



**Mekong River Commission**  
For Sustainable Development

# **HANDBOOK FOR STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AT THE MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION**



**First Edition**

The Mekong River Commission Secretariat  
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## About this Handbook

This handbook provides guidance on the principles and practice of stakeholder engagement within the Mekong River Commission cooperation context, spelling out the different types of stakeholders, the engagement mechanisms and channels, and the related access and dissemination of information.

This handbook is based on approved documents such as the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the Basin Development Strategies and MRC Strategic Plans since 2006, revised Rules of Procedures in 2014-2016, the MRC Communication Strategy and Disclosure Policy 2009, as well as the MRC's Public Participation papers that were prepared and presented in 2000s, and relevant engagement practices.

This handbook is a contribution to the understanding of the MRC's principles and approaches in working with diverse stakeholders who have interests and concerns over the development and management of the Mekong River System.

- *Part 1* of the handbook introduces the importance of stakeholder engagement.
- *Part 2* focuses on definitions, roles and responsibilities of the MRC stakeholders in line with the 1995 Mekong Agreement and the MRC's relevant rules, procedures as well as strategies.
- *Part 3* provides details on methodologies, approaches, mechanisms and platforms available for engaging various stakeholders.
- *Part 4* reaffirms organizational transparency and accountability regarding information and data sharing as part of engagement process.

For stakeholders, how and when to engage with the MRC, information can be found under 2.1 and 3.4. The sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 will guide the implementation of the stakeholder engagement at both national and regional levels.

*This handbook is a working document that shall be updated when necessary with improvements and lessons learnt from implementation of the MRC's stakeholder engagement process.*

Should any comments or questions on this handbook and its application, please direct them to the Stakeholder Engagement Specialist, Office of CEO, Mekong River Commission Secretariat.

# Table of Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction to stakeholder engagement.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1.	What is stakeholder engagement? .....	1
1.2.	Why do we need to engage stakeholders?.....	1
1.3.	How is stakeholder engagement reflected in the MRC rules and regulations? .....	2
<b>2.</b>	<b>Overview of the MRC stakeholders.....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1.	The MRC definition of stakeholders.....	6
2.2.	Roles and responsibilities of the MRC stakeholders.....	7
2.2.1.	Mekong River Commission Council .....	7
2.2.2.	Mekong River Commission Joint Committee.....	7
2.2.3.	Mekong River Commission Secretariat.....	8
2.2.4.	National Mekong Committees.....	8
2.2.5.	National Mekong Committee Secretariats .....	8
2.2.6.	Dialogue Partners.....	8
2.2.7.	Development Partners.....	9
2.2.8.	Non-state parties and bodies.....	9
2.2.8.1.	Non-governmental organizations and Civil society organizations.....	9
2.2.8.2.	Consulting firms and Private sector .....	10
2.2.8.3.	Scientific and advisory institutes .....	10
2.2.9.	Regional frameworks .....	10
2.2.10.	Other partners .....	10
2.2.11.	Media .....	11
2.2.12.	Observers .....	11
<b>3.</b>	<b>The current stakeholder engagement under the MRC cooperation framework.....</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1.	Key guiding principles of engagement .....	13
3.2.	Goal and expectation of engagement .....	15
3.3.	Engagement stages.....	16
3.4.	Engagement mechanisms and platforms .....	17
3.4.1.	MRC Summit.....	18
3.4.2.	MRC International Conference .....	18
3.4.3.	MRC Council Meeting.....	18
3.4.4.	MRC Joint Committee Meeting.....	19
3.4.5.	MRC Dialogue meeting.....	19
3.4.6.	MRC Informal Development Partner Meeting.....	19
3.4.7.	Regional Stakeholder Forum.....	19
3.4.8.	Expert groups .....	20
3.4.9.	Partnerships .....	21
3.5.	Summary.....	21
<b>4.</b>	<b>Access to information and datasets at the MRC .....</b>	<b>24</b>
	<b>Related documents .....</b>	<b>25</b>
	<b>Annexes .....</b>	<b>25</b>
	Figure 1. Governance structure of the Mekong River Commission .....	6
	Figure 2. MRC Partners and Stakeholder Engagement Platform .....	13
	Figure 3. A simple illustrative principle of Stakeholder Mapping and Analysis.....	15
	Figure 4. MRC expert groups .....	21

Table 1. Engagement stages .....17  
Table 2. Summary of existing MRC’s stakeholder engagement arrangement .....22





## **PART 1. INTRODUCTION**

The Mekong has multiple actors engaged in the development and management of the whole basin. The MRC is aware that stakeholder involvement in decision-making is fundamental to achieving feasible, equitable, credible and lasting solutions and that the quality of decisions can be improved by the inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders who can bring important national and regional knowledge and relevant perspectives to the development and management process. The MRC's governmental stakeholders have been clearly stipulated and detailed in its treaty agreement and in the rules of procedures, therefore this handbook focuses more on roles and responsibilities of non-state stakeholders.

### **1.1. WHAT IS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT?**

In general understanding, stakeholder engagement is the process by which an organisation involves people who may be affected by the decisions it makes or can influence the implementation of its decisions. They may support or oppose the decisions, be influential in the organisation or within the community in which it operates, hold relevant official positions or be affected in the long term. It is a process that should occur throughout the lifecycle of an activity and therefore not a once-off exercise.

Stakeholder engagement can help to understand the perspectives of those who may be affected, improve the quality of analysis of impacts based on real or local situations, be able to prioritise those impacts to ensure the robustness of all efforts, and better understand how to manage identified impacts.

During the engagement, stakeholders have a chance to contribute to and influence the decision-making process. This differentiates stakeholder engagement from one-way communications processes that seek to issue a message or influence groups to agree with a decision that is already made. On the other hand, external stakeholder engagement is not decision making itself, but it is critical to hear and address all relevant views that contribute to decision making.

### **1.2. WHY DO WE NEED TO ENGAGE STAKEHOLDER?**

The benefits of broaden stakeholder involvement are multiple, especially in water governance, including acceptability, equity, effectiveness, and sustainability of activities. The appropriate engagement of all relevant stakeholders is essential to build confidence, credibility, instils ownership and ensure the sustainability and security of transboundary water governance processes.

Effective governance requires effective participation at all levels. It is essential to ensure that participatory consultation in the planning and decision-making processes are specifically designed to give voice to all sectors of society, women and men as well as different age, ethnic, and cultural groups.

### 1.3. HOW IS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT REFLECTED IN THE MRC RULES AND REGULATIONS?

Since its inception in 1995, the MRC has adopted a participatory approach in the work of all its core and sector programmes and currently as part of implementing its core river basin management functions. The organisation is envisaging ways to expand the opportunities for collaboration with different stakeholders and partners, to realize its mission and the visions of both the Basin and the Organisation, i.e. sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin.

#### Visions and Mission

##### VISION for the **Mekong River Basin**<sup>1</sup>

An economically prosperous, socially just, environmentally sound, and climate resilient Mekong River Basin

##### VISION for the **Mekong River Commission**

A world class, financially secure, International River Basin Organisation serving the Mekong countries to achieve the basin Vision

##### MISSION of the **Mekong River Commission**

To promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries' mutual benefit and the people's well-being

Stakeholder participation has been implied, defined and referred in all MRC's key documents including the *1995 Mekong Agreement*<sup>2</sup> and *Procedural Rules*<sup>3</sup>, the *Rules of Procedure of the Council*<sup>4</sup> of the MRC, the *Rules of Procedure of the Joint Committee* of the MRC, the *Rules of Procedure of the MRC Secretariat*<sup>5</sup>, *Basin Development Strategies* and *Strategic Plans*.



The 1995 Mekong Agreement sets out general mechanism to engage stakeholders while the Rules of Procedure provides detailed instruction how to engage them.

<sup>1</sup> MRC Basin Development Strategy 2021-2030, page 70

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/BDS-2021-2030-and-MRC-SP-2021-2025.pdf>






<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/agreement-Apr95.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/MRC-procedures-EN-V.7-JUL-18.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/ROPs-of-the-Council-REVISED.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/RoPs-of-the-MRCS-REVISED.pdf>

#### Five sets of procedural rules

	Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing (PDIES), approved in 2001 to operationalise data and information exchange of vital water-related indicators among the four Mekong countries.
	Procedures for Water Use Monitoring (PWUM), approved in 2003 to establish an effective monitoring system of water use of the Mekong and tributaries by various sectors, including domestic supply, irrigation and hydropower.
	Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA), approved in 2003 to facilitate the cooperation on water use and development with a set of three specific processes for proposed water infrastructure projects.
	Procedures for the Maintenance of Flows on the Mainstream (PMFM), approved in 2006 to set out assessment criteria and a process to monitor and maintain adequate water flow in the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers.
	Procedures for Water Quality (PWQ), approved in 2011 to strengthen a cooperative framework to monitor and safeguard water quality of the Mekong and Bassac rivers with agreed sets of assessment criteria.

The five MRC Procedures, which support the implementation of the 1995 Mekong Agreement, also provide guidance to support appropriate public participation actions on relevant technical aspects.

In the Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing (PDIES) adopted in 2001, Section 2 (Objectives) states that “basic data and information” should be available to the public.

## 2. Objectives<sup>6</sup>

*- make available, upon request, basic data and information for public access as determined by the NMCs concerned*

In the Procedures for Water Quality (PWQ) adopted in 2011, it has a particular provision on public participation as well as institutional arrangement with line agencies, local authorities and stakeholders under functions, roles and responsibilities of the National Mekong Committees:

### 5.3. Public Participation<sup>7</sup>

*“The Member States shall endeavor to raise awareness and promote the participation of the public in maintaining acceptable/good water quality”.*

### 6.4. National Mekong Committees

*6.4.1. Informing the relevant line agencies, local authorities and stakeholders of the Procedures to ensure their effective implementation*

*6.4.4. Informing line agencies, local authorities and stakeholders concerned of the relevant plans, programmes and activities to facilitate maintaining acceptable/good water quality on the mainstream*

In response to an increasing interest from its stakeholders related to public participation in the work of the MRC, a Study on Public Participation in the Context of the MRC was initiated and completed in late 1996 and was fully agreed by the MRC Joint Committee in March 1999, which has provided guidance and the framework for the public participation activities of the MRC projects and programmes since then. The principles of public participation include the needs for public participation to be consistent with policies, approaches and processes in the

<sup>6</sup> MRC Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing (PDIES)

<https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/Procedures-Data-Info-Exchange-n-Sharing.pdf>

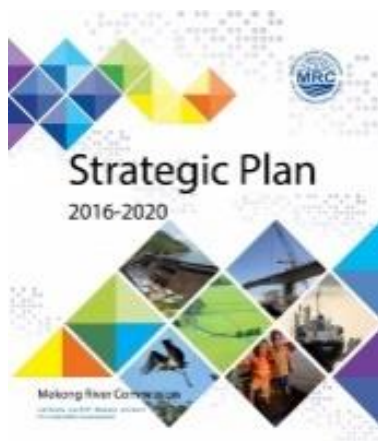
<sup>7</sup> MRC Procedures for Water Quality

<https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/Procedures-for-Water-Quality-council-approved260111.pdf>

Member countries and the need for stakeholder analyses and provision of information to the public.

The *Statement on Public Participation* was developed in 2009<sup>8</sup> and updated in 2017 to suit the current MRC core river basin management function context. In addition, this public participation work has also been supported by the 2009 MRC Communication Strategy and Disclosure Guidelines<sup>9</sup>.

The *Basin Development Strategies* always underscores not only the need for stronger cooperation between Member Countries in implementing all strategic priorities but also between them and Dialogue Partners (China and Myanmar), related regional cooperation frameworks (primarily ASEAN, ADB and GMS), and broader stakeholders ranging from other international RBOs and research institutes to civil society, Development Partners, and the private sector.



Increase cooperation with partners and stakeholders has always been one of the priorities. Stakeholder engagement has been institutionalised to ensure wide input and commitment to the development agenda. The implementation of the *MRC Strategic Plans* identifies various actions to enhance stakeholder engagement and water diplomacy, strengthening regional cooperation is an important cross-cutting outcome.

The new Basin Development Strategy 2021-2030 and Strategic Plan 2021-2025 has identified five strategic priorities towards achieving the basin's vision by 2030, as follows:

1. **Environment:** Maintain the ecological function of the Mekong River Basin
2. **Social:** Enable inclusive access and utilisation of the basin's water and related resources
3. **Economic:** Enhance optimal and sustainable development of water and related sectors
4. **Climate change:** Strengthen resilience against climate risks, extreme floods and droughts
5. **Cooperation:** Strengthen cooperation among all basin countries and stakeholders

Climate change and Cooperation are considered as cross-cutting dimensions, necessary perspectives to connect and strengthen all sectors. Under Priority 5 of the BDS<sup>10</sup>, the MRC SP activities relate to stakeholder engagement are:

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mekonginfo.org/assets/midocs/0002009-society-public-participation-in-the-context-of-the-mrc.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/Communication-Strategy-n-Disclosure-Policy.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> MRC Basin Development Strategy 2021-2030, page 194

<https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/BDS-2021-2030-and-MRC-SP-2021-2025.pdf>

- 5.2.5.1 **Develop a Multiple Stakeholder Platform** for the whole basin with countries and MLC Water and in consultation with all other relevant partners (to consolidate and align) including clear objectives and guidelines on participation and contribution
- 5.2.5.2 Coordinate the management and **operations of the Multiple Stakeholder Platform (including the regional stakeholder forum)** including consistent recording, reporting and impact tracking procedures in response to stakeholder input
- 5.2.5.3 Implement **proactive engagement and communication** with stakeholders, the media, and the public

In the context of the MRC, the terms "[public participation](#)" is normally used and emphasized regarding stakeholder engagement. The MRC Public Participation Statement has defined that *Public Participation is a process through which [key stakeholders](#) gain influence and take part in decision making in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the MRC programs, and projects and activities.*

The MRC has made every effort to create an enabling environment and opportunities for various stakeholders to *contribute to the decision-making process* of water and related resources uses, however the ultimate decision lies with the policy makers of the MRC Governance bodies (Joint Committee and Council) for collective decisions taking into account the sovereign decision of each member country.

Within the context of MRC cooperation, decision making regarding policies and projects rest with member countries. Nevertheless, the stakeholder engagement process brings added value by

1. providing access to extensive data, information and knowledge
2. providing safe space and legitimate platforms for airing views and two-way communication, even contrary ones
3. providing independent review and monitoring
4. holding decision makers accountable for their decisions.

## PART 2. OVERVIEW OF THE MRC STAKEHOLDERS

Following the governance structure of the Mekong River Commission, stakeholders have been categorized as internal and external stakeholder. Their participation and involvement are based on the nature of issues and discussion. However, they all play important roles with differential responsibilities through different stages of implementation.

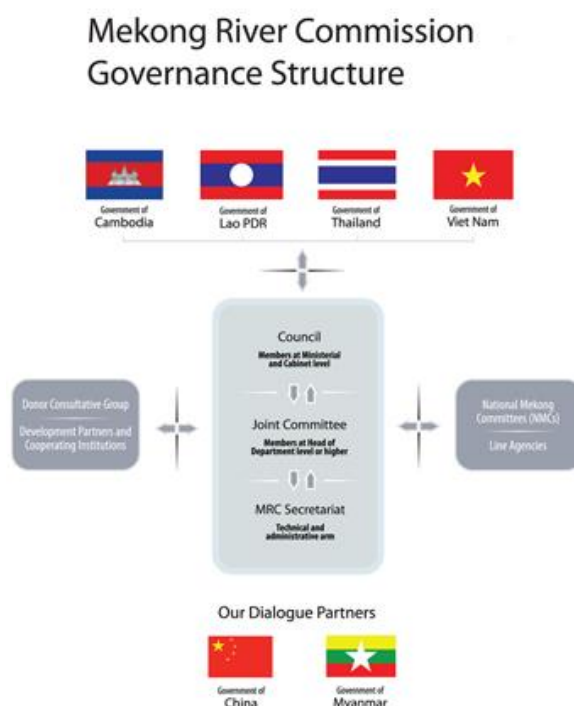


Figure 1. Governance structure of the Mekong River Commission

### 2.1 THE MRC DEFINITION OF STAKEHOLDERS

With a diverse range of political and economic systems and a large population of people living in the Basin as well as the complexity of the MRC interventions, the stakeholders in the context of the MRC operations is necessarily broad and will be further clarified at the initial stage of each activity and project, by means of stakeholder analysis. The MRC has adopted universal and broad definition of stakeholder as follows:

A **Stakeholder** is any person, group, or institution that has an interest in and/or can be affected by the scope of works of the MRC. This includes both intended beneficiaries and intermediaries, those affected<sup>11</sup>, and those involved and/or those who are generally excluded from the decision-making process.

**Key stakeholders** are those who can significantly influence or who are important to the success of the works of the MRC, and those who may be significantly impacted in an adverse fashion.

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<sup>11</sup> Directly and indirectly



Stakeholder is either within or outside the organisation. In consideration of the MRC's governing structure, there are internal and external stakeholders.

**Internal stakeholders** are defined as government bodies in the MRC structures such as the MRC Council, Joint Committee, the MRC Secretariat, the National Mekong Committees and their Secretariats, and the principal line agencies in the NMCs in each member country. Development Partners contributing financially to the MRC can be considered internal stakeholders.

**External stakeholders (or broader stakeholders)** are non-state bodies such as NGOs, implementing partners, private sector, civil society organisations, policy advocates, research institutions, individuals, the media and other groups who have interests or stakes in development process of the Mekong River System. They are the ones who can act on behalf of affected local communities, contribute information, views and their perspectives in discussion in development planning or ones who will be carrying out decisions of policy makers or bodies.

In the MRC Cooperation, there are some entities considered as **observers** and are invited to observing the MRC governance meetings. More information regarding observers in the following part.

## 2.2 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MRC STAKEHOLDERS

### 2.2.1 Mekong River Commission Council (*Environment and Water Ministers of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam*)

Approve and provide strategic guidance to Policies, Strategies and Plans implementation and promote them at a high-level to all relevant national and regional development initiatives.

Once a year, the Environment and Water Ministers of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, supported by senior officials from foreign affairs and key line ministries, meet to discuss emerging issues related to the Lower Mekong Basin as well as the priorities of the Commission for the next year, through the annual MRC Council Meeting. As Council Members of the Mekong River Commission, the Ministers convene to review and come to mutual conclusions on the management and development of water and related resources within the framework of the 1995 Mekong Agreement.

### 2.2.2 Mekong River Commission Joint Committee (*senior officials at no less than Head of Department level of the four countries*)

Provides direct implementation guidance to Policies, Strategies and Plans implementation, endorse technical guidelines and reports, and promote them at senior-level to all relevant national and regional development initiatives.

In taking Council decisions and policies forward by putting them into actions, the MRC Joint Committee, which comprises senior officials at no less than Head of Department level of the four countries and supported by national line agencies including the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, will meet regularly twice per year. The Joint Committee meetings are to review the implementation and follow up on progress of decisions made at the Council meetings.

### **2.2.3 Mekong River Commission Secretariat**

***(technical, operational and facilitating arm of the MRC under management of a Chief Executive Officer)***

Develops, facilitates, supports and monitors the implementation of the MRC policies, strategies, plans, procedures, guidelines and reports and regularly report to the Joint Committee and Council for decision and guidance, and various stakeholders for information and comments.

The MRCS provides technical advice and recommendations in support of the member countries cooperation and reaches out to as many stakeholders as possible to inform its advice and facilitation. In engagement with stakeholders, the MRCS follows the procedures laid down by member countries and promote strategies and guidelines for cooperation.

### **2.2.4 National Mekong Committees**

***(inter-sectoral body of the Government to coordinate and facilitate activities of Mekong River Commission for sustainable development of water and related resources in the Mekong basin in each country)***

Prepare, provide reviews and inputs, and implement MRC policies, strategies, plans, procedures, guidelines and reports at the national levels.

Council members are normally chairpersons, appointed by their Prime Ministers, of the National Mekong Committees (NMCs). The members of the national Mekong committees are authorized representatives of line ministries (including but not limited to Environment and Water, Foreign Affairs, Planning and Investment, Energy, Agriculture and Rural Development, Public Transport, Commerce and Industry, Science and Technology), and of the people's committees/city in the Mekong basin.

### **2.2.5 National Mekong Committee Secretariats**

***(technical, operational and facilitating arm of the NMCs under management of Secretary General or Director General)***

Facilitate and coordinate MRC works implementation at the national levels with national line/implementing agencies, RBOs and others.

Heads of the NMCSs are also members of the MRC Joint Committee.

### **2.2.6 Dialogue Partners**

***(the People's Republic of China and the Union of Myanmar)***

Take account of basin perspectives and priorities and continue exchanging and sharing of information and technical expertise.



Cooperation with the MRC Dialogue Partners has been maintained and strengthened through a number of mechanisms, such as Agreement on data sharing, official meetings and exchanges of technical visits, joint symposium, joint research and studies, training programs for Junior Riparian Professional (JRP).

A specific annual meeting with Dialogue Partners will be regularly scheduled as a meeting attached to the MRC Governance Meeting or separately depending on the situation. Dialogue Partners are also invited to the annual MRC Council Meeting, joint session with partners.

### **2.2.7 Development Partners**

***(government and institutional partners who provide financial contribution and technical support to the implementation of the MRC Strategic Plans and its activities)***

Promote basin development perspectives and priorities and continue providing financial and technical support in addressing them both at regional and national levels, multilaterally.

Being a financial contributor, development partner can either contribute fund to the basket fund or earmark the fund to any specific activities of the MRC Strategic Plan, or a combination of both.

Development Partners will receive regular progress updates, and be invited and involved in governance and consultative mechanisms of the MRC, including technical meetings and workshop, Expert Group meetings (as observers where relevant), Regional Stakeholder Forums, and Governance meetings such as Budget Committee (as members), Annual Informal Development Partners Meeting (with the MRC Joint Committee and MRCS), Development Partners Consultative Group Meeting (with the MRC Council), and the MRC International Conferences and the MRC Summits.

### **2.2.8 Non-state parties and bodies**

#### *2.2.8.1 Non-governmental organizations and Civil society organizations*

Promote basin perspectives and priorities and contribute to information generation, inputs and recommendations, and stakeholder communication and outreach.

NGOs and CSOs currently engage in MRC works through Regional Stakeholder Forums, national stakeholder forums or information sessions by the NMCS, and regular dialogues with the senior management of the MRC Secretariat.

In consideration of increasing important roles of civil society in the basin development, the MRC Secretariat is exploring a multi-stakeholder platform, including a civil society engagement mechanism to directly and periodically dialogue between MRC management and the Mekong citizens for better addressing emerging needs in the Mekong river basin. In addition, different opportunities for collaboration have also been established based on joint interest in topics, including but not limited to peer reviews, joint activities, technical exchanges and meetings, etc.

### *2.2.8.2 Consulting firms and Private sector*

Consider and address basin perspectives, priorities, procedures and best practice guidance as well as contributing to information generation when implementing development opportunities and projects.

If appropriate, business leaders could be encouraged to take part as keynote speakers at the Forums, Symposium, Conferences, etc.<sup>12</sup> Specific forums have been held to engage with private developers and operators.

In consideration of increasing roles and contribution of private sector in the basin development, the MRC Secretariat is exploring cooperative arrangements to engage private sector for balancing socio-economic development in the region.

### *2.2.8.3 Scientific and advisory institutes*

Consider and promote basin perspectives and priorities and contribute to the generation and dissemination of information and knowledge

Research and think tank organizations, including those attached to universities, in the region and around the world, can collaborate and provide inputs for technical works, including but not limited to peer reviews, technical analysis, data and information, joint activities, technical exchanges and meetings, etc.

## **2.2.9 Regional frameworks**

***(ASEAN, GMS, MLC, Mekong-US, Mekong Japan, Mekong Korea, etc)***

Joint efforts in promotion of the water-related development opportunities to close the development gap and the facilitation of broader cost and benefit sharing deals for regional integration.

MRC and different regional frameworks in the Mekong basin maintain its partnership regularly through high-level policy meetings as well as important technical working group discussions and exchanges.

## **2.2.10 Other partners**

***(Any agencies with MOUs, etc)***

Regional, international cooperation and technical support and exchange, bringing fresh and latest insights from the world to the Mekong and vice versa. Cooperation with these partners cover the following methods: Technical collaboration (e.g. studies, assessments, monitoring, review of MRC products, etc); Dialogue and technical exchanges (e.g. workshops, symposiums, visits, etc) and Capacity building (e.g. trainings, personnel exchanges, secondments, etc).

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<sup>12</sup> MRC Communication Strategy and Disclosure Policy 2009

### 2.2.11 Media

Following other international approach, the media has been invited to cover important MRC governance meetings such as the Council and Summit. Working mechanism with media can be arranged through background briefings, media conferences, news release, and interviews, as well as working dialogue, exchanges and field trips.

### 2.2.12 Observers

**(UN organizations, ADB, selected partners with MOUs, qualified NGOs)**

The 1995 Mekong Agreement sets out mechanism to engage stakeholders who are defined as **observers to governance meetings**, while the Rules of Procedure provides detailed instruction how to engage them. Two UN organizations, the UNDP and ESCAP, have been granted standing observer status at the MRC governance meetings.

#### **Under Article 17. Sessions of Council of the 1995 Mekong Agreement**

*“The **Council** shall convene at least one regular session every year and may convene special sessions whenever it considers it necessary or upon the request of a member State. It may invite **observers** to its sessions as it deems appropriate.”*

#### **According to Rule 12. Attendance, Assistants, Advisors, and Observers of the Rules of Procedure of the Council of the MRC**

*“... Observers status may, if appropriate, and subject to the unanimous consent of the Council members, be granted to the following organizations and international bodies: (i) those that have active MoU or partnership agreement with the MRC; (ii) UN agencies and international financial institutions that strengthen regional cooperation; (iii) qualified NGOs working on environment, water resources management, nutrition, community development and humanitarian issues at the local, national and regional levels; (iv) organizations and bodies with specialized technical or scientific competences relating to the goals of the MRC; and (v) research and scientific institutions conducting researches on a range of environmental and social issues applicable to the sectors MRC is working to address.*

*Proposal for admission of observer status should be submitted by the MRC Secretariat and approved by Chairperson in consultation with the other Council Members prior to the dispatch of invitation letters. Expenses for attendance of observers to the Second Session of the Council Meeting will not be a responsibility of the MRC. The Chairperson could take final decision in case there are different views amongst the Council Members.”*

To be considered as “qualified” organization, some general criteria will be taken into consideration such as:

- 1) mandates or expertise of the organization (nominee) related to water resources planning and management (e.g. in navigation and transport, agriculture, fisheries, industry, food

and energy security, sustainable development, health, disaster risk management and biodiversity and conservation)

- 2) the nominee agrees and supports the objectives and principles of the Mekong Agreement
- 3) the importance of coordination and communication between the MRC and the nominee to achieving the goals and objectives of the Mekong Agreement
- 4) the capacity for the nominee to make a practical and valuable contribution to the work of the MRC
- 5) that nominee has a structured, permanent administration
- 6) that the appointed representative of the organization has a mandate to speak on behalf of the organization
- 7) that the nominee has signed an Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding with the MRC setting out the basis for cooperation
- 8) that the nominee has a regional or basin-wide perspective and will promote this perspective.

#### **Under Article 23. Sessions of Joint Committee of the 1995 Mekong Agreement**

*“The **Joint Committee** shall convene at least two regular sessions every year and may convene special sessions whenever it considers it necessary or upon the request of a member State. It may invite **observers** to its sessions as it deems appropriate.”*

According to **Rule 11 of the Rules of Procedure of the Joint Committee of the MRC: Attendance, Assistants, Advisors, Observers**

*“... F. The Joint Committee shall invite representatives of UNDP and ESCAP, and may invite, as it deems appropriate, representatives of governments, other international organizations, and designated agencies and individuals, to attend sessions<sup>13</sup> in the capacity of observers.”*

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<sup>13</sup> Sessions of the Joint Committee

## PART 3. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT UNDER MRC COOPERATION FRAMEWORK

The stakeholders have opportunities to be engaged through different working channels and arrangements, including but not limited to governance meetings, expert group meetings, regional and national forums, and dialogues. More approaches and mechanisms are being explored and considered to strengthen collaboration with private sector, civil society, and research institutes.

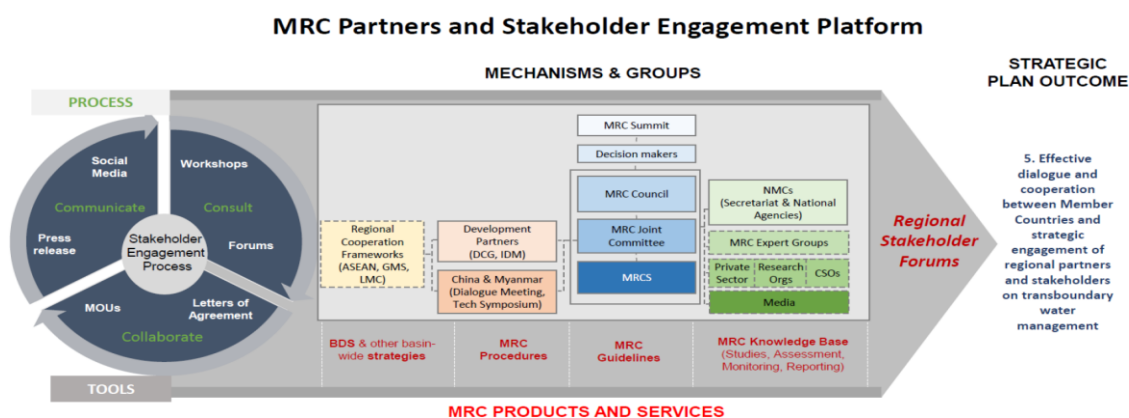


Figure 2. MRC Partners and Stakeholder Engagement Platform

### 3.1 KEY GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

In the context of the MRC, engagement is ultimately about building a relationship of trust and confidence through ongoing communication and interactions with those most valuable and affected stakeholders, including by frequently discussing how to better engage. Relationship building from the very start of a project or investment, even when there are no formal decisions to be made. Following are some key guiding principles:

- ✓ **Engaging the right stakeholders:** especially potentially affected stakeholders, those who may experience severe impacts but have relatively limited influence.
- ✓ **Engaging about the right issues:** focusing on impacts management and mitigation. This means taking the time to explain the business to stakeholders in order for them to provide informed input and constructive feedback. This usually requires good internal alignment before engagement begins, so that everyone is clear on what the objectives and expectations are.
- ✓ **Engaging in the right way:** depending on the number of people engaged to make sure transparency and timely information sharing. Give everyone enough time to absorb information and ensure everyone understands the questions. Given the Mekong context, especially in communication and extend the reach of messages accessible to wider audiences, it is advisable to confine the translation of some documents to the key messages and need to be translated into the national languages of the Member Countries.
- ✓ **Engaging at the right time:** listening to affected stakeholders and taking account of their perspectives in internal decision-making for better-informed decisions and a reduction in the severity of impacts.

Stakeholder engagement is not just about conveying information, it instead should be a **two-way dialogue** that conducted in good faith and is responsive to the views, experiences and expectations being exchanged. It's an **ongoing process** focused on building a mutually beneficial relationship, taking into account the stakeholder's diversity and human rights. Multiple targeted channels need to be considered.

Engagement of a wider range of stakeholders in MRC strategic planning activities was adopted since 2009 when stakeholder participation was a cross-cutting theme supporting participatory basin planning, starting with individual forums, workshops and working groups organized regarding basin development planning, i.e. stakeholder consultation process for the Integrated Water Resources Management-based Basin Development Strategy. The BDP Phase 2 (2006-2010) engaged stakeholders in a strengthened national, transboundary and regional participatory planning process, focusing on expanding engagement with community-based and civil society organizations.

Following recommendations of the 2011 stakeholder analysis, an MRC-wide mechanism for stakeholder participation through coordinated activities including an annual stakeholder forum was initiated and included in the workplans. During these years, stakeholder engagement has gradually broadened and coordinated from individual and specific sectoral approach into institutional and planning aspect, such as regional consultation for mainstream hydropower projects which involved a broad range of local, national, regional and international stakeholders, the preparation of MRC Basin Development Strategy and Strategic Plan, etc.

At the MRC, stakeholder engagement efforts and progress have been reflected through public participation process, including in the prior consultations of mainstream hydropower projects. The regional stakeholder consultations have grown, serving as an **enabling water diplomacy environment** starting from information sharing, two-way dialogues, opposing opinions exchange, and constructive suggestions. They contribute to better understanding and manage expectations. They bring up opportunities for a better solution that help meet the needs of the Mekong people.

The Member Countries play a critical role in **bringing the perspectives and interests of local and national stakeholders to the MRC discussion**. Each country has specific arrangements for public participation and consultation, especially for understanding and mitigating potential impacts arising from transboundary development. Each Member country has a policy and/or legislated focus on decentralization and on building the capacity and participation at provincial and local levels. All countries have a history of local level participation and consultation, for example through village associations, local and provincial governments, mass organizations representing youth, women and ethnic minority groups.

Engagement at **national and sub-national level** is arranged by the NMC with the coordination of its Secretariat. Stakeholders include national agencies, academic organisations, RBOs, private sector and national civil society organizations. There are more and more national Stakeholder Forums and National Consultations being organized during the process of drafting and formulating products and services.

For *regional implementation*, engaging with broader stakeholders, including academic organisations, private sector, civil society and other regional organizations as well as potential network of national and regional CSOs have been through the regular MRC Regional Stakeholder Forums, at least once or twice a year.

More details are in following parts.

### 3.2 GOALS AND EXPECTATION OF ENGAGEMENT

Public participation is part of the overall stakeholder engagement in which key stakeholder groups will be identified through stakeholder analysis. As decision-making processes on development and management of water and related resources often address multiple objectives, involve diverse interests, and have far-reaching effects, it requires us to work on a multiple-dimension approach with consideration of different stakeholders' needs and expectations. The stakeholders mapping and stakeholder analysis can help to determine which stakeholders are most vulnerable and affected by the intervention activities, for a suitable approach.

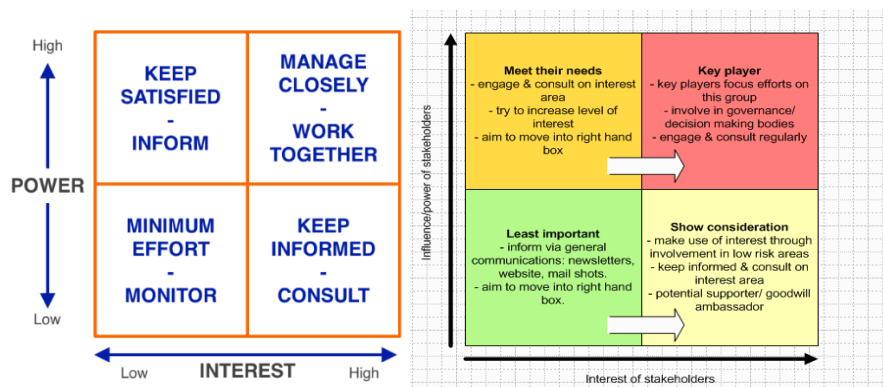


Figure 3. A simple illustrative principle of Stakeholder Mapping and Analysis

The ultimate goal of public participation in the context of the MRC is to enhance the ability of the MRC and Member Countries to achieve the sustainable development objectives of the 1995 Mekong Agreement. Public participation will seek to build mutual understanding and strengthen decision making and ownership in the MRC context. Public participation activities will be planned and targeted to be appropriate to the capacity and interests of the key public stakeholder groups.

While working at *regional level and focusing on policy issues*, in some circumstances it might not be possible to fully involve all affected stakeholders in the process, especially when beneficiaries is at national and local level such as development impacted local communities. It is important that the group is still included in the process and considering alternative options for engagement. In such cases, it may be necessary to engage with credible representatives or representative organizations, third parties such as CSOs, mass organizations, NGOs who may have working connections and experience with these affected groups. They can therefore convey the potential concerns related to the activities on their behalf. That's how the MRC has been building its collaboration with national and regional



river network and coalition who are working on Mekong related issues at nationwide in the region.

The aim of this cooperation is to **build synergies**, draw on and build regional level expertise and reduce duplication. The MRC will seek to establish continuous improvement in public participation through the application of the results of the monitoring and evaluation of its public participation activities and processes.

Stakeholder engagement process has been emphasised on a **spirit of good faith** with **constructive discussion and recommendations**. The MRC has been exercising its utmost to facilitate discussion and exchange of views with all stakeholders including those who has different viewpoints and position to the MRC work in the Mekong basin, aiming at **sharing accurate information, minimising misunderstanding and misperceptions** of the powers and functions by all parties, creating an enable environment to deliver key messages to decision-makers with the goal to **maintain transparency and credibility** of the MRC’s works.

### 3.3 ENGAGEMENT STAGES

There are different stages the MRC has used to engage stakeholders. In general, there are four stages with different degrees of engagement, namely, **information gathering, communication, consultation and collaboration** that contribute to decision-making. These stages can occur simultaneously but when starting off a new activity or project of public interest, one would need to start with the first two stages (in sequence) before a higher level of engagement with stakeholders can be successful.

Stages	Supporting methods and tools
<p><b>Information gathering</b></p> <p>The first stage of public involvement is to understand the issues and stakeholders that affect - and are affected by a particular activity or project. Important types of information are social, cultural, economic and political.</p>	<p>Stakeholder analysis, surveys, focus groups and interviews with key people (in the community), etc.</p>
<p><b>Dissemination / Communication</b></p> <p>Dissemination can take a variety of forms and aims at providing information that is understood and useful to the stakeholders. Thus, the knowledge that the key stakeholders gained in the first stage will be used to design the information methods and materials. This is considered one-way communication.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• press releases, press conferences</li> <li>• newspaper inserts, interviews with journalists</li> <li>• internet sites, social media</li> <li>• outreach activities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Consultation</b></p> <p>This stage goes one step beyond dissemination and creates an opportunity for stakeholders to discuss and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• national/community meetings</li> <li>• consultation papers</li> </ul>



<p>negotiate their needs and preferences. It is here that ideas from stakeholders can start to affect activity.</p> <p>This is <b>two-way communication and dialogue</b> focused on sharing information and collecting information to adequately understand the activity and project’s context and the preferences, concerns and expectations of different parties, and to ensure that all parties understand and learn from one another’s perspectives.</p> <p>Connected to this, a form of engagement is responding, where organization take action in response to an issue, concern or certain information identified during consultation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• specific meetings with interest groups</li> <li>• regional stakeholder forums</li> <li>• feedback and comment mechanism</li> </ul>
<p><b>Participation / Collaboration</b></p> <p>This stage is collaboration and participation where stakeholders are able to directly contribute their ideas and preferences. In other words, they take part in decision making. It is during this stage that projects, policies and everyday resource decisions are put into practice, and costs and benefits are allocated and shared.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• national/community/regional meetings</li> <li>• planning and review meetings</li> <li>• advisory panels</li> <li>• expert groups</li> <li>• MOUs and partnership agreements</li> </ul>

Table 1. Engagement stages

MRC emphasises that *all relevant stakeholders should have the opportunity to directly or indirectly influence activity and project design, implementation and effects*. It is also important to include the involvement of those groups who may not easily or readily participate, such as women, elderly and young people and minority groups.

Engagement is an **ongoing process**, with each step in the process increasing capacity, building trust and adding value. A continuous improvement approach will be built into the whole participation process strategically and flexibly.

### 3.4 ENGAGEMENT MECHNISM AND PLATFORMS

Stakeholder engagement has been targeted to meet the needs of the MRC core functions and activities, **from the planning and designing throughout implementation**. There are existing working arrangements tailored to meet different needs of each stakeholder group, as follows.

### 3.4.1 MRC Summit<sup>14</sup>

The MRC Summit is the highest governance meeting led by Prime Ministers and convened every four years, bringing together political leaders to address the prevailing challenges and opportunities facing the Mekong Basin. It is an opportunity for the Heads of Governments of the four MRC Member Countries to revisit the commitments made four years earlier and agree on strategies for the future and beyond. Three summits were held to date – the first in 2010, hosted by the Kingdom of Thailand in Hua Hin, and the second in 2014, hosted by the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam in Ho Chi Minh City and the third in 2018, hosted by the Kingdom of Cambodia in Siem Reap.

Ministerial representatives from the MRC Dialogue Partners (China and Myanmar) and Development Partners' representatives as well as key partners are invited to participate in the Summits.

The 4<sup>th</sup> MRC Summit will be held in April 2022 and hosted by Lao PDR.

### 3.4.2 MRC International Conference

The MRC International Conferences precede the MRC Summits of Heads of Government that are held every four years. The organisation of these conferences serves a double objective. Firstly, they offer a space for exchanges on transboundary water management between experts and stakeholders from the Mekong and other regions around the world. Secondly, they contribute to the leader's Summits by delivering key messages about best practices and new ideas for the sustainable management and development of the Mekong River Basin.

The MRC International Conference is free of charge and open to all interested participants. In support of public participation, a limited financial sponsorship will be provided to assist participation from civil society and community-based organizations based on request.

### 3.4.3 MRC Council Meeting<sup>15</sup>

MRC Council Meeting is an annual meeting usually conducted at the end of each year by the ministers of the four countries sitting on the MRC Council. The Meeting discusses yearly progress, approving strategies, and strategic directions for basin development and management.

MRC Development Partners, MRC Dialogue Partners, other partners, and observers are invited to participate in the session 2 of the MRC Council Meetings, called "Joint Session with Partners".

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/consultations/summits/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.mrcmekong.org/publications/governance/minutes-of-the-meetings/>

#### 3.4.4 MRC Joint Committee Meeting<sup>16</sup>

The Joint Committee Meeting is held twice yearly (usually April and September) among the members with support of the MRC Secretariat, to review work plan implementation and endorse activities for council approval. It is usually not open to external stakeholders.

#### 3.4.5 MRC Dialogue meeting<sup>17</sup>

The Dialogue Meeting held every year is the official mechanism to have discussion between MRC JC Members and Dialogue Partners' governments (China and Myanmar) in interested transboundary water related resources management in the basin as a whole.

#### 3.4.6 MRC Informal Development Partner Meeting

The meeting is a forum for exchange of views on matters of mutual interest, thereby strengthening the partnership between the Development Partners and the MRC. The meeting is chaired by the MRC Joint Committee Chair annually.

#### 3.4.7 Regional Stakeholder Forum<sup>18</sup>

Recognizing the interests involved in the basin and the importance of a shared and informed understanding of different stakeholders' perspectives, the MRC has been implementing various activities to strengthen relationships with a broad range of actors and players outside the MCs' governments, including in the private sector, civil society and academia, and other partners working in the Mekong region.

During 2016-2020, the MRC has strengthened engagement with *regional stakeholders* more in substantive development of knowledge products and consultations over proposed projects, guidelines and strategies through the *regional stakeholder forum (RSF)*.

The forums serve as a platform for the MRC's MCs and other relevant stakeholders to share information, discuss, provide, and exchange views and recommendations on reasonable and equitable use of water and related resources in the Mekong River system in various key MRC activities.

While the objectives of each forum will be specific to the topic(s), the general purpose of the forum will be:

- To share information about and promote the key works of the MRC that are of interest to the general public, including the roles and responsibilities of the MRC
- To consult and involve external stakeholders on the preparation, implementation and monitoring of the MRC key works including strategies, plans, guidelines, procedures and reports at different stages.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.mrcmekong.org/publications/governance/minutes-of-the-meetings/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.mrcmekong.org/publications/governance/minutes-of-the-meetings/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/consultations/regional-stakeholder-forums/>

The RSFs are part of a multi-stakeholder platform to share, gain inputs and experience diversified views on a topic and work of public interest. Different opinions contribute to a more comprehensive understanding and inform measures that help meet the needs of the Mekong governments and people.

Key points, comments and recommendations shared during the RSF are recorded (without attribution) in a matrix and fed into the decision-making process. Responses and reflections by the MRCS and member countries are provided and documented in Forum Reports.

The RSFs are free of charge and open to all interested participants. In support of public participation, a limited financial sponsorship will be provided to assist participation from civil society and community-based organizations based on request.

#### *3.4.8 Expert groups*

The Expert Groups (EG) are technical platforms, where regional and national experts regularly meet to jointly develop routine or emergent work related to transboundary water management, and to coordinate the implementation and uptake of activities and products at the national level.

The four Expert Groups have been established and activated since 2018. The Expert Groups aim to enhance the mode of collaboration between the regional and national levels: the MRCS and national line agencies, other institutions and organizations. Selected external organizations and experts can be invited to EG meetings based on the nature of expertise needed and the topics under discussion.

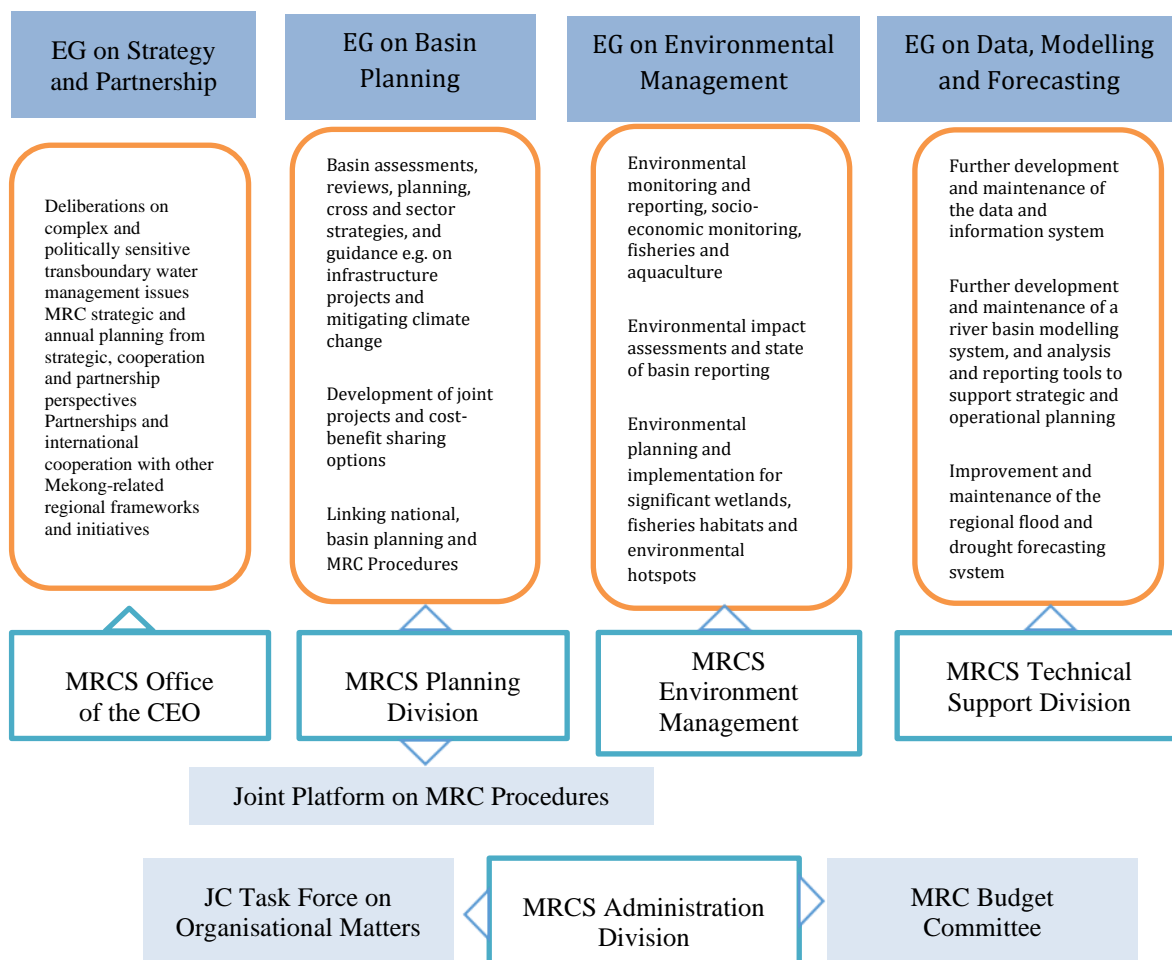


Figure 4. MRC expert groups

### 3.4.9 Partnerships

Stakeholder engagement involves two-way communication, sharing of information, exchange of views, contribution of inputs to the development and implementation of MRC products, and recommendations to activities and works. Another distinct form of engagement, especially with external stakeholders such as private sector, academia or NGOs, can be through partnership and joint collaboration. This can be through various mechanisms, mostly under Memorandum of Understandings (MoU), Letter of Agreement (LoA), Cooperation Framework, and Partnership Agreement.

The collaboration activities then are jointly identified under the form of joint activities/projects, joint workshops, seminars, and technical forums, secondment of experts/exchange of staff, technical and reciprocal visits, and experience exchange.

### 3.5 SUMMARY

In summary, MRC has been working with different stakeholders in the past 25 years through diverse mechanisms and approaches to meet the changes and development in the basin. The table below provides snapshot of existing arrangement and its expected participants:

	<b>Member Countries</b>	<b>Dialogue partners</b>	<b>Development Partners</b>	<b>Other Partners</b>	<b>Non-state bodies</b>	<b>Media</b>
<b>MRC Summit (every 4 years)</b>	X	X	X	X	By Invitation	X During opening
<b>MRC International Conference (every 4 years)</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>MRC Council Meeting (once per year)</b>	X	X	X	X	By Invitation	X
<b>MRC Joint Committee Meeting (twice per year)</b>	X	By Invitation as observers	-	-	-	-
<b>MRC Dialogue Meeting (once per year)</b>	X	X	-	-	-	-
<b>MRC Informal Development Partner meeting (once per year)</b>	X	-	X	By Invitation	-	-
<b>MRC Regional Stakeholder Forums (at least twice per year)</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>MRC Expert Group Meetings (several)</b>	X	By Invitation as observers	By Invitation as observers	By Invitation as observers	By Invitation as observers	-
<b>Joint workshops, seminars, technical forums, secondment of experts/exchange of staff, technical and reciprocal visits, and experience exchange.</b>	-	By exchange	By exchange	By exchange	By exchange	By exchange

*Table 2. Summary of existing MRC's stakeholder engagement arrangement*

The MRC can promote and facilitate broader cooperation and collaboration among different stakeholders and actors including CSO's and people in the region, to bring policy makers, technical experts and publics to the same table to discuss common benefits for the Mekong people.

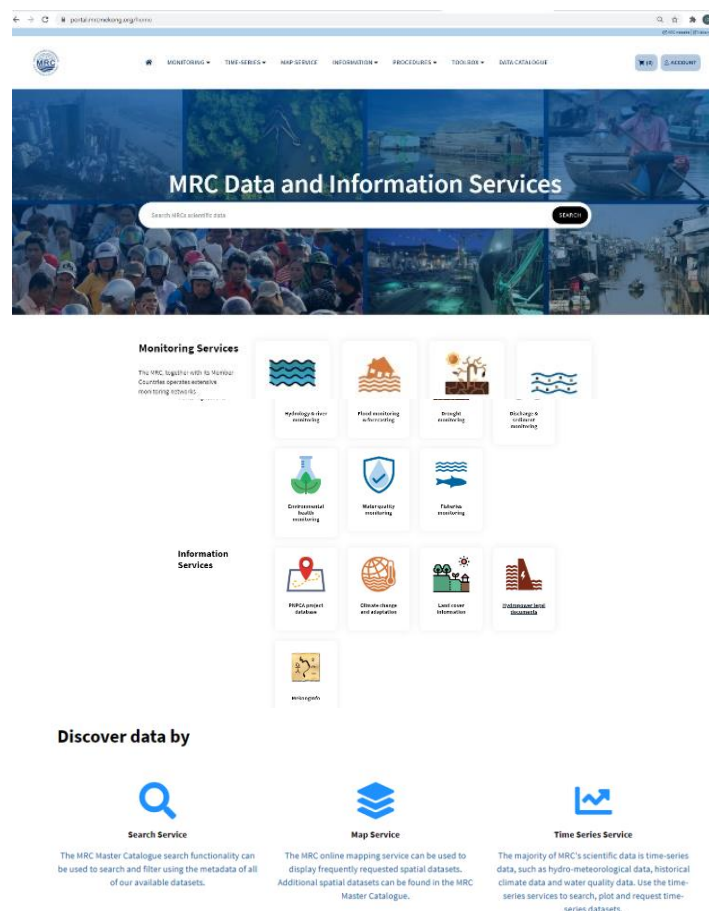
In line with the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aims at achieving sustainable development through inclusiveness, efficiency and equality with the principle of leaving no one behind, the MRC has been working on some initiatives and new approaches, i.e. Civil Society Platform, to have better engagement and collaboration with civil society, research and academia, and private sector at both national and regional level.

## PART 4. ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND DATASET AT MRC

As stakeholder engagement is about building trust and confidence through ongoing communication and discussion. Transparency and credibility play important role in enhancing relationship. Better engagement can be achieved initially with access to information and data.

Following the MRC Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing, *Data* is defined as representations of facts, expressed as measurements or statistics, suitable for communication, interpretation or processing, while *Information* defined as Data interpreted, processed and refined, and then displayed by the competent authorities having ownership or possession thereof, which is required for exchange and sharing for the purpose of the implementation of the Mekong Agreement.

The MRC embraces a policy of transparency and disclosure. All documents that are finalized and agreed by member countries are publicly available on the MRC's website. Working documents, such as drafts, are made available on request and/or as part of consultation through the Regional stakeholder forums and national forums. Access to datasets on the website or the public section of the MRC Information System portal<sup>19</sup> launched in 2006 and recently updated in 2020 is either free or subject to the MRC pricing policy and copyright regulations.



**Monitoring Services**

This MRC together with its Member Countries operates extensive monitoring schemes:

- Hydrology & river monitoring
- Flood monitoring & forecasting
- Drought monitoring
- River & estuary monitoring
- Environmental health monitoring
- Water quality monitoring
- Fisheries monitoring

**Information Services**

- MRC project database
- Climate change with adaptation
- Land cover information
- CHINA-MRC-2016

**Discover data by**

- Search Service**  
The MRC Master Catalogue search functionality can be used to search and filter using the metadata of all of our available datasets.
- Map Service**  
The MRC online mapping service can be used to display frequently requested spatial datasets. Additional spatial datasets can be found in the MRC Master Catalogue.
- Time Series Service**  
The majority of MRC's scientific data is time-series data, such as hydro-meteorological data, historical climate data and water quality data. Use the time-series services to search, plot and request time-series datasets.

<sup>19</sup> <http://portal.mrcmekong.org>



## PART 5. RELATED DOCUMENTS

1. 1995 Mekong Agreement and Procedural Rules  
<https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/agreement-Apr95.pdf>  
<http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/MRC-1995-Agreement-n-procedures.pdf>
2. Revised Rules of Procedure of the Council of the MRC 2016  
<http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/ROPs-of-the-Council-REVISED.pdf>
3. Rules of Procedure of the Joint Committee of the MRC
4. Revised Rules of Procedure of the MRC Secretariat 2014  
<http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/RoPs-of-the-MRCS-REVISED.pdf>
5. MRC Strategic Plan 2006-2010  
<https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/strategies-workprog/Strategic-plan-2006-2010.pdf>
6. Basin Development Strategy 2011-2015  
<http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/strategies-workprog/BDP-Basin-Dev-Strategy-2013-Eng.pdf>
7. Basin Development Strategy 2016-2020 <http://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/news/basin-development-strategy-and-mrc->
8. MRC Strategic Plan 2016-2020  
[strategic-plan-2016-2020-set-the-stage-for-new-sustainable-development/](http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/strategies-workprog/strategic-plan-2016-2020-set-the-stage-for-new-sustainable-development/)
9. Basin Development Strategy 2021-2030 and MRC Strategic Plan 2021-2025
10. MRC Communication Strategy and Disclosure Policy 2009  
<http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/Communication-Strategy-n-Disclosure-Policy.pdf>
11. Revised MRC Communication Strategy and Disclosure Policy 2015  
<https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/MRC-Disclosure-Guidelines-RevisedVer-May2015-final.pdf>
12. Public Participation in the context of the MRC  
<https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/Public-Participation-in-MRC-context.pdf>
13. Public Participation in the Lower Mekong Basin  
<https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/governance/Public-Participation.pdf>
14. Updated Statement on Public Participation in the context of the MRC 2014

## Annexes

1. Overview of MRC Stakeholders (for internal use)



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