what was said. (b) HE Navuth responded to all questions, although he was accompanied by Mr. Watt Botkosal, Mr Pik Dun, and Sophot; (c) The sound quality of this interview was very poor. HE Navuth shared his written responses to the questions (which he had prepared) with the interview team subsequently. These have been woven into the notes below.

The interview was introduced by Virak Chan (Wold Bank, Cambodia), 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?**

There are five challenges: first, the Mekong region, with its growing population, requires economic development, so as to ensure that we have water, food and energy security. We need all of the countries to implement joint projects to address this.

Second, the COVID pandemic: this has led to delays in all activities, tourism, etc.

Third, climate change is of extreme relevance. There is increasing uncertainty with the rainfall regime, and there is often too much intense rainfall and flooding, including flash floods.

Fourth, competition between various regional mechanisms – he lists a variety – there is a lack of coordination amongst these, and the competition between them is a challenge to geo-politics.

Fifth, there is a lack of investment to support the region; in particular, a lack of support to help Cambodia deal with climate change. He references the delta where a wide variety of infrastructural interventions have helped them to adapt to climate change, including pumping stations, channels to release flood water, and others. Lack of coordination in financial/funding instruments for environmental protection and wetlands including implementation of research.

**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 should recognise that the Mekong is very complex. Six countries, different economies, the relations between upstream and downstream countries, and geopolitical positions. The Mekong is very important to us all for water supply, irrigated agriculture, navigation, energy, ecosystems, and recreation, fisheries, etc. For HE Navuth, regional cooperation comprises solidarity, friendship and stability.

Insofar as opportunities are concerned, HE Navuth identified partnership, networking, and shared future and vision, prosperity, planning, data and studies. He saw opportunities for joint efforts in partnerships, networking, dialogue, shared responsibility, a shared future, shared  prosperity, shared basin planning, development and management. Also, sharing of data and information, studies and projects, joint work, involvement, and assisting  riparian countries. And, finally, national and regional economic development.

**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?**

HE Navuth felt that the MRC and LMC were both examples of this. Reflecting on the MRC, he highlighted their five procedures, which are supported by the riparian countries. Also, the various MRC guidelines, its basin development strategy, and its five-year strategic plan. HE Navuth sought clarification if the World Bank would support with the MRC or LMC. Shelley MacMillan [World Bank] explained that it would not be prioritising any platform but sought to discover what the riparians seek and need and the means to improve riparian relations. Avoiding duplication or rivalry between platforms is also important.

There are also the various sectoral strategies on fisheries, hydropower[[1]](#footnote-1),the environment and climate change. In addition, there are the transboundary projects. HHE Navuth provides some example, of which are between two countries. Then there is the Joint Council (JC), the MRC Council, and the MRC Summit.

As for the LMC, HE Navuth discusses the various joint working groups and technical-level meetings between ministers. At lower levels, there is meetings on various themes (e.g. the hydropower and the environment, flood monitoring, dam operations, joint environmental monitoring of dams) and training. There are also joint observation and assessment initiatives, for example on the impact of the Chinese dams on the downstream countries. China has also been notifying the downstream countries of water releases from their dams, and also information-sharing. HE Navuth also mentions Chinese releases of water to downstream countries during the dry season; and the special fund for small projects. Also, the Water Cooperation Centre, that works to smooth out cooperation between China and the lower Mekong countries on water issues. He also mentioned that the LMC is looking at a water management project for the Tonle Sap via the special fund.

Within the MRC, he does not see any challenges that the countries have not been able to address under the JC. He mentions that the JC works well, given that its members have been working together for twenty to thirty years. He sees this as positive.

HE Navuth explained that Cambodia-LMC relations fall under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of the sectors on which it focuses is water, which then has its own sector working group. The latter is led by the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology (MOWRAM) – and not the CNMC.

From his own notes, HE Navuth provided the following responses to Question 3:

*From the MRC:*

* Water Utilization Procedures and associated Technical Guidelines and their implementation,
* MRC Basin Development Strategy and Strategic Plan and multi-year work plan and implementation.
* Regional and sectoral (fish, environment) strategies and technical guidelines for sustainable development.
* Transboundary cooperation projects between the member countries: with Lao, Thailand and Vietnam,
* Coordinated river basin management.
* MRC Dialogue Partners and Summit.

From the LMC:

* Training, technical workshop’, symposium and Forum on technical and policy matters related to WRM, HP, Environment, etc.
* Exchange visit, joint studies and joint observation and assessment.
* Notification on HP release from HP in China.
* Establishing the LM WRC Information sharing platform, Exchange of data and information  during flood season (extended to the whole year).
* Project development and implementation for Special Fund.
* Implementation of the 5-year work plan of the LM WR Cooperation.
* LM WR Cooperation (Working Group, Ministerial level).
* Foreign Affairs and Summit levels.

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

Our team does not know all of the mechanisms that are out there. We are focused only on water. The different mechanisms should complement each other and promote investment. They (agendas and objectives) should not compete. Each has their own way of working with Mekong countries. They should deliver advantages to the Mekong governments.

HE Navuth saw the main challenge as being the lack of cooperation coordination.

Insofar as opportunities are concerned, HE Navuth spoke of joint dialogues; and cooperation to yield technical results. And we need financial support. He saw developing infrastructure for flood and drought management. Coordinating the various cooperative frameworks is also an opportunity. We need more grants from these frameworks, he said. They also need to work together with the MRC to support its implementation of its strategic plan.

HE Navuth had no reflections on the MRC development partners. He said that he thought that they worked well together. He then reiterated the need for cooperation between the various frameworks.

John Ward [Mekong Futures] asked if they feel that now cooperation is much more internally driven? HE Navuth replied by describing the two key MRC funding mechanisms: and basket fund, which the MRC can use for whatever it needs it for, in line with its strategic plan; and ear-marked funds which are bilateral funds for specific – but relevant – issues, which the MRC welcomes. HE Navuth mentioned the Japan flood/catchment project.

From his own notes, HE Navuth provided the following:

*Advantages*:

* Joint efforts, investment for economic development, regional prosperity, to complimenting  and not to competing each other.
* More competitive fund, more opportunities for economic development.
* Good governance for the Mekong-Lancang basin, contributing to sustainable development,

*Disadvantages:*

* Lack of cooperation coordination.
* Not consistent principle of cooperation ...

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

HE Te Navuth lists indicators of success as working together; sharing data (that extends into the dry season); LMC cooperation and special fund projects; high level commitment and political will; and joint action plans. Tangible achievements include bridges, roads and highways – what you can see with your eyes. Also, the amount of funding – the number and magnitude of loans or grants. In addition, economic development activity such as trade.

From his own notes, HE Navuth provided the following:

*Success:*

* Working together, sharing of data and information, joint project implementation,  real investment.
* Economic development and prosperity.
* High level commitment and political will, clear Declaration and Joint Action Plan.

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

Economic development – this is the most active type of programme under the LMC: roads, bridges, highways or other infrastructure. Also, regional stability and peace – this is the most effective way to cooperate. Joint assessments and sharing information (he highlights the LMC’s data-sharing) are others. Also, scholarships and training.

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

No money to follow up negotiations to achieve agreements. This prevents cooperation; in addition, research without country involvement; and lack of coordination.

Faithful cooperation and the political will to enable it; not introducing too much geopolitics, are enablers.

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

Chinese-US relations (Joke). We respect international law and regulations. Cambodia needs to become rich so that it too can become influential.

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

The first is that governments should consider national interests and priorities and how these relate to regional ones. There needs to be high commitment and political will to balance the environment with economics. Decisions by higher level authorities need to be based on data, technical tools, and a scientific base to inform decision-making to ensure sustainable development. Trade-offs between benefits and costs need to be made. HE Navuth references something he calls ‘impact sharing’ – which he sees as countries developing (and benefitting) while impacting downstream countries. The countries should consider the impacts on downstream countries. There should also be stakeholder participation and consultation.

John Ward asks if problems like the water-food-energy nexus need a different type of cooperation? HE Navuth replies that the different sectors need to talk to each other to balance development. This is the IWRM principles for appropriate resource use. Sometimes, they don’t talk with each other. This is one of the challenges. He mentioned trust as reciprocity, participatory, respectful as principles “of cooperation”?

1. Note, the MRC Hydropower Strategy has not been agreed upon by the member countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)