

How the Mekong River Commission Benefits Lao PDR: A Personal Reflection

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A former Mekong River Commission (MRC) Secretariat staff, Mr Voradeth Phonekeo, shares his thought on how Lao PDR has benefited from the MRC in terms of policy and strategy development, information sharing, and increased cooperation in the region. This reflection is part of a series of personal reflections, initiated by the MRC Secretariat, on commitments of the MRC member countries – Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam – to the MRC and the benefits of the MRC to the countries.

In his reflection, Voradeth, who is also a former Lao government official, highlights the following:

- In its report on the implementation of 7th National Strategic Economic Development Plan (NSED), the Lao government reported the nation's contribution to the Cooperation Framework in Mekong Agreement on Sustainable Development in the Mekong River Basin. This is a direct result from the contribution of the MRC to which Lao PDR is a full member.
- In the Key Government Direction for the 8th NSED 2016–2020, all Lao development strategies and policies emphasize “sustainable development with harmonization among the economic development and socio-cultural development and environmental protection” and “widening international cooperation with ownership in various forms oriented towards benefit for all, enhancing favorable conditions for regional and international integration”.
- Since the beginning of 2016, under a new riparian CEO's leadership, the MRC has completed its reforms and restructuring of its Secretariat based on core functions of river basin management. The MRC Strategic Plan 2016-2020 is now in full operation and has helped to promote the sustainable utilization, conservation and management of the Mekong water resources.
- Lao PDR is a founding member of the MRC and has so far followed all commitments given to the 1995 Mekong Agreement, including submitting notifications on tributary projects and prior consultations on mainstream projects under the MRC's Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA).
- Under the prior consultations for the previously proposed dams on the Mekong mainstream, the Lao government shared all relevant project information, including technical feasibility studies that cover the projects' social and environmental impact assessments, trans-boundary, cumulative assessments as well as the related mitigation measures.
- Through the prior consultation process and through the MRC in general, it has become clear that the two have provided strong support for better and wider information sharing and clarification, leading to a better understanding of the projects and national development priorities.
- Specifically, the prior consultation process has made it possible for Lao PDR to obtain additional technical review (2nd opinion) and wider stakeholder comments, at no additional cost to the project, that are necessary for basin-wide sustainable development.

- Following results of prior consultations, the Lao government has continued to be open to improving the projects, investing in millions of dollars worth of additional mitigation measures, committed to MRC monitoring of impact and public visit.
- As a member of MRC, Lao PDR sees the benefits of MRC strategies, guidelines and assessments and has actively participated in reviewing and providing input and comment to ensure a balance between national and regional interests. This would help ensure the use and possible up-taking of strategies and adherence to at the national level.
- The Lao government continues to invest a tremendous effort to address barriers and enhance a good business environment. This strategy aims to facilitate trade and investment and to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), particularly in the mining and hydropower sectors which have contributed to economic development and economic growth.
- However, the government never ignores the importance of good regional cooperation under the MRC framework. The government, through its partnership with private companies, ensures the implementation of best and most sustainable projects for the country and for the Mekong region as a whole as much as possible.
- The MRC guidelines and tools to support sustainable hydropower planning and management, such as the environmental baseline information improved for hydropower planning (known as ISH11) can be used to provide good information to maximize opportunities and reduce risks across economic, social and environmental dimensions for all stakeholders. The ISH11 can also assist the specific objectives of Joint Monitoring of the Mainstream Hydropower Projects.

Mr. Voradeth Phonekeo served as Team Leader of the Initiative for Sustainable Hydropower at the MRC Secretariat from 2008 to 2017. The initiative produced numerous studies, assessments, guidelines and tools for Mekong sustainable hydropower planning and management. Before joining the MRC Secretariat, Voradeth worked for the Lao government in many hydropower projects, including the Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Project (during project development phase) and Theun Hinboun Hydropower Project (Feasibility study phase) and Nam Ngum 1 dam (civil structure maintenance and dam safety inspection) as well as Electricite Du Laos (EDL). Mr. Phonekeo is a hydropower engineer by education and has over 20 years of work experience in the field.