

# MEKONG THE MOTHER AND THE NEW CHALLENGE

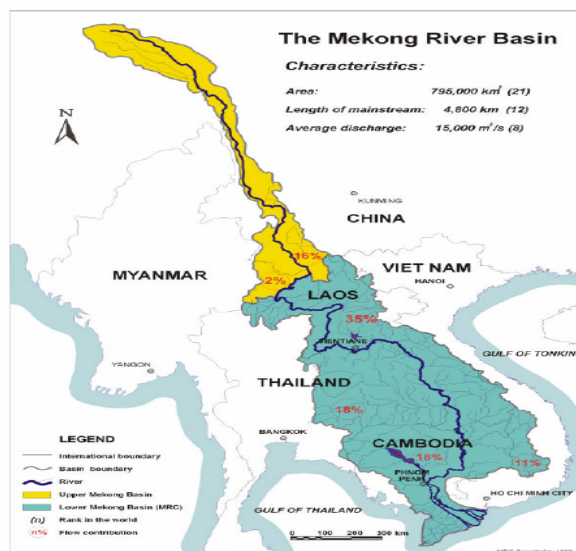
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## Abstract

*The Mekong flow through six Southeast Asia countries namely Southern China, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Its mighty resources attracted attention to many explorers from outside especially from Europe. People in this region were poor and most of them are still living under the poverty line. It was until early 1950 after the independence of the three former Indo-Chinese countries that dreams on development of the resource of the Mekong took shapes. Supported by the United Nations and its related agencies and 21 donor countries, the Mekong Committee for Investigation of the development of the Mekong River Basin was formed. The 1995 Mekong Agreement was based on new cooperation principles and the cooperation frameworks are being elaborated. Sets of rules supported by number of procedures and guidelines were formulated. Due to the complexity of the basin natural resources and its use in space and time additional detail data supporting Integrated Basin Management is being compiled and further research program is being planned. It is of great hope for the people that the old and new dreams will resurface again. The successful implementation of the Agreement could not be achieved without proper sectoral, regional and local integration of all aspects of development to the lowest level. A change is required from the previous way of planning at all level in each of the riparian country with mutual respect and “meeting the present needs without compromising the capacity of the future generation to meet their own” (Gro Harlem Bruntland in Lord Osborne, 2000). This will be a big challenge for all parties concerned.*

**Key words:** Basic knowledge, challenge, cooperation, dream, ethic, hope, Integrated Water Resources Management, Mekong spirit

## Introduction



The Mekong River, alternatively known as the Great River or the Mother of rivers is flowing through six countries and has its sources in the Tibetan plateau in China. After leaving China by gushing through numerous high mountains range of Yunnan its caves a border between Myanmar and Laos then between Thailand and Lao PDR crossing the major cataract of Khone Fall at its entrance into Cambodia. From the Kratie town in Cambodia, the Mekong enters into its delta where it joins the Tonle Sap- Great Lake system and the Bassac creating a unique natural flood flow regulation and biological rich of the world.

There is evidence of human settlement in the basin dating back 6,000 years ago, but although the basin has an undoubtedly long history of human occupation the impact of human on the basin was slight. And unlike other big river in the world such as the Nile or the Yangtze rivers where great civilization were formed, major cities

such as Phnom Penh and Vientiane were cities in the modern time. The civilization of Angkor was an exception where their builders look at the Mekong at the same time as vital resources and as a threat, a route used by enemies. There was never an attempt to tame or tap the Mekong resources.

People in the Mekong river basin are generally poor as compared to people in the neighbouring river basin such as Chao Phraya, Yangtze or the Red river. Accessibility to remote region has been improved until very recently when more new roads were opened in Thailand and Lao PDR when previously the river was the only major trade route.

Historically, the mighty resources of the Mekong has long been known to outsiders, the European from the beginning of the sixteen century, early interest were focused on navigation especially access road to China which were strongly expressed by the French colonial. The 1866-1868 expedition led by Carne has eventually reached Yunnan but failed to locate the source of the Mekong. The experience of these adventurers, when recounted in Paris, made clear the treacherous, dangerous ascend of the river and the folly of the thinking that this would provide an easy route into China. With this knowledge French aspiration turned to other potential routes into the interior, notably the Red river. This interest has led to the initial limitation of colonial administrative borders between current sovereign states in the region. During the early 1950s the three former French Indo-China countries received their independence from France. It was a tremendous tasks for the new governments to govern and rebuild their respective countries.

## **The Mekong Developments**

After their independence, the former Indochina's countries joined by Thailand formed the Mekong Committee for Investigation of water and related resources of the Lower Mekong River basin. The Mekong was conceived not only as a route or as a border but as an opportunity for investment in the development of water and related resources, a commercial objective. Taking the advantage of the untapped huge potential for hydropower, irrigation (by the time the projects were conceived only less than 3per cent of cultivated land was irrigated), navigation and flood controls and, fresh scientific knowledge based on newly collected data, intensive development planning activities took place. It was a time of a big **dream** for leaders, engineers, planners in the region and throughout the world. The Mekong projects obtained the participation of international organizations (including 12 UN organizations) and 21 countries in addition to the four riparian countries. The pragmatic plans grew out of a "**Mekong Spirit**" reflecting the **hope** of the people involved in the engineering undertaking to improve quality of life of the people of the four riparian countries (Professor Hiroshi Hori and Professor Bob Stenholt, 1999 in Nancy Hudson-Rodd). Based on the newly acquired scientific data collected on of Mekong mainstream and its major tributaries and in the lower basin more than 70 individual projects were identified by 1969 ( dams, power stations, experimental farms, soil surveys, bridges, irrigation scheme, flood forecasting and flood control, navigation etc. In the early 1970s, three dams were completed, two in the northeast of Thailand (Nam Pung and Nam Pong)and one in southern Laos (Lower Sedone) with activities of other at various stage of progress.

There are more than 50 other projects which have been named, line or dot or blob in the maps which in the years and decades to come will become towns, dams, bridges or irrigation

scheme, roads, factories, new farm land (Wilson.1973:54 in United Nations Universities, 1990). There was unlimited optimism expressed in the benefits to flow from these many grand development schemes. However, this most ambitious international development project encountered many drawbacks, and the Mekong Committee complained that finding financial backers for these schemes was proving increasingly difficult. Work on the project was hindered as war in Indo-China escalated.

The **dreams** of continuous development progress for the people in Mekong basin began to fade also due to concern over the human and ecological consequences of some projects. By the 1980s, a development evaluation showed that none of the 16 mainstream schemes had been completed and only 16 of the proposed 180 of the proposed basin plan had been completed, with the majority of these in northeastern Thailand (Nam Pong, Nam Oon, Nam Pung, Lam Pao, Lam Pra Pleang, Lam Ta Kong, Nam Phrom, Lan Don Noi ) and two in Laos (Selabam and Nam Dong Dams) (United Nations, 1984: 48).

But more recently four decades after ECAFE initiatives, the four member countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam) have negotiated for a new Agreement. This Agreement was signed in 1995 and called 1995 Mekong Agreement, the **dream** of dams is again with us while international financial assistance to large scale infrastructure projects had come under increasing public pressure, and the environmental movement in Thailand had become quite vocal in opposing hydropower projects in the Mekong basin. As prospect for the construction of a cascade of large reservoirs on the mainstream faded, dry season water shortage became issues of concern. To protect its plan for large scale water diversion projects, Thailand, in opposition to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam, did not want to reinstate **cooperation** under the principles of the joint declaration of 1975 (Browder, 2000). The country feared that some of the rules under the joint declaration – prior approval by member countries to major unilateral appropriation of mainstream waters and the treatment of major tributaries in the same fashion as the mainstream could hinder its two large scale projects (The Kok-In-Nan and the Khong-Chi-Mun projects) and wanted a smaller role of the Mekong Regime, Vietnam on the other hand, felt that the Interim Mekong Committee status was too limiting to the development of additional water resources. By mid 1992, it became clear that although all four member countries wanted to maintain the Mekong Regime, ideas about its structure, role and responsibilities differed widely from country to country.

It had taken two years of intense negotiation for the four member countries to reach the agreement. All four member countries wanted to maintain the Mekong Regime but, ideas about its structure, role and responsibilities differed widely.

The 1995 Mekong Agreement provides a **cooperation** framework for member countries to work together to achieve sustainable development in the basin. Each member country needed the protection of a minimum of interest regarding the Mekong water. For example, Cambodia considered the preservation of the Tonle Sap system of major importance and Vietnam considered the maintenance of existing dry season flows in the Mekong delta as essential. A supporting tool has been developed under the Water Utilization program which is consisting of a Decision Support Framework (DSF), sets of rules for maintenance of flows in the Mekong mainstream and studies on trans-boundaries issues. A great deal of knowledge has been accumulated for the development of the tools and the current under development “Integrated Flow Management”. New tools and knowledge are expected to assist accelerated coordinated

projects planning process. And there is an obvious growing demand for new sophisticated scientific data and information, analysis, exchange and sharing at an appropriate time as well as growing capacity requirement to manage the whole system in an integrated and coordinated way. In the eyes of the great public which had joined the Mekong **Dream** the big question for them is what will happen next.

## **The Challenges**

The population in the basin has increased from around 20 millions in the early 1970 to currently 55 millions and is predicted to be between 75 and 90 millions by 2025. The majority of them rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Rice is the main crop of most rural households, with 80-90 per cent of households growing it as their principal crop. In recent years the economies of Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam have begun a shift towards market-oriented production and trade liberalization. They are becoming more industrialized as happened in Thailand 20-30 years ago. These changes are important factors affecting livelihoods, incomes and poverty levels of people living in the region.

Poverty is widespread and pervasive throughout the Lower Mekong Basin. Poverty is multi-dimensional- poor people lack a wide range of livelihood assets and opportunities as well as income. Poverty reduction is a priority in the socio-economic development policies of all countries in the LMB especially for the poorest country where majority of the population is directly dependant on natural resources makes the ecosystem management a particularly challenging task. It is expected that impact on the region natural resources will increase with time. During the last 50 years significant forest resources has been depleted, mostly in northeast Thailand, Lao PDR and at a spectacular speed in Cambodia. The benefit from those resources has been mainly used outside the area or at the capital cities.

The 1995 Agreement has shifted the focus in the basin from large-scale projects to cooperating in sustainable development and equitable use of natural resources (MRC, 1995). The basin development planning strongly supports community participation in natural resources management in the basin. The overall approach is: (i) to achieve basin-wide benefits while taking into account national interest; (ii) to balance development opportunities with resources conservation; (iii) broad public participation; knowledge-sharing and capacity building. The plan is expected to involve themes of environment, human resource development, socio economic, poverty reduction, gender equity and public participation (MRC, 2003). Other programmes including environment, fisheries, navigation, capacity building and agriculture, irrigation and forestry programmes, are also being undertaken to implement the 1995 Mekong Agreement. The Basin Development Plan will be the key programme of the 1995 Mekong Agreement. Due to the complexity of water resources development and management in the Lower Mekong River basin; a joint and common approach is essential from the commune to national and regional level. To meet their development needs member countries need to implement a wide variety of projects and programs. Administration, planning and legislation in each member country are generally distributed in different sectors belonging to different line ministries. National planning is often sector driven with limited consideration on cross sectoral interactions.

At the institutional level, member countries are at different level of development but generally new in this fields though some member country are already in a more advance technical stage of development in terms of water resources development. The implementation of Integrated Water Resource Management (**IWRM**) is further complicated in the Mekong Basin due to poor understanding of the dynamics of river and stream ecosystem and their dependence on flow regimes (Campbell, in Juha and al., 2005). This leads to severe limitations and uncertainties in environmental impact assessment.

Based on the suggested benchmark for “good **IWRM**” by (Millington, 2004 in MRC, 2005, Strategic Directions for **IWRM** in LMB):

- *Institutional and regulatory frameworks with clear pathways of accountability – establishing the ethic and performance of good governance*
- *Knowledge-driven planning and management, with open sharing of information*
- *Community and stakeholder participation – partnerships between government and community for demand-responsive approaches to development*
- *Integration and coordination of policies and programs across sectors, countries, competing stakeholder interests and levels of government.*

It is clear that though some steps have been made toward **IWRM**, there is still a long way to go for MRC and member countries to achieve “good **IWRM**”.

The Pak Moon dam case was one of the examples illustrating the complexity of such undertaking even within a country boundary. The poor whom their livelihoods are at the subsistence level are the one who first to suffer from the negative impact.

It seems also with the time the people at the regional and national level tends to forget the lesson of the Se San as well. In this case it was not even clear whether MRC and direct concerned countries have taken the issues seriously and building the case as a lesson learned for future planning and management in the planning.

### **Building the Mekong ethics**

Water is a crucial issue to be resolved by all immediately. To this end the whole society must contribute. The establishment of a number of guiding principles and the subsequent rules could not be considered an end in itself. But there is a need to put a commitment into action in search for a model which could serve as a spearhead of the science of this new millennium, conscientious and ethically motivated, gathering all interdisciplinary specialists. This would need great international cooperation efforts gathering scientists and researchers worldwide and in the Mekong region including the public. The ethics of natural resources Management in the Mekong River Basin are directed towards balance and equity as much as towards regional optimization. Scientific rationality plays a clear role, but does not provide a complete reference for resources allocation or related conflict resolution (Tue Kell Nilsen, 2003).

The rich cultural heritage of the region must be used to achieve good **IWRM** in addition to full participation of the whole people of the LMB to assure a sustainable future of the water sector in this region.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The 1995 Mekong Agreement should serve well expectation of the people of the basin to achieve and economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound river basin. The art and practice of equitable distribution of and access to fresh water for all people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as fundamental right and international obligation, is the mother of all **ethical** questions of all trans-boundary natural resources of a finite nature. The merit of the Mekong the Mother which has given us throughout generation a peaceful live must not be forgotten for a harmful and uncoordinated development. As people we are different in many ways but the river and its ecosystem is only one, the Mekong and its ecosystem is unique in the world we should make good use of it guiding by best principles and **spirit**.

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