

The Role of Regional Institutions in Sustainable Development: A Review of the Mekong River Commission's First 15 Years

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Abstract

The implementation of sustainable development principles often comes into conflict with government driven needs for greater economic growth. The richly diverse Mekong Region—which comprises the six riparian nations of China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam—is in the midst of a regional debate between development and ecological preservation. The Mekong River Commission (MRC), the sole organization in the region tasked with managing this delicate balance, is struggling to find a balance between utilizing the Mekong's waterways for economic growth without undermining the vitality of the river for use by future generations. In its 15 year history, the organization has never truly defined its basic principles on sustainability and has instead shifted positions as its leadership has changed. The MRC is also trapped in a difficult balance with its upstream neighbors; due to its limited authority, the MRC has been unable to effectively manage water usage and development along the Mekong region.

1. Introduction

Vision for the Basin: An Economically Prosperous, Socially Just and Environmentally sound Mekong River Basin.

Vision for the Mekong River Commission: A world class, financially secure, international river basin organization serving the Mekong countries to achieve the basin vision.

Mission of the MRC: To promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries' mutual benefit and people's well being (MRC).

Sustainable development reverberates in policy discussions around the world. In practice, the implementation of sustainable development principles often comes into conflict with government driven needs for greater economic growth. The Mekong Region, comprising the six riparian nations of China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, is in the midst of a regional debate between development and ecological preservation. The sole organization in the region tasked with managing this delicate balance, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), is

struggling to find a balance between utilizing the Mekong's waterways for economic growth without undermining the vitality of the river for use by future generations.

Ensuring the viability, history, and character of the basin system represents an enormous task for all professionals in conservation, sustainable development, and water resource management. Outside of China, the river basin in the lower Mekong remains close to its natural state. However, plans are being made to construct dams for hydropower and irrigation, improve river navigation for trade, and other policies that will change the nature of the river across the region. All of these changes are made in the name of pro-poor development.¹ Yet, the poorest communities are often found on the banks of the Mekong and rely on the river's natural abundance for their livelihoods. The MRC must find a balance between developing the basin and not destroying the natural resources the poor rely on.

Since the founding of the MRC in 1995, the organization has faced many questions about its role and ability to adequately address development concerns. In many ways, the MRC has been insular, focusing mainly on answering the needs and requests of its member nations' governments and select partnering agencies. Its ability to absorb and respond to outside considerations (public requests) has been dependent on the character of the organization's leadership. At the same time, the MRC has played a significant role in shaping the Mekong basin as the greatest opportunity for sustainable development, trade facilitation, and navigation. The MRC's greatest challenge has been how to include into development plans the much less quantifiable but equally important roles of culture, the ecological system, and social structures of basin residents.

The question remains: How can the MRC use its knowledge and information base to facilitate dialogue between all parties (member governments, donors, and civil society), to coordinate and advise on sustainable development, and to manage water usage and resources of this rich ecological system for the benefit of the poorest, while maintaining the ecological integrity of the river system? Thus far, the MRC has not been able to adequately answer this question. It has done a poor job in its fundamental tasks of water management and sustainable development and has struggled to maintain dialogue with all parties. This article will demonstrate how the MRC's changing understanding of sustainable development, along with its inability to coordinate information transfer, include public input, and influence national agendas, has hampered its ability to meet its stated mission. Beginning with a basic background of the MRC's origins, this article will examine how the MRC has looked at sustainable development, water resource management, public participation, and role development. Finally, it will give some thoughts of what the future holds for the organization.

2. The Founding of the Mekong River Commission

The MRC's legacy can be traced back to geopolitics of the 1950s. Led by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United States Army Corp of Engineers, a United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (UNECAFE) study viewed the Mekong as one of the greatest "untamed" rivers whose waters must be controlled to limit flooding, produce electricity, and support development through a series of hydropower dams in the region. During a historical

period fraught with concern over the rise of Communism in Southeast Asia, development in the region had little to do with actual local needs; instead, development was seen as a strategy to fight Communism. Hence, hydropower plans developed by the US Corp of Engineers gave the United States a clear advantage over others in the region.

Following the decision to build a cascade of dams throughout the region, an agreement was signed in 1957 that established the MRC's forerunner, the Mekong Committee, and included Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The committee's main task during the time was to implement hydropower development plans throughout the region. During its early years, the committee predominantly surveyed, researched, and collected data for the construction of a series of hydropower dams throughout the basin. However, the committee could only complete a limited amount of work as Indochina (Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) slipped into outright conflict in the 1960s and 1970s. Meetings were suspended and little work was completed. In 1975, with the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the grouping, without Cambodia (who at that time was under the closed Khmer Rouge regime) signed a new interim agreement that allowed the 3 countries to continue implementing hydropower development studies and construction. In all, a very limited number of dams were built, none of which were on the Mekong's mainstream waterways.

In 1992, conflict in Cambodia ceased, and the country re-emerged from years of isolation. Consideration had to be made about where Cambodia fit into the existing 3 party Mekong Committee. However, since 1957, the economic make-up of the region had changed significantly. Thailand in particular was in the midst of great industrial growth and had become reliant on the river's water. Several Thai development plans required diversions on the Mekong's tributaries and mainstems. However, the 1975 interim agreement contained specific clauses prohibiting the river water's diversion without consent from other member countries. For the first time in over a decade, Cambodia's re-entry into the Committee as the country most immediately downstream of Thailand posed a potential threat to Thailand's own economic plans. Thailand was fearful that Cambodia would object to its water diversion plans and therefore, objected to Cambodia's re-entry. However, excluding a stable Cambodia would undermine the regional legitimacy of the organization. This impasse threatened the existence of the Mekong Committee, something that the UNDP could not allow to happen.

In this acrimonious atmosphere, negotiations led by the UNDP for a revitalized four member organization concluded in 1995 and established the current Mekong River Commission. The commission was tasked with ensuring sustainable development throughout the basin with explicit language to mitigate harm to the environment while protecting, preserving, and even enhancing its surroundings. The member countries' governments heralded the Agreement as a great achievement. Within civil society, on the other hand, the 1995 Agreement was met with less enthusiasm. Although civil society applauded the agreement for establishing a mechanism for cooperation and discussion, the Agreement failed to acknowledge the negative attributes of large scale industrial development and to explicitly discard hydropower plans for the Mekong region.² As a result, the MRC had to continue reassessing its role in the Mekong Region.

Over the next 15 years, the MRC's role and focus shifted as it struggled to define its position vis-à-vis other intergovernmental organizations and regional

bodies. Its main strength continued to be its ability to increase its already significant knowledge base by amassing large quantities of macro level data and observations on the technical aspects of the river basin. However, it struggled to utilize this knowledge base for actual sustainable development and water governance.

3. Sustainable Development

The 1995 Agreement that created the MRC was explicit in its goal towards, “sustainable development, utilization, conservation and management of the Mekong River Basin water and related resources... consistent with the needs to protect, preserve, enhance, and manage the environmental and aquatic conditions and maintenance of the ecological balance” (“1995 Agreement On the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin”). Within this framework, the MRC structure (Council, Joint Committee, National committees, and Secretariat) has been unable to present a coordinated work-plan meeting this objective. The MRC has found it particularly difficult to understand the implications of cross boundary programs in transportation, fisheries, hydropower, and irrigation. The very understanding of sustainable development and the degree of attention paid to environmental concerns and sustainability have been wholly dependent on the personalities of the MRC’s leadership. The MRC’s inability to institutionalize actual environmental and social considerations beyond the rhetoric undermines this element of the MRC’s core goals.

During the first years of its existence, the MRC, under the direction of Yanasabu Matoba, a former Japanese engineer, differed little from its predecessor, the Mekong Committee. Its 1996 Work Program included a list of infrastructure programs for investment. Many of these projects were recycled from lists constructed by the Mekong Committee focusing extensively on centralized infrastructure. Other considerations, including its mandate for water utilization, environment, and social mitigation programs were considered with no progress made until the early 2000s.

Following Matoba, Joern Christensen, was appointed the MRC’s Chief Executive Officer. During his tenure, from 2000-2004, development became much less project-specific. Instead, basin wide considerations were made with an emphasis on ecological conservation. Under Christensen, the Basin Development Plan was completed in 1999, and implementation began soon thereafter. The Basin Development Plan was one of the key projects stipulated by the 1995 Agreement. Its aim was to develop and coordinate development initiatives that would benefit all countries in the region by emphasizing cross border projects while also minimizing the possible negative impact associated with such projects. Sustainable development became less reliant on rapid infrastructural development and instead included consideration for basin wide resource management combined with social and environmental impacts. This did not mean a cessation of infrastructure projects, but greater attention was paid to the projects’ ecological ramifications. The environment, fisheries, and water utilization programs became integral for determining how the development agenda could be reconciled with socio-economic growth, a stark departure from preceding years.

By the mid-2000s, the basic frameworks and procedures for the MRC had been concluded.³ While the early 2000s were marked by basin wide management and integration of environmental and social considerations into development plans, the second half of the decade saw an increase in concrete investment and development projects. Under the MRC's third CEO, Olivier Cogels, concrete action became the major concern. In 2005, he wrote, "the MRC is in an ideal position to act as a promoter and facilitator of well-coordinated investments in the water and water related sectors of the region, in close cooperation with the donor community and investment institutions" (Cogels, 2005). In this model, greater cooperation with both the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) became integral.⁴ "Sustainable Development" now meant concrete projects in hydropower, navigation, fisheries, irrigated agriculture, environmental management, watershed management, etc.⁵ During this period, project completion, with a nod to sustainable development was extremely popular among riparian governments.

By 2008, under its current CEO, Jeremy Bird, the MRC once again shifted positions. Greater consideration is now given to the social and environmental impacts related to project implementation. Core practices now include determining mainstream acceptable practices for hydropower development. The MRC's new project to develop a strategic environmental assessment is indicative of its current efforts to pay more attention to the environmental ramifications of development projects. Over the past few years, greater attention has also been paid to impacts on one of the most diverse fisheries in the world, accounting for one quarter of global freshwater fishing and worth over 2.5 billion USD annually (MRC). The MRC's latest two initiatives, Basin Wide Development Scenarios 2010 and its Strategic Environmental Assessment (Opportunities and Risks) for Proposed Lower Mekong Basin Mainstream Dams, takes a much more critical view of the impacts that development will have on the make-up of the region. The Basin Wide Development Scenarios 2010 looks at three cases: the baseline situation, the definite future scenario, and foreseeable future scenario. In each of these scenarios, the MRC has assessed how development plans created throughout the region will impact livelihoods, fisheries, hydrology, etc. The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) on the other hand, analyzes for the first time the impact of mainstream hydropower construction on the communities, fisheries, and hydrology of the region. The SEA was recently released in October 2010 and actually found that hydropower plans should be halted for at least ten years because they could lead to irreparable harm ("Dams Spell Doom," 2010). With greater emphasis on the social and environmental impacts of project implementation, the MRC has made significant strides in recent years towards sustainable development.

The MRC's understanding of sustainable development has changed through the years, and its evolution has not followed a linear path. Instead, the balance between how much environmental and social issues would be considered in the need for overall development depended predominantly on the personality of the MRC's CEOs. During its first years, the MRC was concerned with continuing with previous hydropower plans. During subsequent years, the MRC shifted back and forth between developing more comprehensive and balanced development agendas and completing large centralized infrastructure projects. Recent years have seen a return to social and environmental considerations for project completion, though much progress remains.

4. Water Resource Management

The MRC's second major task is to manage the water resources afforded by the Mekong River for the betterment of the communities it serves. In this respect, the MRC has followed a step-wise approach by passing a series of procedures dictated by the 1995 Agreement. The 1995 Agreement explicitly spelled out the MRC's role in facilitating water use, determining the causes of disruptions, and facilitating disputes if they were to occur. The MRC also sought to increase dialogue with upstream Mekong countries, Burma and China, as a key cornerstone for water resource management. Yet this effort met only limited success in facilitating greater transparency in water use. In the end, the MRC's effectiveness in water management was greatly hampered because the 1995 Agreement set out procedures that were not rules based and lacked real enforcement mechanisms. In essence, the MRC was unable to influence the national policies of its member countries.

Although the MRC initiated its water utilization program in 1996, it was not until 2003-2006 that the majority of its stated mandates were completed, including *Procedures for Water Use Monitoring, Prior Consultation and Agreement, and Maintenance on the Flows on the Mainstream*. Another mandate, known as *Procedures for Water Quality*, is currently still awaiting approval. The delay in these procedures led to Thailand's 1995 diversion of water from the Mekong mainstream for its own purposes and uncoordinated development along the river. As in the 1995 Agreement, the procedures are not rules based and member states are not bound to act by the procedures.

Along with these procedures, the MRC has also developed a variety of modeling mechanisms and programs to focus its work. The current model is the integrated water resources management (IWRM) to complement its hydrological modeling under the Decision Support Framework. The IWRM in theory, "promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources, in order to maximize the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems" ("Mekong Water Resources Assistance Strategy," 2007). By utilizing the IWRM, the MRC notionally acknowledges the need for both a bottom-up and top-down approach. Nevertheless, the actual implementation of the program relies on the organization's ability to influence riparian governments' policies, something that has not yet happened. The individual national Mekong committees are more concerned with national interests than the MRC's regional role, thus straining relations among members.

The MRC's relations with its upstream countries, Burma and China, have led to some agreements between the parties for greater information sharing. However, it still took over ten years for China to agree to provide 24 hour water level and 12 hour rainfall data for flood forecasts. Only following this year's major drought has China agreed to release limited data from two of its upstream dams. The fact that it took 15 years for China to agree to minimal data release is a testament to the relationship the MRC has with its upper riparian neighbor.

These two aspects-the organization's inability to affect real domestic policy changes in its riparian governments and insufficient information sharing with its upstream neighbors-limit any real affect the MRC can have on water use

management. Without effective water use management, the second core objective of the MRC cannot be met, leading to disruptions in water flow and depletion of water resources. For the communities living along the river who are reliant on its natural water flows, massive changes in expected water flows (both unforeseen), droughts, and floods have led to diminishing livelihoods.

5. Public Participation

One of the greatest challenges the MRC faces is its relationship with the public. More than any other issue, the MRC's inconsistent policy and the original disregard for public participation led many to question its legitimacy and effectiveness. By not engaging with the public, the MRC severely limited its own ability to adequately assess the needs of the people living along the Mekong. Without public input in its projects, civil society protested against the opaque decision making process that they believed benefited large private developers over their own needs. This undermined the MRC's objectives to effectively manage the resources of the Mekong for residents in the area.

The core problem is that the MRC is only directly accountable to the four riparian governments, not to the general public. During the 1990s, the MRC took a particularly aloof stance. Its first CEO, Yanasabu Matoba, stated, "Public participation is not the responsibility of the MRC but that of its member countries," further noting that if the public needed information it must, "go to the embassies of the member countries or through the donors" ("Letters," 1996). The utter exclusion of public participation in the MRC secretariat's planning process was an inauspicious beginning to relations between the MRC and the public. Rather than seeing the public and civil society as key actors and allies, the dismissive nature of these first years fostered hostility and mistrust between the parties.

Given the extremely different stages of political freedom and participation of its member states, the MRC has been unable to sustain public participation in its programs. Certain less contentious projects (environmental and basin development plans) include built-in mechanisms for dialogue and consultations with the public, while others (water utilization program) exclude the public completely. For example, the current Basin Development Plan and the State of the Basin Report both hold a series of stakeholder sessions to share preliminary results, garner feedback, and make amendments throughout the process. In April 2010, a representative from the MRC even attended a civil society forum to share the latest developments of the Basin Development Plan and to hear differing viewpoints. Still a key avenue for public engagement, the National Mekong Committees have failed to implement a mechanism for open dialogue. The Committees are established by each of the national governments. For Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, where public participation is a new concept, there is little precedent for establishing arenas for public dialogue. Instead, the National Mekong Committees are treated as merely another bureaucratic organization.

It was not until 2009 that the MRC responded concretely to the problem by issuing a new communications strategy. This strategy explicitly declared the need for greater discussion, dissemination of information, publication of the MRC's roles, and the need to establish avenues for public feedback on projects.⁶ By 2009, after nearly

two decades of turmoil over the lack of information coming from the MRC, its new CEO, Jeremy Bird (who had previously been head of the World Commission on Dams) saw the vital need for a better communication strategy with the public. Over the years, public participation was a repeated refrain from both civil society and the donor community. Bird recognized donor demands as well as the importance of a coherent communications strategy from his previous position. Being accustomed to dealing with controversial issues, he realized the MRC must address these concerns and improve its information sharing. Over the past year, the MRC has released policy studies, posted meeting notes, and held stakeholder forums. Hopefully this genuine approach and engagement with the public will continue.

6. Its role: Knowledge Development, Investment, Regulation, and Coordination

Most importantly perhaps is the image and overall role of the MRC. Over the course of 15 years it has developed, accommodated, and changed itself depending on pressures from governments, donors, and civil society. Striving to meet multiple objectives- including managing water resource information, coordinating activities, notifying members, and playing prominent advisory roles on sustainable development- these goals remain largely unmet.

6.1 Knowledge Development and Consulting

From its very inception, the MRC has been a knowledge organization. Work since the 1950s resulted in a vast quantity of information on fishery levels, environmental surveys, water levels, etc. Many of its programs today continue to fulfill this purpose, since the MRC sees itself as a repository for technological knowledge about the river's resources and flows. Yet, it still lacks a depth of knowledge on the cultures and histories of communities along its banks that were originally deemed unimportant in its work. Stretching from China into Vietnam, the Mekong passes through villages and communities that are both among the poorest as well as most diverse. These include small fishing communities on the borders of Laos and Thailand, ethnic minority groups, and floating villages in Cambodia and Vietnam. Historically, these communities have relied on the river's natural ebb and flow for their livelihoods. Most dependent are the floating villages on the Tonle Sap (Great Lake) in Cambodia where the river naturally reverses its flow every year, yielding one of the largest fisheries in the world. Recently, the MRC has tried to increase its knowledge by publishing the *Living Mekong*, a volume documenting the rich diversity of communities and fisheries along its banks, but more should be done to effectively engage with these communities.

As a knowledge organization, the MRC has used its role to act as a consultant and advisor for projects with the World Bank and ADB as well as to advise member countries. This has manifested into a number of consultancies with international financial institutions on pre-feasibility reports for the MRC as well as environmental studies for local member organizations. Recently, it has also begun to delve into developing recommendations for cross- border infrastructure projects across the

region, acknowledging the need for greater environmental and societal considerations. At the forefront of all infrastructure projects is a cascade of dams on the mainstream. The MRC's "Sustainable Hydropower" program came about as Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia looked to build 11 mainstream Mekong dams. The MRC recognized that the completion of these 11 dams would change the very character of the Mekong river basin, leading to potentially catastrophic environmental and social considerations due to collapsed fisheries, relocations of communities, and a complete change in the ecology of not just a single country, but the entire region.

6.2 Private Investment

The MRC has also played a role in attracting investment for development projects. Over time, this has moved from collaboration with international financial institutions towards projects with private investors. The shift became prominent particularly under Olivier Cogel's administration. The importance of the private sector's increasing role in the Mekong basin is a significant challenge for the MRC. This is particularly true as private investors such as Chinese, Russian, and regional financiers and companies enter the market for hydropower development. As development organizations, such as the ADB, promote public-private partnerships, private entities play an increasing role in determining development projects. In doing so, Jeremy Bird, notes, "The planning cycle for private sector projects tends to be much shorter than in the public sector, and less open" ("Changing Currents: Navigating the Mekong's past, present, and future," 2008). With the private sector playing a greater role, the MRC must reassess its position in development programs and determine its relationship with private entities. However, this shift from a basin management and a knowledge coordination organization towards an investment attraction organization does not fit donors' conceptions of the organization. Instead, donors believe it should play the role of a manager and facilitator amongst governments rather than a project oriented organization (Donor Group Statement, 10th Meeting of the MRC-Donor Consultative Group).

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6.4 Knowledge Management and Coordination

Even without a true regulator's role, the MRC as a knowledge base, advisor, and coordination center can do much more to highlight and regulate water flows. Yet, it continues to fail to successfully investigate, monitor, and notify governments of impending disasters. One of the prime examples is the Yali Falls Dam built 80 km upstream of the Cambodia-Vietnam border. Between 1999 and 2001, when partial operation of the dam commenced, flash floods destroyed fields and vegetable gardens while also leading to a number of deaths in Ratanikiri, Cambodia. It was only when local reports from Ratanikiri emerged that the MRC responded. Even then, the MRC's could only take undertake several field studies to meet with the Vietnamese and Cambodian Mekong National Committee members to set up better communication and cooperation mechanisms. It was clear that the MRC's position was limited; it could merely bring sides together but not force changes ("Cooperation for Sustainable Development," 2000).

In 2010, the Mekong basin faced its most severe drought in close to 20 years. Water flows and levels were considerably below average. The MRC claimed the low water levels were due to an unusually dry rainy season that ended in October, 2009. Holding this knowledge internally, the MRC made no public statement until local media began reporting on drought conditions. This inability to coordinate and share information or make early warnings was indicative of its communications and systemic failures. Even if seen solely as a knowledge organization, the MRC failed to meet its objectives. For the most part, the MRC has managed its large technical knowledge base to assist in member country and international financial institutional projects; however, it has struggled to adequately coordinate information transfer especially during times of crises.

7. The Future of Regional Cooperation

The MRC provides a good case study of the difficulties facing regional organizations tasked with managing water resources and sustainable development in a trans-boundary context. The commission's complex agenda among its four member states combined with finding a way to engage with its two upstream non-member neighbors make its mission particularly difficult. Combined with regional and international interest in the Mekong from the ADB and WB, the MRC has struggled to find its niche in the development world. The MRC offers a number of lessons including the following: the importance of effective communications amongst governments and the public, true public engagement, the need for a mechanism to adequately enforce implementation of recommendations and

decisions, clearly defined understanding of development and real sustainability, and lessons in dealing with the geopolitics of upstream and downstream neighboring countries. Although it has made mistakes in the past, the MRC is also shifting positions and reforming itself for the future.

After years of foreign leadership, the MRC is shifting towards riparianization, meaning the riparian states (Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam) will have greater power in the decision-making process. In the upcoming years, the CEO and other key positions will be turned over to a riparian country national rather than expat leadership. Decreased term limits for professional staff will also be amended to increase dedication and professionalization of the organization. This fundamental shift in the organization's everyday working structure will further increase riparian governments' ownership of the organization.

These changes will, however, lead to more questions. Most significant of these questions will be whether this latest attempt at inclusivity will be institutionalized and continued by later regimes. How the secretariat manages its relationship with national governments will also change as the organization moves ahead. Time will tell whether increasing riparian ownership of the MRC will lead to greater cooperation or greater manipulation of the Secretariat as a tool of national agendas. The MRC stands at a pivotal moment when it must take a more assertive stand in using its knowledge to promote sustainable development and equitable water use in the basin. As dialogue on global warming increases, the MRC will need to find a *truly equitable* strategy that will enable it to meet the changes brought by global warming. It should also endeavor to implement water resource management that does not destroy the ecological system and livelihoods of those in the basin, while simultaneously alleviating poverty for the very poorest.

Steadily over the past 15 years, the MRC has expanded its core strength as a knowledge institution in regards to technical and scientific data. At the same time, it has struggled to define its role in "sustainable development," to effectively coordinate information transfer and to establish its public presence. In the past, much of this was due to a nonexistent communications strategy and shunning of public engagement. This is beginning to change, as the MRC recently passed a new communications strategy that establishes avenues for public input, responds to inquests, and utilizes the internet for information dissemination. It has also started taking more comprehensive steps to understand a dam's impact on fisheries, sedimentation, and overall ecological impacts while issuing guidelines for further "sustainable hydropower" development. These are improvements, but they also signify the continued belief in the centrality of large scale infrastructure for development.

The original question of how to use its knowledge base to increase environmental and social considerations and manage water resources has still not been adequately answered. At present, the MRC's attempts have been inconsistent and dependent on the nature of its leadership. The true institutionalization of sustainability, environmental considerations, public participation and discourse has not yet occurred. Consequently, the regional organization established to both coordinate and advise on basin wide development has had little impact on the decision making of its national members, nor has it been responsive to civil society and local societal needs. This has led to uneven development with potentially disastrous long term effects.

The MRC has, thus far, failed to fulfill its vision for the Mekong Basin. Sustainable development for the poorest Mekong residents still has a long way to go. In addition, its inability to coordinate information transfer about water fluctuations impacting the entire basin has resulted in greater hardship for large swathes of communities. The struggles that were noted above have hampered the MRC from undertaking projects that are both sustainable and beneficial to the wellbeing of citizens living on the banks of the Mekong. While large-scale infrastructure and agriculture projects have resulted in greater overall economic growth for the Mekong countries, greater income inequalities have also emerged in the basin, exacerbating local challenges. As the basin's nations continue down a path towards rapid economic growth, more pressure will be placed on the river system. Currently, 11 mainstream hydropower projects are planned in Laos and Cambodia with potentially severe impacts on fish migration and the overall ecology of the basin. How the MRC navigates these projects will set precedence for the future and define its role in the basin. The MRC will need to confront and address its systemic failures in order to ensure that it may not only adequately manage the Mekong's development and water resources but also gain public legitimacy and trust.

Endnotes

¹ Pro-poor development: policies aimed specifically at benefitting the livelihoods of the poorest communities and individuals in the region.

² Please see "Statement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin." 4 April 1995, Chiang Rai, Thailand.
http://www.terraper.org/key_issues_view.php?id=14. The grouping of Thai Civil society organizations stressed, "an end to the era of environmental destruction and the beginning of an era of sustainability that does not damage the natural environment and which benefits all members of society ... a holistic approach and the decentralization of authority to local communities must replace the concept of large scale water development centralized within the State."

³ The different procedures included: Procedures for data and information exchange and sharing, water use monitoring, and notification for prior consultation and agreement.

⁴ The IUCN and WWF also became cooperation partners during this same period. Today, twenty-seven organizations are amongst the Mekong Commission's development partners. They encompass a wide array of organizations from NGOs to intergovernmental organizations.

⁵ In fact, the Cogel administration was notable for its control of information and was charged with withholding negative environmental reports. Please see "13 Years of

Bad luck: a reflection on the MRC and civil society in the Mekong.” *Watershed*. Vol. 12, No. 3, November 2008 for further information. Cogels also explicitly defended the building of hydropower dams, finding them critical for the region.
http://www.mrcmekong.org/mrc_news/speeches/30-nov-06_open.htm.

⁶ Please see new communications strategy,
http://www.mrcmekong.org/download/free_download/MRC-communication-strategy-250110.pdf for more information.

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