The Role of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in Conflict Management

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Outline of the Presentation

1. Background information
2. Challenges
3. Regional cooperation and conflict management related activities
The Mekong river is approx. 4,800 km long

‘Complex hydrology’ and limited water infrastructure: often correlates with widespread poverty & malnutrition in the world

Unique biodiversity and large fisheries on which millions of people depend

60 million people live in the Lower Mekong Basin

Increasing demand for water resources development to reduce poverty and support an increasing population
As in most international river basins, the relationship between the upstream and downstream States in the Mekong system is politicized and controversial. There exist various power relations based on the present water utilization and the alleged future needs. In general terms, PR China occupies a much more powerful position in the basin, due to its political power. China is also the upstream State, which results in an extreme asymmetry of power relations.
THAILAND: seeks cheap energy (hydropower), more water for its modernized agriculture sector, and enhanced flows in the Chao Praya Basin.

LAO PDR: wishes to realize its hydropower generating potential.

DIFFERENT MEMBER STATES, DIFFERENT INTERESTS

CAMBODIA: would be best served by the conservation of the current hydrological regime, including the seasonal flooding which gives rise to the huge fishery.

VIET NAM: wishes to protect the efficient agriculture and aquaculture production in the Delta. Faced with saltwater intrusion.
THAILAND: seeks cheap energy (hydropower), more water for its modernized agriculture sector, and enhanced flows in the Chao Praya Basin.

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These varying demands were negotiated and codified in a framework agreement of The Mekong River Commission (MRC) in April 1995 between the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam.
1. Challenges

1. Over 21% of the basin is eroding, only 31% of its original forests left intact and only 5% under protection.

2. 2% population growth over the next 50 years and increasing environmental degradation.

3. Developments – including dams and diversions, irrigation expansion with associated changes to the natural flow regime – will also bring high risks.

4. Potential impacts caused by unpredictable meteorological conditions, climate change and rising sea levels etc. call for new consideration and action by the MRC.
Dams on the mainstream Mekong

Upper Mekong – 8 existing or planned
Lower Mekong – 12 proposed

Dams on Mekong Tributaries

Existing and planned – 94
(only hydro dams – does not include irrigation dams)
2. MRC, Regional Cooperation and Conflict Management related Activities

Goal 2 of the MRC Strategic Plan (2006-2010) contains the following objective:

“To identify potential transboundary issues for negotiation, mediation and conflict prevention; and develop mediation and conflict management capacity”
2. MRC, Regional Cooperation and Conflict Management related Activities

MRC-USAID under Environmental Cooperation-Asia (ECO-Asia) Governance project, 2006-2009 to increase capacity for planning and resolution of transboundary water-related issues through:

a. Water conflict prevention and management training
b. Mapping “hotspots”
c. Piloting Collaborative Management Process for Dispute Prevention
The MRC Flood Management and Mitigation Programme is anticipating and resolving flood issues, differences and disputes.

The transboundary assessment of economic, social and environmental impacts of a range of basin-wide scenarios is the foundation of this Strategy.

Trade-offs between economic benefits and environmental and social cost for each country and for the Basin’ biodiversity, between sectors, areas, and population groups, and ultimately led to national positions as to the preferred and acceptable scenarios.
The BDP, in November 2011, organized a training workshop to build negotiation skills in order to enhance international cooperation on water management and development in the Mekong River Basin and to support the negotiation processes related to the IWRM-based Basin Development Strategy.
2. MRC, Regional Cooperation and Conflict Management related Activities

Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA)
The Mekong Agreement defines prior consultation as a process “that would allow the other member riparians to discuss and evaluate the impact of the proposed use upon their uses of water and any other affects”. It provides the forum within which Member Countries can debate the issues based, not only on the documents submitted, but also taking into account the perspectives of many other stakeholders and the opinions collected from representative public meetings.
The proposed Xayaburi hydropower project in Lao PDR is the first mainstream project submitted for consideration by the MRC in September 2010. The proposed dam, the third in a cascade of six proposed dams upstream from Vientiane, is subject to the “prior consultation” process of MRC's Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA) approved in 2003.
## 2. MRC, Regional Cooperation and Conflict Management related Activities

### Xayaburi Prior Consultation

#### The PC Process and Roadmap

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 Sept 2010</td>
<td>Submission proposed Xayaburi dam project to MRCS</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 Oct 2010</td>
<td>PC submitted documents received by all JC Members</td>
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<tr>
<td>26 Oct 2010</td>
<td>1st PNPCA JC WG Meeting - PC Road Map</td>
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| 29 – 30 Nov 2010          | 2nd PNPCA JC WG Meeting
                             | Xayaburi site visit; review of Draft PC Scoping Assessment                          |
| Dec 2010/Jan 2011         | Report drafting process                                                          |
|                           | MRC Technical Review Report                                                       |
| 14 Feb 2011               | 3rd PNPCA JC WG Meeting                                                            |
|                           | **Consideration of Draft MRC PC Review Report**                                    |
| end Feb 2011              | Initial response forms from countries received                                    |
| 22/23 March 2011          | 33rd Meeting of JC - Consideration of the Final Draft MRC PC Review Report         |
| 22 April 2011             | End date of PC process                                                            |

[www.mrcmekong.org](http://www.mrcmekong.org)
Technical Review 5 topics:

- Fish Passage/Fisheries Ecology
- Sediment Transport, Morphology and Nutrient Balance
- Water Quality, Aquatic Ecosystem Health and Integrated Basin Flow Management (IBFM)
- Navigation
- Safety of Dams

2. MRC, Regional Cooperation and Conflict Management related Activities
The **MRC Navigation Programme**: making use of the common potential to avoid conflicts.

MRC facilitated the legally binding **NAVIGATION AGREEMENT** between Cambodia and Viet Nam (signed in 2009).

Vessels coming from sea bound for Phnom Penh can no longer be stopped by Viet Nam.

Vietnamese ships can now freely sail on the Mekong and Tonle Sap in Cambodia.
3. Conclusion

In summary, the MRC as a river basin organization, under its current Strategic Plan 2011-2015, continues to play key roles in serving the joint interests of its Member States to promote sustainable development in the Mekong River Basin, while at the same time to enhance effective regional cooperation. To fulfill its roles more commitment from its Members, and more open and transparent internal management of the organization and institutional capacity building especially in facilitation and negotiation are needed.
THANK YOU