

## Panelist Abstract

**Panelist:** Jeorn Kristensen, Chief Executive Officer, Mekong River Commission

**Name of Session:** Session IV. Lessons of Experience - Longstanding Multicountry Institutions Plenary Session

**Presentation title:** The Mighty Mekong and its Basin, Opportunities and Challenges

### **Summary of Key Issues and Best Practices/Lessons Learned**

Given the crucial socio-economic role the mighty river of Mekong plays in the life of the six countries through which it flows, regional co-operation on the management of the river and its related resources is imperative. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) was created for this purpose. While having a history that traces more than 40 years back, the Commission came fully to its own only as recently as 1995, with the signing, by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, of the *Agreement on the Co-operation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin*.

Before enlarging on the work of the Commission, however, let me first describe the background from which its mandate arises.

### **THE RIVER AND ITS PEOPLE**

For the people who inhabit the Mekong River Basin, the Mekong River - the "Mother of Waters" as it is called - is much more than just a natural resource. The river is the heart and soul of mainland South-East Asia. For the people whose lives depend on its waters, the river is a way of life, a home for the spirits, a social arena, a place where life unfolds, a source not only of survival but also of profound meaning. The river speaks of the past and the future, of the eternally recurring cycles of nature, of the people living upstream and downstream, of survival, beauty and danger.

I am convinced that most foreigners to the region who, like myself, have not grown up with the river and who have not, following the example of anthropologists, totally immersed themselves in the ways of life it supports, are not able to grasp the full significance of the river. However, through enjoying the view of the broad, slow movement of its massive volume of water, experiencing the glitter of reflected sunsets on its surface, and interacting with and observing the way of life of the people who live by the river and on the river, it is possible to at least begin to appreciate the great value of the river for the people whose life is so intimately bound to it.

And then, of course, there are the facts and figures to which, by cultural inclination and practical necessity, we generally must resort. While they do not speak of the river in a poetic language that surely would be closer to the reality of the river as experienced by its people, they, too, speak of a river of mighty importance. The size of the Mekong Basin is 795,000 square kilometers. With a length of 4,350 kilometres, the Mekong River is the longest river in Southeast Asia, the 7th longest in Asia, and the 12th longest in the world.

[MAP OF MEKONG RIVER BASIN]

Rising in Tsinghai Province in China it flows through the eastern part of Tibet Autonomous Region and Yunnan province, after which it forms part of the international border between Myanmar and Laos, as well as between Laos and Thailand. Flowing through Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, it drains into the South China Sea to the south of Ho Chi Minh City. In the Mekong Delta the river divides into two main channels, the Mekong proper and the Bassac, which further divide into 9 tributaries, giving rise to the delta's traditional name of Cuu Long (Nine Dragons.) More than 70 million people, of which some 55

million inhabit the Lower Mekong Basin (the part of the watershed area lying within Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam), depend on the river and its tributaries for food, water and transport.

About nine-tenths of the people inhabiting the Lower Mekong Basin are engaged in agriculture and produce rice, the chief crop of the basin. Irrigation from the Mekong River is essential for this production. The agricultural produce of the basin provides the staple diet of perhaps 100 million people worldwide. It has been estimated that food demand from the MRB would increase between 25% and 50% in the next 25 years, with a corresponding increase in water demand.

The Mekong River is very rich in fish. The size of the inland fisheries sector has historically been grossly under-reported, because of the difficulties in measuring it. Fish is the single most important source of animal protein in the diet, forming together with rice the basis of the food security for the people in the Lower Mekong Basin. MRC estimates the total value of fish caught per year in the Lower Mekong Basin to be at least equivalent to US\$800 million in retail price - a great value for an economically poor region.

## **THE POVERTY CHALLENGE AND THE NEED FOR REGIONAL CO-OPERATION**

The Mekong Basin forms a complex ecosystem. The system is resilient to human manipulation up to a certain extent, after which the risk for sub-system breakdown becomes large.

### **[MEKONG ECO-SYSTEM CHART]**

Since a breakdown in one sub-system, for example fisheries, may be the result of activities in another sector, such as hydro-electric generation, a holistic, inter-sectoral approach to planning is crucial.

A regional approach is also clearly required. For instance, changes in Mekong River water levels resulting from upstream water use can have great impact on downstream agriculture. For instance, Vietnam is concerned about the danger of increased seawater intrusion in the fertile Mekong Delta if dry season water level drops. The availability of fish is sensitive to both downstream and upstream water flow and water quality conditions, as many Mekong fish species migrate for great distances for spawning and feeding. Pollution flows with the river downstream, respecting no borders, and river transportation, of significant importance particularly for Cambodia but also for the other riparian countries, depends on effective regional agreements.

The people of the Lower Mekong Basin remain, in terms of per capita income, among the poorest in the world. Excepting Thailand, nominal per capita income ranges from US\$254 in Cambodia to US\$354 in Vietnam. Around 40% of the population in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam live beneath the poverty line. Even for Thailand, the wealthiest of the four Lower Mekong Basin countries, poverty remains a critical issue. The Thai population living within the Mekong watershed area lag far behind the rest of the country in socio-economic status. Furthermore, the population growth rate in the region is high - 2.5% for Laos and Cambodia, somewhat lower for Vietnam and Thailand - leading to ever-increasing demand for food and jobs. The population of the basin has doubled over the last 30 years. In Cambodia alone, the population is expected to increase from an estimated 12 million today to 20 million in 2020 - most of which will be facing severe poverty unless a very significant increase in agricultural production takes place.

There is thus no doubt about the need for economic growth, through such means as more effective farming techniques, increased agro-business, consumer goods production and tourism. This would necessarily be linked with increased energy and water consumption, increased movement of goods and people, increased regional trade and increased urbanisation. To try to stop this process would be like trying to stop the flow of the Mekong River. Not only would it be futile, but it would also be undesirable. The challenge is to find ways to manage the process so that benefits are optimal while harm is minimized. The Basin is entering a new phase of rapid development that may alter permanently the physical landscape, the integrity of its ecosystems and the quality of life of its people. While the Mekong River

and its related eco-systems are still largely healthy, the system is suffering from increasing and even alarming stress. If the present rate of deterioration of natural resources continues, forest cover, bio-diversity, fish stocks and soil quality – key indicators of ecological health – will in the not-so-distant future be reduced to levels where recovery may not be possible.

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

Only through sound management will it be possible to ensure long-term sustainability of the natural resources, the environment and the quality of life of the Basin's people. Some critical challenges being faced in the management of the Basin resources are:

- lack of accurate, timely data on Mekong River water quantity and quality
- inadequate understanding of how the Basin functions as a system
- incomplete policy and regulatory frameworks
- weak enforcement capabilities, co-ordinating action and data exchange across international boundaries
- lack of skilled professional staff
- insufficient awareness among economic planners and decision-makers regarding the monetary and social value of the Basin's complex ecosystems and habitats

There are also many positive aspects to consider, however. Some of these are:

- the Mekong River Basin eco-systems are still largely in a healthy shape, and bio-diversity in the Basin remains among the richest in the world
- limited urbanisation along the river reduces the threat of pollution to the river
- the present political situation in the region enables constructive co-operation in management of the Basin resources, and the legal and institutional set-up for such co-operation is basically in place
- the understanding of the Basin eco-systems has increased significantly over the last decade
- there is great potential for increased agricultural production in the region, based on an increased yet sustainable use of the Mekong River waters
- there may be significant potential for small-scale hydro-electric power schemes with limited environmental impact
- there is significant international financial support available for regional co-operation on Mekong River management.

## **THE MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION**

The 1995 agreement establishing the Mekong River Commission has a unique status in that it forms the basis of the only legally constituted regional organisation mandated from the highest political level to deal with Mekong River management in a holistic manner. The MRC is the only wholly riparian voice speaking for the interests of riparians in Mekong River matters. While there are many international, regional and national organisations working in the Mekong River basin, there is only one regional river commission, combining research, capacity building, development programmes and political dialogue at the highest level.

The MRC is formally structured as shown in the following chart.

[ORGANISATION CHART OF MRC]

The vision driving the MRC is of an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin. The contribution of MRC toward this vision, the MRC Mission, is to promote and

co-ordinate sustainable management and development of water related resources for the four countries mutual benefit and the people's well being.

The MRC Mission speaks also of 'implementing strategic programmes and activities' and 'providing scientific information and policy advice'. What does this mean in practice? Historically, the MRC Secretariat, in co-operation with the National Mekong Committees and country line agencies, have focused on the first part, implementing programmes and activities. MRC and its predecessors has over the years planned, sought funding for and carried out a wide variety of development projects. The MRC has, in fact, up to now been quite similar to many other development agencies operating in the region.

By virtue of the unique legal agreement on which it is based, MRC is and should, however, be much more than just another development agency. It is in the statement 'providing scientific information and policy advice' of the MRC mission that the unique role of MRC is described. The MRC can fulfill a role that no other organisation is equipped to handle primarily through creating knowledge about basin-wide issues, and helping turn this knowledge into sound political decisions.

To take up that role of a knowledge and monitoring centre generating high-level political decisions, the Commission is in the middle of a major restructuring process that will lead to a much more vigorous Commission that focuses on what it can do better than any other institution. This means: to understand the Mekong Basin in its social, political, economic and environmental totality, and help generate the region-wide institutional capacity and political decisions that are required to harness Mekong River water and related resources in an ecologically, economically and socially sustainable manner.

The "new MRC" has three areas of priority, which follow directly from the 1995 agreement establishing the MRC. These are:

- Developing rules for the cooperative use of water through the Water Utilization Programme.
- Basin Development Planning, facilitating cooperative sustainable development of water related resources.
- Environmental monitoring.

The move away from being a general development agency, a role that other agencies can fill as well as MRC, does not mean that MRC will no longer plan and execute development programmes. Maintaining an operational programme is important for several reasons. Firstly, there remains a large need for externally supported quality development programmes in the region, and there are areas where MRC has a unique competence that should be harnessed for this purpose. The MRC Fisheries Programme is an example of this.

Secondly, operational programmes help generate the data and knowledge that is needed for MRC to be a knowledge centre. The MRC Environment Programme is an example of this.

Thirdly, operational programmes are required for engaging in dialogue (and help strengthen) the many institutions - public and non-governmental - that need to be involved in any decisions made at the political level. All MRC operational programmes are planned with this function in mind, be it the Water Resources and Hydrology Programme, the Agriculture Programme, the Navigation Programme or other programmes.

What is now taken more seriously, however, is making operational programmes truly "strategic", as called for in the 1995 agreement. They need to have basin-wide significance. They need to deal with issues of high priority. And they need to support the knowledge-generating role of MRC. MRC needs to clearly focus on its role as a River Commission, and avoid competing with others in being a general funding source for development projects. During the last year MRC has made a major move from a project-by-project approach to a flexible but strategic programme approach. MRCs supporters are enthusiastically backing this shift, although it leads to less direct donor control and influence over project

funds than what is the case today. Donors back the new strategic direction because they believe it promises a stronger, clearer and more focused MRC. And in the end what donors seek is impact and ownership, not control and influence.

The strategic approach of the MRC can be illustrated as follows.

["ROLE OF MRC" CHART]

Data collection, environmental monitoring and knowledge generation / planning are the core functions of the MRC Secretariat, carried out in collaboration with the 4 National Mekong Committees. Good data and good knowledge are of little use, however, if they do not translate into political decisions leading to what is the ultimate goal: sustainable development and poverty reduction. The unique strength of MRC is that it has the mandate and means to combine operational programmes and a strong knowledge base with an active role in the other key parameters for change, as shown in the chart. In addition to political debate and decision-making, these include awareness creation, the building of institutional capacity (particularly in government line agencies), and the creation of partnerships.

No amount of data and knowledge will do away with real trade-offs between the interests of different sector and population groups in how to make use of the Mekong River Basin resources. Yet it is only through an open and informed political debate, based on sound factual knowledge, that good compromise solutions can be found between these different interests. The Mekong River Commission has a key role to play in making this happen.

For more information:

Jeorn Kristensen, Chief Executive Officer, Mekong River Commission  
P.O. Box 1112, Phnom Penh, Cambodia  
Phone 855 23 720979 / Fax 855 23 720972 / E-mail: [mrcs@mrcmekong.org](mailto:mrcs@mrcmekong.org)  
website: <http://www.mrcmekong.org>