



BLUE PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST MEKONG LEARNING JOURNEY IN CAMBODIA AND LAO PDR

Co-Hosted by
Strategic Foresight Group
and
Mekong River Commission

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Cambodia and Lao PDR**

OUTCOME REPORT: GAINING FROM GRADUALISM

On November 17-20, 2014, members of the Blue Peace Middle East Community embarked on a learning journey to explore and learn first-hand about cooperation on the Lower Mekong River Basin in South East Asia. The delegation from the Middle East included Members of Parliament, senior policy makers, academic and technical experts and leading members of the Blue Peace Media Network.



The Mekong Learning Journey was conducted over a period of four days in Cambodia and Lao PDR during which the participants were able to directly experience and learn from the working of the Mekong River Commission and derive key learnings for the Middle East. The Learning Journey opened doors to new experiences and insight regarding the cooperation and efficient water management achieved by the developing countries in the Lower Mekong River Basin.

The Mekong Learning Journey was organized by Strategic Foresight Group in coordination with the Mekong River Commission. Following the Rhine Learning Mission which was held in September 2013, the Mekong Learning Journey was a continuation of the ‘exchange of experience’ activities under the Blue Peace Initiative. It was sponsored by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

With the motto of “Meeting the Needs, Keeping the Balance”, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) along with its riparian members has built a platform for open dialogue, information exchange and joint development regarding the Lower Mekong River Basin.



Drawing lessons from the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) model, the member countries have jointly developed comprehensive data collection systems and basin wide models to study climate change, flooding and navigation potential. These models are used to develop future strategies for agricultural activities, emergency response systems, forecasting and other similar plans. By starting with small technical projects, such as joint hydrological stations, fisheries and irrigations projects, the riparians countries in the Lower

Mekong River Basin have slowly moved from humanitarian cooperation to encompass wider economic cooperation.

The participants of the Learning Journey had the unique opportunity to learn about these and many other areas of cooperation in the Mekong River Basin. They interacted with the staff at the MRC Secretariat in Cambodia, the International Cooperation and the Communication Section and Environment Division in Lao PDR, the National Mekong Committees of Cambodia and Lao PDR, the Phnom Penh Autonomous Port and Department of Meteorology and Hydrology (DMH) and a hydro-met station at Vientiane. The topics covered were Knowledge and Information, Flood Management, Navigation, Fisheries, Basin Development, Climate Change, and Sustainable Hydropower. Each session highlighted the role and functions of MRC in bringing about cooperation between member states in these areas.

For the participants from the Middle East, it was especially useful to learn about the principles which formed the basis of cooperation among the riparian states, those of “accommodation, adaption and adjustment in a peaceful manner”, a remarkable and vital feature which went to the core of the success of MRC. As an important part of the experience, the participants from the Middle East went on two field trips which showed them the results of previous and on-going cooperation activities under the directive of the MRC.

LEARNING IN PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

MRC Information and Knowledge Management Programme

The Learning Journey began at the Technical Support Division in the Secretariat of the MRC in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, with a presentation on the Information and Knowledge Management Programme of the MRC. Focusing on the Mekong-Hydrological Cycle Observing (HYCOS) Project, the session gave an important insight into the comprehensive data collection activities of the MRC, one of the cornerstones of the success of the commission.



The Mekong-HYCOS project has been developed primarily to address the issue of floods and consists of flood warning systems, workshops and sessions for flood preparedness and planning, real time joint data collection and management, and inventory build-up for sustainability of project infrastructure. The participants particularly noted the focus of the project on vulnerable communities. The

noteworthy aspects of the Mekong-HYCOS project were the process of collecting and exchanging data and the maintenance of inventory for future development activities. The participants expressed appreciation for the comprehensiveness and regularity in data collection and the proactive nature of data exchange. They cited the MRC initiative of inventory build-up as a remarkable activity that would further foster cooperation and inclusivity in the Lower Mekong River Basin.

MRC Fisheries Programme

The first sale value contribution of fisheries to the economies of the Lower Mekong River Basin every year is USD 7 billion. They account for nearly 12% of the GDP of Cambodia and 7% of the GDP of Lao PDR. About 60 million people live in the Lower Mekong watershed. The significance of the contribution of fisheries to the economy in the Mekong River basin has been recognized by the MRC, which has led to the development of a separate Fisheries Programme to structure and consolidate the monitoring, data exchange, and decision making in the fisheries sector in a comprehensive and joint manner. The programme addresses present and possible future challenges such as the impact of dams, transboundary movement of aquatic organisms, transboundary fisheries management, local community development and capacity building of local stakeholders.

MRC Navigation Programme

In accordance with Article 9 of the MRC agreement, the riparian members have been able to establish successfully implement a navigation network on the Mekong River ‘without regard to territorial boundaries’. The participants recognized the fundamental role of the MRC in creating the platform which brought the riparian members together to establish this network and cooperate in trade and economy in the basin. They also noted the comprehensiveness of the Navigation Programme which has not limited itself to trade and transport but has extended into socio-economic analysis, traffic safety, environmental sustainability and information coordination and laid emphasis on maintaining the balance between national development and spirit of transboundary cooperation.

Flood Management and Mitigation Programme

The Flood Management and Mitigation Programme of the MRC was of special important for the participants as it provided a wider perspective of the flood and drought management activities of the MRC. Many areas of the Middle East face intermittent periods of floods as well as droughts, and there was much to learn about the MRC programme and its multi-faceted role of providing detailed information, assistance, guidance and mediation to all riparian members and stakeholders. This programme especially highlighted the importance of sustained open dialogue and regular exchange of information between countries.

Meeting with the Cambodia National Mekong Committee (CNMC)

The participants had the opportunity to meet with H.E. Mr Watt Botkosol, the Deputy General of the CNMC, and his colleagues. The CNMC is a national institution which assists and advises the Cambodian Royal Government in matters related to policies, strategies, planning, investigation, management and development of the Mekong River within the country.



The Cambodian National Mekong Committee serves as the key link between the MRC and the Ministry of Water Resources, which is the similar structure in all member countries. The national committees ensure that the relevant Ministries are working in accordance to the principles and values as designed by the MRC. They also facilitate regular and open dialogue between relevant Ministries within each country, thus aiming to maintain the balance between development and economic needs and environmental concerns of the river basin.

Field Visit to Phnom Penh Autonomous Port

As part of the learning journey a field visit to the new International Phnom Penh Autonomous Port (PPAP) on the Mekong River was held. There, they learnt of the port activities, its future plans, and the role of the MRC in setting up this port. The PPAP illustrates the success of the MRC in providing a space and platform to countries to create areas of cooperation.

The PPAP is an International port established after several years of discussion between Cambodia and Viet Nam, where the MRC played a key role in successfully addresses the needs and concerns of both countries in the area of navigation and development. Working closely with the National Committees, the MRC conducted extensive field work, risk assessment of the project and developed a regional plan which led to an agreement between the two countries and ultimately the creation of the PPAP. The MRC further provided the port with technological expertise which enabled the port to sustain 24-hour navigation. The MRC continues to work closely with the PPAP and provides technical and financial support as required.



LEARNING IN VIENTIANE, LAO PDR

Sustainable Hydropower Development

In Vientiane, the participants had the opportunity to learn more about the aspects and processes of establishing cooperation and overcoming developmental hurdles in the basin in the area of hydropower and dam building activity. Some of the key issues explored during this discussion were the impact of proposed large dams on the main Mekong River and increased hydropower development by the member countries, as well as the role of the MRC in addressing these issues.

While the MRC has not yet experienced any major direct conflict between riparian states as of now, it continues to maintain and update mechanisms to address and avoid future escalation of conflict. The hydropower project of Lao PDR is causing considerable concern in Cambodia and Viet Nam, which they have addressed to the MRC. Following the principles of the Commission, Lao PDR has halted construction of the project, and the riparian members are engaged in active discussions regarding the project which are facilitated by the MRC.

Basin Development Programme

Participants were introduced to the comprehensive Basin Development Programme (BDP) which aimed at bridging regional and national planning. Spread over a time period of 15 years, the BDP has been divided into three phases: 1. establishing planning tools and processes, initial basin wide study and capacity building of MRC stakeholders; 2. creating comprehensive assessment and detailed development strategies for the basin; 3. implementing the strategies and updating the IWRM-based BDP strategy.

The participants noted the emphasis on long-term planning of how members will share, use and conserve not only water and other resources in the Mekong basin, but also the consequent costs and benefits. The division of action plans at the national and regional level highlighted the aim of integrating basin development planning into national systems. A unique feature of this programme is that existing strategies are constantly evaluated and updated based on assessment of needs and future risks.

Climate Change Adaptation Initiative (CCAI)

The Mekong River Basin is experiencing changes in temperatures, rising sea levels and changes in precipitation throughout the basin, though the information available on these issues is minimal. The MRC and the riparian states have recognized that detailed exploration and a comprehensive assessment of climatic and hydrological extremes in the basin is required. The effects of these changes are not widespread in nature and many of the national governments have not developed the capacity, knowledge and technology to address them in the future. Recognizing these challenges and inadequacies, the MRC has begun conducting smaller impact assessment projects, as well as their own exchange of experience with other river basin commissions around the world to gain expertise and ideas.

Environment Programme

In alignment with the motto of “Meeting the Needs, Keeping the Balance”, the MRC has established a separate programme for the preservation of environmental balance in the Lower Mekong River Basin. The Environment Programme focuses on studying the current status, changes and challenges of the ecosystem of the basin and developing mechanisms to cope with and cooperate over future challenges.

Here the emphasis is on implementation and active response to emerging issues as a distinguishing feature of this programme as it provides a detailed insight into the environmental activities that are currently taking place in the basin. They include regional environmental and socio-economic assessments, monitoring of quality and ecological balance of the river, implementation of procedures of water quality, development of tools and mechanisms for regional environmental cooperation, grasping and working on negative environmental trends, and reaching out to stakeholders at all levels. A unique and noteworthy feature of this programme, as well as many others within the MRC is that principles of implementation and parameters are designed at the regional level collectively by all the member countries, and complete oversight is given to the MRC indicating a high level of trust.

Meeting with the Lao PDR National Mekong Committee (LNMC)



In Vientiane, the participants had the opportunity to meet Ms. Monemany Nhoibouakong, the Vice Minister of Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and Senior Member of the LNMC. She provided a holistic view of the LNMC, the challenges and issues currently addressed, and their vision for the future. They noted her emphasis on foresight and preparing for an uncertain future by

strengthening the country from within and prioritizing between developmental needs and environmental health.

The MRC derives its funds from both, member countries as well as the international donor community. Contributions from member countries are determined based on a combination of environmental-economic parameters such as their GDP and share of catchment area in their territory. In addition, the international donor community also contributes by financing projects, while international experts are recruited from time to time on a project basis. While acknowledging the vital role of international donors in the success of the MRC, Ms. Nhoibouakong also indicated that the MRC is taking steps to reduce dependence on external funds and to become self-sufficient by the year 2030.

The participants gained valuable insight into how the LNMC and the MRC approached cooperation, open dialogue and balanced growth, which they found to be pivotal to the working and efficiency of the MRC. Trust is a key factor in the success of the MRC and all members countries are committed to the ideals of working together and avoiding conflict.

Field Visit to Department of Meteorology and Hydrology (DMH) and KM4 Hydro-Met Station



A visit to the Department of Meteorology and Hydrology (DMH) in Vientiane gave the participants the opportunity to observe live collection, transmission and management of hydrological and climatic data. A comprehensive tour of the department informed them of the various instruments including the barometer, automatic rain sampler, anemometer and the solarimeter which were used to measure multiple parameters ranging from water flow and quantity to precipitation and solar radiation.

Further at the KM4 hydro-met station, the participants observed the stream flow gauging station and the staff gauge used for measuring river flow and level of water respectively. The field visit was completed with a boat ride on the Nam Ngum tributary of the Mekong River during which the participants had the opportunity to observe local communities along the banks of the tributary and reflect upon the learning from both Phnom Penh and Vientiane and discussed them in the context of the Middle East.



The most significant feature which the participants discovered in case of the MRC was their emphasis on open dialogue and discussion as a fundamental value of sustainable cooperation in the area of water management. In both Cambodia and Lao PDR, MRC and National Ministry officials frequently stated that cooperation was the key factor in all areas of basin development, and any kind of conflict could be mitigated in a peaceful manner with the help of sustained mechanisms and joint will. The participants especially also noted that the riparian members were developing countries with different political structures, but they had aligned their water policies and development policies with considerable harmony.

The participants found it remarkable that the MRC had been successful at helping its members to avoid any extreme conflicts. They look forward to observing and learning from how the MRC deals with any future conflicts which might arise from the signing of The Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, 1997 by Viet Nam in late 2013 and the hydropower project plans of Lao PDR. They also expressed interest in the role and development activities of China and Burma as upstream countries of the Mekong River and learnt that the MRC is currently engaging them as dialogue partners

with limited data exchange and technical cooperation, and is actively looking forward to expanding their involvement in the MRC in the future. The members of the Lower Mekong River Basin have collectively realized that while China and Burma are not party to their agreement, complete exclusion is not suitable and sustainable in the long term, and by keeping channels of cooperation and dialogue open it will ultimately benefit all the riparian countries.



KEY MESSAGES FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

1. Cooperation on the Mekong River is an evolving process. It started in 1957 with the creation of a Mekong River Committee and upgraded in 2001 with the creation of a structured Secretariat. From 1957 to 2001, the Lower Mekong region covering Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam underwent major political upheaval. There were direct or indirect conflicts between countries, and issues related to internal governance and nature of regimes in some of the countries. At national as well as regional level, the region hardly experienced any stability for a long period of time. Despite the problems of governance and conflict in the region, cooperation over the Mekong River gradually increased from 1957 to 2001.

This shows that issues of governance, political instability and relations between countries cannot be an excuse for lack of cooperation. If opinion makers appreciate the importance of cooperation over a vital river, they can introduce it in a gradual way and an evolving manner despite all obstacles. Thus, the Mekong River cooperation experience shows that cooperation in water management is not a European or North American hobby. It is a need of any region which has shared water resources, provided that opinion makers appreciate it and make gradual efforts to improve cooperation.

2. When cooperation over the Mekong River began in 1957 and for a long time until it matured, the economic conditions in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam were challenging. There was a large incidence of poverty. In fact, even though poverty has reduced in the last thirty years, it still persists. Economic limitations may have manifested themselves in the quality of equipment used to monitor the flow of the river, but they haven't prevented political understanding required to promote cooperation. The experience of the Mekong River cooperation shows that deficit in economic assets is not an excuse for lack of cooperation; what you need is surplus of political wisdom.
3. The experience also shows that cooperation can be a gradual process, adjusting to the reality of the day, from time to time. It need not begin with the establishment of a huge agency. It can begin with small steps such as a committee of experts which can then gradually expand to form a full-fledged commission over the years. The Mekong experience shows it is important to have concrete programmes for cooperation; whether in data exchange, fisheries, flood management or navigation is a matter of detail. The areas of cooperation will have to be determined as per the realities of the given region. But the underlying message is that cooperation has to be very specific, translating into concrete instruments. Idealistic statements made at summit level have a political value to mobilize public support, but by themselves, such statements are not sufficient for cooperation.
4. Political guidance and supervision is important. The MRC meets at the summit level once in every four years. However, political commitment is there on a continuous basis. The process must involve a judicious combination of summit level meetings and regular supervision of the cooperation process by political leaders at the appropriate level. In some of the other regional cooperation institutions, there are annual summits with bold declarations but no action. The example of the MRC shows that less frequent summits could work well provided there is emphasis on action.
5. Sustainable management of transboundary water resources is a difficult exercise and requires a flexible approach. In case of the MRC, China and Myanmar are not members, but they have been accepted as dialogue partners. Since 2002, China has been supplying data vital for flood

management to the MRC on a regular basis. Since then, China's involvement has gradually increased. On its part, the MRC has often taken dispassionate views of some of the Chinese dams to see if they have any advantages at all for the lower riparian countries besides the known adverse implications. Thus, a flexible and open-minded approach has made it possible to include all lower riparian countries on a full-fledged basis and the two upper riparian countries on a limited basis in the management of the Mekong River and its tributaries.

6. The MRC is known for its extensive system for collection and exchange of data. Data management covers various aspects of benefits from the river including fishing and navigation as well as challenges to the river system such as climate change. Exchange of data between member countries of the MRC is incorporated into the procedures and functioning of the basin development activities. While the task of actual collection of data is shared by member countries, the MRC maintains a central portal of data which is accessible to all. This has created transparency and trust among the member countries.
7. The MRC has a forward looking approach. It deploys various tools of scenario planning for envisaging future trajectories in management of different aspects of the Mekong River. This includes discerning possible changes with regards to population, economy, ecology and technology. This enables the MRC and the member countries to have a vision which is based on where the region wants to go in years from now rather than being trapped in the realities of today. This futuristic approach has underpinned the evolution of the MRC all around. It has helped to define objectives for a better future rather than being caught in conflicts of the past and the present.
8. There is a strong emphasis on identifying and addressing the needs of the vulnerable communities in the region. Thus, the MRC translates its grand vision of region wide cooperation to meet the requirements of the hydro-insecure people at a micro level.
9. While the primary focus of the MRC is cooperation, it is mindful that the objective of cooperation is sustainable management of water resources and the promotion of efficient utilisation of the same. Unless there is efficiency at all levels, mere cooperation at the interstate level would be hollow.
10. The MRC has developed a pragmatic approach towards cooperation with external donors and partners. While the inter-ministerial committee has been very much in charge and not allowed the CEO recruited from outside the region to go beyond the sensitivities of member nations, they have, in the first place, accepted an external CEO for many years. They have also secured funding for projects from the international donor community. However, the MRC doesn't want to depend on international funding forever. It has prepared a plan to gradually increase its resource contributions by member countries. The MRC envisages that by 2030, it will be able to draw all of its financial requirements from member nations.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

POLICY MAKERS AND EXPERTS

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- Ms Shurooq Al-Abayechi, Member of Parliament, Iraq
- Dr Mysoon Zoubi, Former Secretary General, Ministry of Water Resources, Jordan
- Dr Sumaya Rashid Jaber, First Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iraq
- Mr Koussai Quteishat, Former Secretary General, Ministry of Water and Irrigation and Water Authority of Jordan, Jordan
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