

4th BDP Regional Forum

KEY MESSAGES

The Mekong river: globally important and complex

The Mekong River, by global standards, is both of great importance and also highly complex, due to its highly variable inter- and intra-annual flows. This complex variability creates significant risks as well as significant opportunities. These risks are growing as populations and economies grow and climate change advances, putting more people and assets in harm's way, as recent floods in the region have demonstrated. Assessing and mitigating these risks requires early action, as solutions will become much more difficult and costly with time and continuing uncoordinated development.

Ripe for joint development and benefit sharing: adequate information exists

Experience from other regions indicates that sooner or later joint management and development, with cost and benefit sharing deals, will be necessary if the people of the Mekong are to fulfill their aspirations and potential in a long-term balance with the river. Early action is possible due to MRC's significant investment in data and knowledge that makes the LMB more prepared than most basins that have already reached such deals. The MRC is in the position now to identify joint and/or basin-wide development and cost and benefit sharing options.

Balance basin development and protection.

National plans for water resources development are sub-optimal at the basin level. As they do not often take a basin perspective, they can lead to missed development opportunities and environmental losses at the basin level. The MRC is mandated to work with all countries to identify plans and projects that increase water, food, and energy security, reduce risks and protect environmental assets across the basin. In doing this, the MRC needs to allow and promote broad-based stakeholder engagement to examine development options, costs, benefits and trade-offs that may need to be considered by riparian governments, individually and collectively.

'Optimal' development is used to mean 'full potential of sustainable benefits' from a basin wide perspective.

The word optimal was used to paraphrase Article 1 and part of Article 2 of the 1995 Agreement: 'the development of the full potential of sustainable benefits to all riparian States and the prevention of wasteful use of Mekong River Basin waters'. An optimal solution cannot be achieved by resource optimization only. A 'best' direction of joint development can be agreed upon, as a result of a negotiation process. All solutions are provisional, requiring adaptation to change. Information sharing and trust are critical in this process.

Cooperation combines the comparative advantages of different LMB countries for mutual benefit

All LMB countries have different comparative advantages due to their position within the basin. Joint planning, management and development provide the potential to mitigate risks and develop opportunities in a way that increases benefits for all parties. While this is never easy to achieve,

taking steps along this pathway will provide positive feedback in terms of building trust and creating new opportunities. MRC has the mandate in the 1995 Agreement to identify and promote such steps in joint and basin-wide projects.

Dialogue Partners: engagement growing and appreciated

The Chinese representative made a clear commitment to continue and strengthen regular communication, information sharing and technical exchange. This was greatly appreciated by the MRC and Forum. The Chinese perspective that all riparian countries, whether upstream or downstream, have responsibility to sustainably develop and manage the river was also welcomed. The Myanmar representative welcomes further cooperation with MRC in the future as it faces many challenges developing its water resources.

Perceptions matter

Even though Mekong knowledge creation has been considerable, broad-based consensus and common understanding on key information is often lacking. This results in different perceptions across stakeholder groups, which can feed mistrust and affect regional relations. The MRC is mandated to promote common knowledge and understanding among all stakeholders, through providing evidence and raising awareness related to the river and to management and development benefits, impacts and risks. It is an important element of MRC's coordination and facilitation role to promote cooperation.

Poverty and gender

The BDS should better reflect the imperative of poverty alleviation and gender aspects of development, in its strategic intent. Whilst long-term changes in the rural socio-economy may reduce the numbers of vulnerable resource users in the future, there is a clear need for the MRC in the short to medium term to promote food security and pro-poor development in its sector strategies for water resources development. Regarding gender, actionable guidelines could be developed for the MRC and its Member Countries to reduce existing inequalities and promote gender-responsive and effective water governance systems, policies and strategies.

Sediments: an underestimated resource for a productive Mekong delta

Sediment transport is critical for a stable and productive river delta. Studies on the Mekong delta show: (i) sand plays a critical role but is often lacking in management plans and is at the same time a valuable resource for the construction sector, (ii) reduced sediment transport due to dams and sand mining are leading to river bed deepening and coastal erosion, (iii) nutrient delivery from the river to the delta are already drastically reduced. These findings demonstrate the high sensitivity to change of the Mekong ecosystem. Changes in the Mekong delta morphology call for immediate attention to better understand and mitigate these trends, including establishment of a detailed basin wide sediment budget.

Institutionalized stakeholder engagement

All of the above areas are best addressed through an institutionalized mechanism for stakeholder engagement. This could take the form of strengthened stakeholder participation in MRC Governance Meetings and/or a Regional Stakeholder Platform to engage regularly in the preparation and

implementation of the MRC strategic plans. Also, specific approaches and mechanisms under the Platform tailored to each group of stakeholders could be considered, such as the setting up of a stakeholder working group specifically for the private sector (since investment from the private sector now outweighs those of the public sector in all MRC sectors), for civil society or for research institutes. A more institutionalized and systematic stakeholder engagement will also require further improvement of MRC's knowledge management and communications.

Improving and tightening the draft Basin Development Strategy for 2016-2020

In addition to the above points, the preparation of the next draft of the updated Strategy could take into account the following suggestions:

- (i) Incorporate a 'strategic vision' and better defined objectives;
- (ii) Clearly make the BDS a "basin strategy" prescribing actions to be done, but not mixing strategy and action plan. Write the BDS for policy makers, urging action based on a sense of urgency.
- (iii) The implementation of the BDS for 2011-2015 sits uneasily within Chapter 1. Consider a separate, short chapter on the experiences and lessons learnt from the implementation of the previous BDS. Add to this chapter the progress of the implementation of the "Development opportunities" which is presented in Section 4.1;
- (iv) Combine Chapter 2 (State of the Basin) with the "Development outlook" in Section 3.1 into a chapter entitled "Development trends and outlook";
- (v) Streamline and further improve the remainder of Chapter 3 (Development needs, opportunities and risks), including an assessment of the risks and uncertainties related to infrastructure development;
- (vi) Relate Chapter 4 (Basin Development Strategy), through a new Section 4.1, strongly with the analysis of the needs, opportunities and risks in Chapter 3;
- (vii) Merge the current Sections 4.2 and 4.3 on basin development priorities and basin management priorities;
- (viii) Perceived weaknesses regarding cooperation mechanisms (including PNPCA) need to be better analyzed (in Chapter 3) and addressed in Chapter 4; and
- (ix) Strengthen the distribution of responsibilities for implementation in the Strategy, including the role of research organizations.
- (x) Better describe the monitoring of the Strategy implementation at the basin level through the state of basin reporting system