



1st edition

Mekong River Commission
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT
HANDBOOK



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MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT HANDBOOK

First Edition

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ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

This Handbook provides guidance on the principles and practice of stakeholder engagement within the Mekong River Commission (MRC) cooperation context, spelling out the different types of stakeholders, the engagement mechanisms and channels, and the related access and dissemination of information.

The Handbook is based on approved documents such as the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the Basin Development Strategies and MRC Strategic Plans since 2006, revised Rules of Procedures in 2014–2016, the MRC Communication Strategy and Disclosure Policy 2009, as well as the MRC’s Public Participation papers that were prepared and presented in the 2000s, and relevant engagement practices.

It is a contribution to the understanding of the MRC’s principles and approaches in working with diverse stakeholders who have interests and concerns over the development and management of the Mekong River System. It consists of four parts.

- *Part 1* discusses the importance of stakeholder engagement.
- *Part 2* focuses on definitions, roles and responsibilities of the MRC’s stakeholders in line with the 1995 Mekong Agreement and the MRC’s relevant rules, procedures, and strategies.
- *Part 3* provides details on methodologies, approaches, mechanisms, and platforms available for engaging various stakeholders.
- *Part 4* reaffirms organizational transparency and accountability regarding information and data sharing as part of the engagement process.

This Handbook is a working document that shall be updated when necessary with improvements and lessons learned from implementation of the MRC’s stakeholder engagement process.

Comments and questions on the Handbook and its application may be directed to the MRC Secretariat through the address provided at the end.

PART 1 INTRODUCTION

There are multiple actors engaged in the development and management of the whole Mekong River Basin. The MRC is aware that stakeholder involvement in decision-making is fundamental to achieving feasible, equitable, credible and lasting solutions, and that the quality of decisions can be improved by the inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders who can bring important national and regional knowledge and relevant perspectives to the development and management process. The MRC's government stakeholders have been clearly stipulated and detailed in the Mekong treaty agreement¹ and in the Rules of Procedures;² therefore, this Handbook focuses more on roles and responsibilities of non-state stakeholders.

1.1. WHAT IS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT?

Stakeholder engagement is generally understood as the process by which an organization involves people who may be affected by the decisions it makes or who can influence the implementation of its decisions. They may support or oppose decisions, be influential in the organization or within the community in which it operates, hold relevant official positions or be affected in the long term. It is a process that should occur throughout the life cycle of an activity and therefore not a one-off exercise.

Stakeholder engagement can contribute to understanding the perspectives of those who may be affected, improve the quality of analysis of impacts based on real or local situations, be able to prioritize those impacts to ensure the robustness of all efforts, and better understand how to manage identified impacts.

1 For the detail on the Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, and other related Procedures, see MRC (1995, 2017).

2 For the detail on the Rules of Procedures of the Council, the Joint Committee, and the MRC Secretariat, see MRC (2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

During the engagement, stakeholders have a chance to contribute to and influence decision-making unlike one-way communications that seek to convey a message or influence groups to agree with a decision already made. Moreover, stakeholder engagement is critical to hear and address all relevant views that contribute to decision-making.

1.2. WHY DO WE NEED TO ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS?

The benefits of broaden stakeholder involvement are multiple, especially in water governance, including acceptability, equity, effectiveness, and sustainability of activities. The appropriate engagement of all relevant stakeholders is essential to build confidence and credibility, instil ownership, and ensure the sustainability and security of transboundary water governance processes.

Effective governance requires effective participation at all levels. It is essential to ensure that participatory consultation in the planning and decision-making are specifically designed to give voice to all sectors of society, women and men, as well as different age, ethnic, and cultural groups.

1.3. HOW IS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT REFLECTED IN THE MRC RULES AND REGULATIONS?

Since its inception in 1995, the MRC has adopted a participatory approach in the work of all its core and sector programmes, and currently as part of implementing its core river basin management functions. The organization is envisaging ways to expand the opportunities for collaboration with different stakeholders and partners in order to realize its Mission and the Visions of both the Basin and the Organization, i.e. sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Visions of the MRC and the Basin and Mission of the MRC

Stakeholder participation has been implied, defined and referred in all MRC's key documents including the 1995 Mekong Agreement³ and Procedural Rules,⁴ the Rules of Procedure of the Council,⁵ the Rules of Procedure of the Joint Committee,⁶ the Rules of Procedure of the MRC Secretariat,⁷ and other Basin Development Strategies and Strategic Plans.

3 See MRC (1995) for detail on the 1995 Mekong Agreement.

4 See MRC (2018) for detail on the procedural rules.

5-7 See MRC (2016a, 2016b, 2016c) for the three revised Rules of Procedures.

The 1995 Mekong Agreement sets out the general mechanism to engage stakeholders, while the Rules of Procedure provide detailed instructions on how to do so.

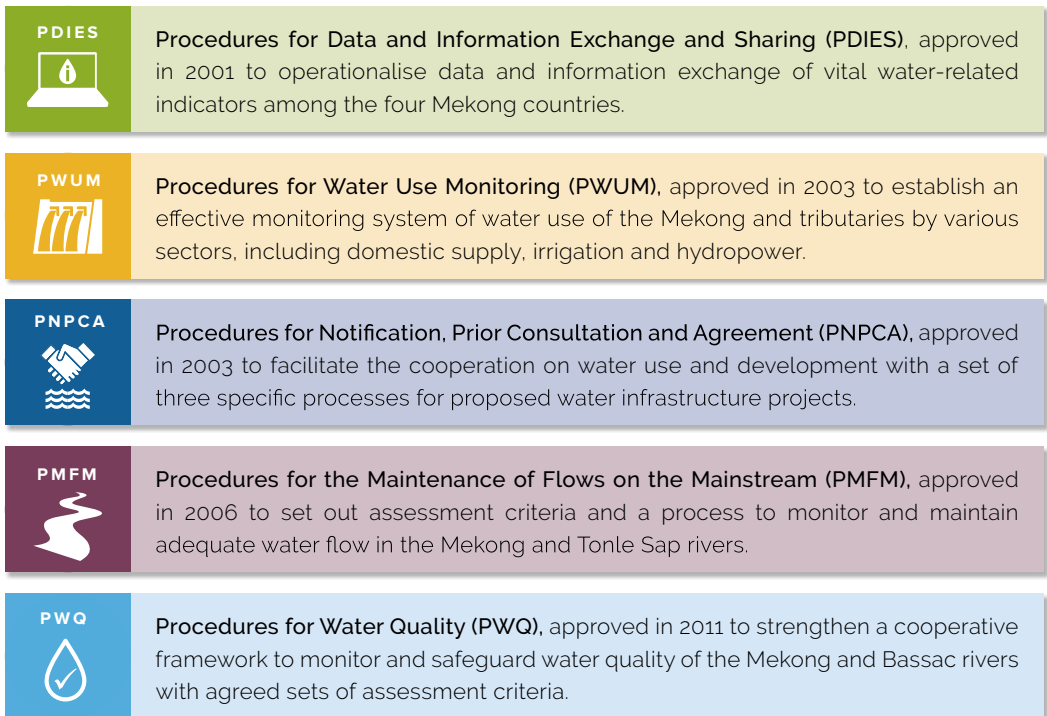


Figure 2. Five sets of MRC’s procedural rules for water cooperation

The five MRC Procedures, which support the implementation of the 1995 Mekong Agreement, also provide guidance to support appropriate public participation actions on relevant technical aspects (see Figure 2).

In the Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing (PDIES) adopted in 2001, Section 2 (Objectives) states that “basic data and information” should be available to the public.

“Make available, upon request, basic data and information for public access as determined by the NMCs concerned.” MRC PDIES⁸

The Procedures for Water Quality (PWQ)⁹ adopted in 2011 have a specific provision on public participation and on the institutional arrangement with line agencies, local authorities and stakeholders under *functions, roles and responsibilities* of the National Mekong Committees:

5.3. Public participation

“The Member States shall endeavour to raise awareness and promote the participation of the public in maintaining acceptable/good water quality.”

6.4. National Mekong Committees

6.4.1. Informing the relevant line agencies, local authorities and stakeholders of the Procedures to ensure their effective implementation

6.4.4. Informing line agencies, local authorities and stakeholders concerned of the relevant plans, programmes and activities to facilitate maintaining acceptable/good water quality on the mainstream

In response to an increasing interest from its stakeholders related to public participation in the work of the MRC, the Study on Public Participation in the Context of the MRC was initiated and completed in late 1996, and was fully agreed on by the MRC Joint Committee in March 1999. Since then it has provided guidance and the framework for the public participation activities of the MRC projects and programmes. The principles of public participation include the needs for public participation to be consistent with policies, approaches and processes in the Member Countries and the need for stakeholder analyses and provision of

8 See MRC (2001) for detail on the PDIES.

9 See MRC (2011) for detail on the PWQ.

information to the public.

The Statement on Public Participation¹⁰ was developed in 2009 and updated in 2017 to suit the current MRC's core river basin management function context. In addition, this public participation work has also been supported by the 2009 MRC Communication Strategy and Disclosure Guidelines.¹¹



The Basin Development Strategies always underscores not only the need for stronger cooperation between Member Countries in implementing all strategic priorities, but also between them and Dialogue Partners (China and Myanmar), related regional cooperation frameworks (primarily Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], Asian Development Bank and the Greater Mekong Subregion [GMS]), and wider stakeholders ranging from other international river basin organizations (RBOs) and research institutes to civil society, Development Partners, and the private sector.

Increasing cooperation with partners and stakeholders has always been one of the priorities. Stakeholder engagement has been institutionalized to ensure wide input and commitment to the development agenda. The implementation of the MRC Strategic Plans identifies various actions to enhance stakeholder engagement

and water diplomacy; strengthening regional cooperation is an important cross-cutting outcome.



¹⁰ See MRC (2009b) on the context of its public participation.

¹¹ See MRC (2009a) for information on the MRC's disclosure policy.

The new Basin Development Strategy (BDS) 2021–2030 and Strategic Plan (MRC SP) 2021–2025 identifies five strategic priorities towards achieving the Basin’s vision by 2030, as follows:

1. **Environment:** Maintain the ecological function of the Mekong River Basin.
2. **Social:** Enable inclusive access and utilization of the basin’s water and related resources.
3. **Economic:** Enhance optimal and sustainable development of water and related sectors.
4. **Climate change:** Strengthen resilience against climate risks, extreme floods, and droughts.
5. **Cooperation:** Strengthen cooperation among all basin countries and stakeholders.

Climate change and cooperation are considered cross-cutting dimensions, necessary perspectives to connect and strengthen all sectors. Under Priority 5 of the BDS,¹² MRC SP’s activities related to stakeholder engagement include:

Develop a Multiple Stakeholder Platform for the whole basin with countries and MLC Water, and in consultation with all other relevant partners (for consolidation and alignment), including clear objectives and guidelines on participation and contribution

Coordinate the management and **operations of the Multiple Stakeholder Platform (including the regional stakeholder forum)**, including consistent recording, reporting, and impact tracking procedures in response to stakeholder input

Implement **proactive engagement and communication** with stakeholders, the media, and the public

In the context of the MRC, the term ‘[public participation](#)’ is normally used and

¹² See MRC (2021, p. 194) for detailed activities.

emphasized regarding stakeholder engagement. The MRC Public Participation Statement has stated that “public participation is a process through which **key stakeholders** gain influence and take part in decision-making in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the MRC programmes, projects and activities”.¹³

The MRC has made every effort to create an enabling environment and an engaging opportunity for various stakeholders to **contribute to decision-making on water and related resources uses**; however, the ultimate decision lies with the policymakers of the MRC Governance bodies (Joint Committee and Council) for collective decisions taking into account the sovereign decision of each Member Country.

Impact stakeholders can make

- Within the context of MRC cooperation, decision making regarding policies and projects rest with member countries. Nevertheless, the stakeholder engagement process brings added value by:
- providing access to extensive data, information and knowledge;
- providing safe space and legitimate platforms for airing views and two-way communication, even opposing ones;
- providing independent review and monitoring;
- holding decision makers accountable for their decisions.

13 See MRC (2009b, p. 3) for detail on the statement.

PART 2 OVERVIEW OF THE MRC STAKEHOLDERS

Following the governance structure of the MRC (see Figure 3), stakeholders have been categorized as internal and external stakeholder. Their participation and involvement are based on the nature of issues and discussion. However, they all play important roles with differential responsibilities through different stages of implementation.

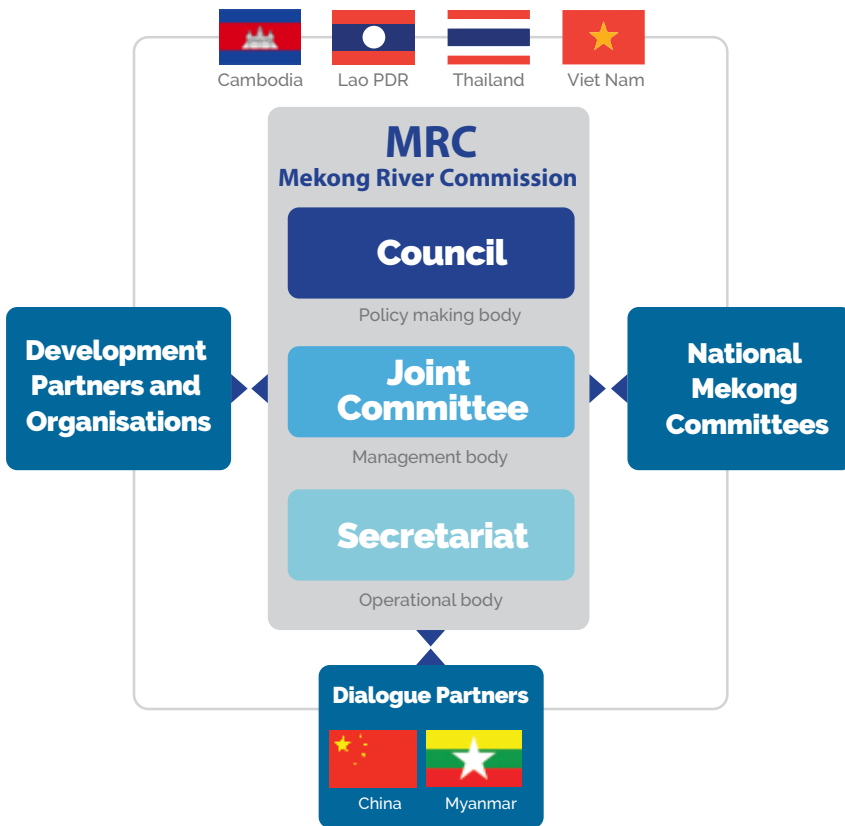


Figure 3. Governance structure of the Mekong River Commission

2.1. THE MRC DEFINITION OF STAKEHOLDERS

With a diverse range of political and economic systems and a large population of people living in the Basin as well as the complexity of the MRC interventions, there is necessarily a broad range of stakeholders in the context of the MRC operations, which will be further clarified at the initial stage of each activity and project by means of stakeholder analysis. The MRC has adopted a universal and broad definition of stakeholder as follows:

A **stakeholder** is any person, group, or institution that has an interest in and/or can be affected by, the scope of works of the MRC. This includes both intended beneficiaries and intermediaries, those directly and indirectly affected, and those involved in – and/or those who are generally excluded from – the decision-making process.

Key stakeholders are those who can significantly influence – or who are important to the success of – the works of the MRC, and those who may be significantly impacted in an adverse manner.

A stakeholder is either within or outside the organization. In consideration of the MRC's governing structure, there are internal and external stakeholders.

Internal stakeholders are defined as government bodies in the MRC structures such as the MRC Council, the Joint Committee, the MRC Secretariat, the National Mekong Committees (NMCs) and their Secretariats, and the principal line agencies in the NMCs in each Member Country. Development Partners contributing financially to the MRC can also be considered internal stakeholders.

External stakeholders (or wider stakeholders) are non-state bodies such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), implementing partners, the private sector, civil society organizations, policy advocates, research institutions, individuals, the media and other groups who have an interest or stake in developing the Mekong River system. They can act on behalf of affected local communities and contribute information, views and perspectives in discussions on development planning or people who will be carrying out decisions of policymakers or bodies.

In the MRC cooperation, some entities are considered observers and are invited to observing the MRC governance meetings. More information regarding observers is provided in the following section.

2.2. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF MRC STAKEHOLDERS

The Mekong River Commission Council

Ministers of the Environment and Water of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam

The MRC Council approves and provides strategic guidance to implementation policies, strategies and plans and promote them at a high level to all relevant national and regional development initiatives.

At the annual MRC Council meetings, the Ministers of the Environment and Water of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Viet Nam, supported by senior officials from foreign affairs and key line ministries, meet to discuss emerging issues related to the Lower Mekong Basin as well as the priorities of the Commission for the next year. As Council Members of the MRC, the Ministers review and reach a unanimous conclusion on the management and development of water and related resources within the framework of the 1995 Mekong Agreement.

The Mekong River Commission Joint Committee

Senior officials who are at least at the Head of Department level of the four countries

The MRC Joint Committee provides direct implementation guidance to the implementation of policies, strategies and plans, endorses technical guidelines and reports, and promotes them at the senior level to all relevant national and regional development initiatives.

In taking Council decisions and policies forward by putting them into action, the MRC Joint Committee, which comprises senior officials who are at least at the the Head of Department level of the four countries and supported by national line agencies including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, will meet regularly twice

per year. At the Joint Committee meetings, they review the implementation and follow-up on progress on decisions made at the Council meetings.

The Mekong River Commission Secretariat

Operational arm of the MRC and performs technical, facilitating and administrative functions under the management of a Chief Executive Officer

The MRC Secretariat develops, facilitates, supports, and monitors the implementation of the MRC policies, strategies, plans, procedures, guidelines and reports, and regularly reports to the Joint Committee and Council for decision and guidance, and various stakeholders for information and comments.

The MRC Secretariat provides technical advice and recommendations in support of the Member Countries' cooperation, and reaches out to as many stakeholders as possible to inform advice and facilitation. In engagement with stakeholders, the MRC follows the procedures laid down by member countries and promotes strategies and guidelines for cooperation.

National Mekong Committees

Inter-sectoral body of the Government to coordinate and facilitate activities of the Mekong River Commission for sustainable development of water and related resources in the Mekong Basin in each country

National Mekong Committees prepare, provide reviews and inputs, and implement MRC policies, strategies, plans, procedures, guidelines and reports at the national level.

Council members are normally chairpersons, appointed by their Prime Ministers, of the National Mekong Committees (NMCs). The members of the National Mekong Committees are authorized representatives of line ministries (including but not limited to Ministries of the Environment and Water, Foreign Affairs, Planning and Investment, Energy, Agriculture and Rural Development, Public Transport, Commerce and Industry, Science and Technology), and of the people's committees/city in the Mekong Basin.

National Mekong Committee Secretariats

Technical, operational and facilitating arm of the National Mekong Committees under the management of the Secretary General or Director General

National Mekong Committee Secretariats facilitate the implementation of the MRC works at the national level and coordinate with national line and/or implementing agencies, RBOs, and others.

Heads of the National Mekong Committee Secretariats are also members of the MRC Joint Committee.

Dialogue Partners

People's Republic of China and the Union of Myanmar

Dialogue Partners take into account basin perspectives and priorities, and continue exchanging and sharing of information and technical expertise.

Cooperation with the MRC Dialogue Partners has been maintained and strengthened through a number of mechanisms, such as the agreement on data sharing, official meetings and exchanges of technical visits, joint symposiums, joint research and studies, and training programmes for Junior Riparian Professionals (JRPs).

A specific annual meeting with Dialogue Partners is regularly scheduled as a meeting attached to the MRC Governance Meeting or separately depending on the situation. Dialogue Partners are also invited to the annual MRC Council Meeting and joint sessions with other partners.

Development Partners

Government and institutional partners who provide financial contribution and technical support to the implementation of the MRC Strategic Plans and its activities

Development Partners promote basin development perspectives and priorities, and continue providing financial and technical support in addressing them both at regional and national levels, on a multilateral basis.

Being a financial contributor, Development Partners can either contribute funds to the basket fund or earmark funds to any specific activities of the MRC Strategic Plan, or a combination of both.

Development Partners receive regular progress updates, and are invited and involved in governance and consultative mechanisms of the MRC, including: technical meetings and workshops; expert group meetings (as observers where relevant); Regional Stakeholder Forums, and governance meetings such as Budget Committee meetings (as members); annual Informal Development Partners Meetings (with the MRC Joint Committee and MRC Secretariat); Development Partner Consultative Group meetings (with the MRC Council); and MRC International Conferences and MRC Summits.

Non-state parties and bodies

NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) promote basin perspectives and priorities, and contribute to information generation, inputs and recommendations, and stakeholder communication and outreach.

Non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations

NGOs and CSOs currently engage in MRC works through Regional Stakeholder Forums, national stakeholder forums, or information sessions by the National Mekong Committee Secretariats, and regular dialogues with the senior management of the MRC Secretariat.

In consideration of increasingly important roles of civil society in the Basin development, the MRC Secretariat is exploring a multi-stakeholder platform, including a civil society engagement mechanism that allows direct and periodic dialogue between MRC management and the Mekong citizens to better address emerging needs in the Mekong River Basin. In addition, different opportunities for collaboration have been established based on joint interest in topics, including but not limited to peer reviews, joint activities, technical exchanges and meetings, etc.

Consulting firms and the private sector

Consulting firms and the private sector consider and address basin perspectives, priorities, procedures, and best practice guidance, as well as contribute to information generation when implementing development opportunities and projects.

When appropriate, business leaders could be encouraged to take part as keynote speakers at the forums, symposiums, conferences, etc.¹⁴ Specific forums have been held to engage with private developers and operators.

In consideration of the increasing roles and contribution of the private sector in basin development, the MRC Secretariat is exploring cooperative arrangements to engage the private sector in order to balance socio-economic development in the region.

Scientific and advisory institutes

Scientific and advisory institutes consider and promote basin perspectives and priorities, and contribute to the generation and dissemination of information and knowledge.

Research and think-tank organizations, including those attached to universities, in the region and around the world can collaborate with the MRC Secretariat and provide inputs to technical works, including but not limited to peer reviews, technical analysis, data and information, joint activities, technical exchanges and meetings, etc.

Regional frameworks

Association of Southeast Asian Nations, GMS, MLC, Mekong-United States, Mekong Japan, Mekong Korea, etc.

Regional frameworks are engaged in joint efforts in promoting water-related

¹⁴ See MRC (2009a) on the disclosure policy.

development opportunities to close the development gap and facilitating broader cost and benefit sharing deals for regional integration.

The MRC and different regional frameworks in the Mekong Basin maintain their partnership regularly through high-level policy meetings as well as important technical working group discussions and exchanges.

Other partners

Any agencies with Memoranda of Understanding, Letters of Agreement, Letters of Intent, etc.

Other partners engage in regional and international cooperation and technical support and exchange, bringing innovative and latest insights from the world to the Mekong and vice versa. Cooperation with these partners include the following methods: technical collaboration (e.g. studies, assessments, monitoring, review of MRC products); dialogue and technical exchanges (e.g. workshops, symposiums, visits) and capacity building (e.g. training, personnel exchanges, secondments).

Media

Following other international approaches, the media has been invited to cover important MRC governance meetings such as the MRC Council meetings and MRC Summits. MRC works with the media through background briefings, media conferences, news releases, and interviews, as well as dialogues, exchanges, and field trips.

Observers

United Nations organizations, Asian Development Bank, selected partners with memoranda of understanding, qualified non-governmental organizations

The 1995 Mekong Agreement sets out the mechanism to engage stakeholders who are defined as **observers to governance meetings**, while the Rules of Procedure provides detailed instructions on how to engage them. Two United Nations organizations, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), have been granted standing observer status at the MRC governance meetings.

Under Article 17. Sessions of Council of the 1995 Mekong Agreement

“The **Council** shall convene at least one regular session every year and may convene special sessions whenever it considers it necessary or upon the request of a member State. It may invite **observers** to its sessions as it deems appropriate.”

According to Rule 12. Attendance, Assistants, Advisors, and Observers of the Rules of Procedure of the Council of the MRC

“Observers status may, if appropriate, and subject to the unanimous consent of the Council members, be granted to the following organizations and international bodies: (i) those that have active MoU or partnership agreement with the MRC; (ii) UN agencies and international financial institutions that strengthen regional cooperation; (iii) qualified NGOs working on environment, water resources management, nutrition, community development and humanitarian issues at the local, national and regional levels; (iv) organizations and bodies with specialized technical or scientific competences relating to the goals of the MRC; and (v) research and scientific institutions conducting researches on a range of environmental and social issues applicable to the sectors MRC is working to address.

Proposal for admission of observer status should be submitted by the MRC Secretariat and approved by Chairperson in consultation with the other Council Members prior to the dispatch of invitation letters. Expenses for attendance of observers to the Second Session of the Council Meeting will not be a responsibility of the MRC. The Chairperson could take final decision in case there are different views amongst the Council Members.”

To be considered a qualified organization, the following general criteria must be met:

- that the mandates or expertise of the organization (nominee) be related to water resources planning and management (e.g. in navigation and transport, agriculture, fisheries, industry, food and

energy security, sustainable development, health, disaster risk management and biodiversity and conservation);

- that the nominee agrees and supports the objectives and principles of the Mekong Agreement;
- that coordination and communication between the MRC and the nominee is important in order to achieve the goals and objectives of the Mekong Agreement;
- that nominee is capable of making a practical and valuable contribution to the work of the MRC;
- that the nominee has a structured, permanent administration;
- that the appointed representative of the organization has a mandate to speak on behalf of the organization;
- that the nominee has signed an Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding with the MRC setting out the basis for cooperation;
- that the nominee has a regional or basin-wide perspective and will promote this perspective.

Under Article 23. Sessions of Joint Committee of the 1995 Mekong Agreement

“The **Joint Committee** shall convene at least two regular sessions every year and may convene special sessions whenever it considers it necessary or upon the request of a member State. It may invite **observers** to its sessions as it deems appropriate.”

According to Rule 11 of the Rules of Procedure of the Joint Committee of the MRC: Attendance, Assistants, Advisors, Observers

“The Joint Committee shall invite representatives of UNDP and ESCAP, and may invite, as it deems appropriate, representatives of governments, other international organizations, and designated agencies and individuals, to attend sessions [of the Joint Committee] in the capacity of observers.”

PART 3 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT UNDER THE MRC COOPERATION FRAMEWORK

The stakeholders have opportunities to be engaged through different working channels and arrangements, including but not limited to governance meetings, expert group meetings, regional and national forums, and dialogues (see Figure 4). More approaches and mechanisms are being explored and considered to strengthen collaboration with the private sector, civil society, and research institutes.

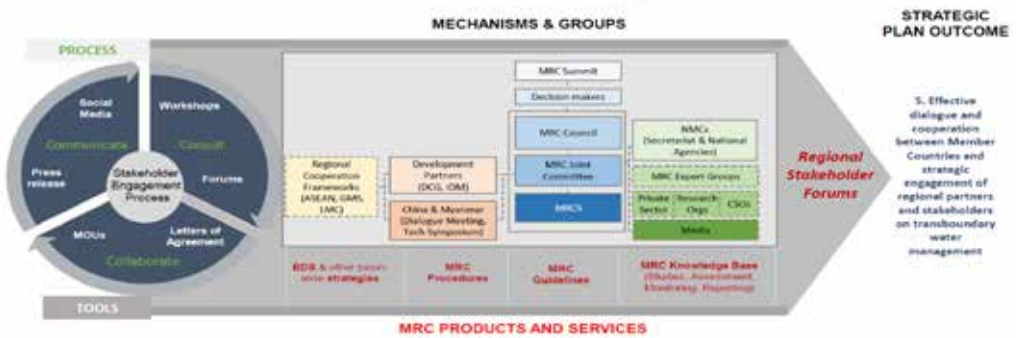


Figure 4. MRC’s partners and stakeholder engagement platform

3.1. KEY GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

In the context of the MRC, engagement is ultimately about building a relationship of trust and confidence through ongoing communication and interactions with the most valuable and affected stakeholders, including by frequently discussing how to better engage. Relationship building begins from the very start of a project or investment, even when there are no formal decisions to be made. The following are some key guiding principles:

Engage the right stakeholders: especially potentially affected ones, who may experience severe impacts but have relatively limited influence.

Engage on the right issues: focusing on impact management and mitigation. This entails taking the time to explain the business to stakeholders so that they will provide informed input and constructive feedback. This usually requires effective internal alignment before engagement begins so that everyone is clear on what the objectives and expectations are.

Engage appropriately: depending on the number of people engaged, to ensure transparency and timely information sharing. Give everyone enough time to absorb information and ensure that everyone understands the questions. Considering the Mekong context, especially in the communication of messages and the extent of their reach to wider audience, it is advisable to translate some documents from academic English into easily understandable English and the riparian languages of the Member Countries.

Engage at the right time: Listen to the affected stakeholders and take into account their perspectives in internal decision-making in order to better inform decisions and reduce the severity of impacts.

Stakeholder engagement should involve more than conveying information; it should be a **two-way dialogue** that, conducted in good faith, is responsive to the views, experiences and expectations exchanged. It is an **ongoing process** focused on building mutually beneficial relationships, taking into account stakeholders' diversity and human rights. Multiple targeted channels need to be considered.

Engagement of a wider range of stakeholders in MRC's strategic planning activities was adopted in 2009 when stakeholder participation was a cross-cutting theme supporting participatory basin planning. It started with individual forums, workshops and working groups organized regarding basin development planning, i.e. stakeholder consultation process for the Integrated Water Resources Management-based Basin Development Strategy. The Basin Development Plan (BDP) Phase 2 (2006–2010) engaged stakeholders in a strengthened national, transboundary and regional participatory planning process, focusing on expanding engagement with community-based and civil society organizations.

Following recommendations of the 2011 stakeholder analysis, an MRC-wide mechanism for stakeholder participation through coordinated activities including an annual stakeholder forum was initiated and included in the workplans. During these years, stakeholder engagement gradually broadened and was coordinated from an individual and specific sectoral approach into an institutional and planning one, such as regional consultation for mainstream hydropower projects, which involved a broad range of local, national, regional and international stakeholders, the preparation of BDS and MRC SP, etc.

At the MRC, stakeholder engagement efforts and progress have been reflected through a public participatory process, including in the prior consultations of mainstream hydropower projects. The regional stakeholder consultations have grown, serving as an **enabling water diplomacy environment**, starting from information sharing, two-way dialogue, an exchange of opposing opinions, and constructive suggestions. They contribute to better understanding and manage expectations. They bring up opportunities for a better solution that help meet the needs of the Mekong people.

The Member Countries play a critical role in **bringing the perspectives and interests of local and national stakeholders to the MRC discussion**. Each country has specific arrangements for public participation and consultation, especially for understanding and mitigating potential impacts arising from transboundary development. Each Member Country has a policy and/or legislation focusing on decentralization, and on building capacity and increasing participation at the provincial and local levels. All countries have a history of local-level participation and consultation, for example, through village associations, local and provincial governments, and mass organizations representing youth, women and ethnic minority groups.

“Engagement at **national and sub-national level** is arranged by the NMC with the coordination of its Secretariat. Stakeholders include national agencies, academic organizations, river basin organizations, private sector and national civil society organizations. There are increasingly great numbers of national stakeholder forums and national consultations being organized during the process of drafting and formulating of products and services. ”

“For **regional implementation**, engaging with wider stakeholders, including academic organizations, the private sector, civil society and other regional organizations as well as a potential network of national and regional civil society organizations, has been established through the regular MRC Regional Stakeholder Forums, at least once or twice a year. ”

3.2. GOALS AND EXPECTATION OF ENGAGEMENT

Public participation is part of the overall stakeholder engagement in which key stakeholder groups are identified through stakeholder analysis (see Figure 5). Since decision-making on the development and management of water and related resources often addresses multiple objectives, involves diverse interests, and has far-reaching effects, this requires a multiple-dimension approach that takes into consideration different stakeholders’ needs and expectations. The stakeholder mapping and analysis can help to determine which stakeholders are the most vulnerable and the most affected by the intervention activities in order to determine a suitable approach.

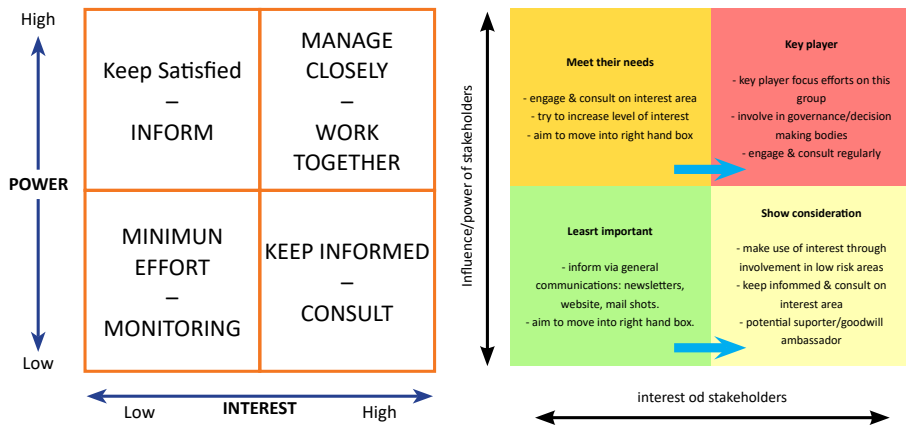


Figure 5. A simple illustrative principle of stakeholder mapping and analysis

The ultimate goal of public participation in the MRC context is to enhance the ability of the MRC and Member Countries to achieve the sustainable development objectives of the 1995 Mekong Agreement. Public participation will seek to build mutual understanding and strengthen decision-making and ownership in the MRC context. Public participation activities will be planned and adopted to the capacity and interests of the key public stakeholder groups.

While working at the **regional level and focusing on policy issues**, in some circumstances it might not be possible to fully involve all affected stakeholders in the process, especially when beneficiaries are at the national and local levels, such as local communities impacted by development. It is important that the affected stakeholders are still included in the process and to consider alternative options for engagement. In such cases, it may be necessary to engage with credible representatives or representative organizations, third parties such as CSOs, grassroots organizations, and NGOs that may have work connections and experience with these affected groups. They can therefore convey the potential concerns related to the activities on their behalf. In this way, the MRC has been building its collaboration with national and regional river network and coalition who are working on Mekong related issues at nationwide in the region.

The aim of this cooperation is to **build synergies**, draw on and build regional level expertise and reduce duplication. The MRC will seek to establish continuous improvement in public participation through the application of the results of the monitoring and evaluation of its public participation activities and processes.

Stakeholder engagement process has been based on a **spirit of good faith with constructive discussions and recommendations**. The MRC has been doing its utmost to facilitate discussions and exchanges of views with all stakeholders including those with different viewpoints and positions from the MRC work in the Mekong Basin. The aim is to **share accurate information, minimize misunderstandings and misperceptions** of the powers and functions by all parties, and create an enabling environment to deliver key messages to decision-makers in order to **maintain transparency and credibility** of the MRC's works.

3.3. ENGAGEMENT STAGES

The MRC has engaged stakeholders at different stages (Table 1). In general, there are four stages with different degrees of engagement that contribute to decision-making: **information gathering, communication, consultation and collaboration**. These stages can occur simultaneously, but when beginning a new activity or project of public interest, it is necessary to start with the first two stages (in sequence) before a higher level of engagement with stakeholders can be successful.

The MRC emphasizes that **all relevant stakeholders should have the opportunity to directly or indirectly influence activity and project design, implementation and effects**. It is also important to include the involvement of these groups who may not easily or readily participate, such as groups of women, elderly persons, youth and minorities.

Engagement is an **ongoing process** where each step increases capacity, builds trust and adds value. A continuous improvement approach will be built into the whole participation process strategically and flexibly.



Table 1. MRC’s stakeholder engagement stages

Stages	Supporting methods and tools
<p>Information gathering</p> <p>The first stage of public involvement is to understand the issues and stakeholders that affect and are affected by a particular activity or project. Important types of information are social, cultural, economic, and political.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder analysis, surveys, focus groups and interviews with key people (in the community), etc.
<p>Dissemination/communication</p> <p>Dissemination can take a variety of forms and aims at providing information that is understood and useful to the stakeholders. Thus, the knowledge that the key stakeholders gained in the first stage will be used to design the information methods and materials. This is considered one-way communication.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media releases, press conferences • Newspaper inserts, interviews with journalists • Internet sites, social media • Outreach activities
<p>Consultation</p> <p>This stage goes one step beyond dissemination and creates an opportunity for stakeholders to discuss and negotiate their needs and preferences. It is here that ideas from stakeholders can start to affect activity.</p> <p>This is two-way communication and dialogue focused on sharing and collecting information to adequately understand the activity and project context, and the preferences, concerns and expectations of different parties, and to ensure that all parties understand and learn from one another’s perspectives.</p> <p>Relatedly, engagement is only meaningful when organizations take action in response to an issue, concern, or certain information identified during consultation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National/community meetings • Consultation papers • Specific meetings with interest groups • Regional Stakeholder Forums • Feedback and comment mechanism
<p>Participation/collaboration</p> <p>This stage is collaboration and participation where stakeholders are able to directly contribute their ideas and preferences. Hence, they take part in decision making. It is during this stage that projects, policies, and everyday resource decisions are put into practice, and costs and benefits are allocated and shared.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National/community/ regional meetings • Planning and review meetings • Advisory panels • Expert groups • Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and partnership agreements

3.4. ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM AND PLATFORMS

Stakeholder engagement has been targeted to meet the needs of the MRC's core functions and activities, **from planning and design to implementation**. There are working arrangements tailored to meet different needs of each stakeholder group, as follows.

MRC Summit

The MRC Summit is the highest governance meeting led by Prime Ministers and convened every four years, bringing together political leaders to address the prevailing challenges and opportunities facing the Mekong Basin. It is an opportunity for the Heads of Governments of the four MRC Member Countries to revisit the commitments made four years earlier and agree on strategies for the future and beyond. Three summits were held to date – the first in 2010, hosted by the Kingdom of Thailand in Hua Hin; the second in 2014, hosted by the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam in Ho Chi Minh City; and the third in 2018, hosted by the Kingdom of Cambodia in Siem Reap.

Ministerial representatives from the MRC Dialogue Partners (China and Myanmar) and Development Partners' representatives as well as key partners are invited to participate in the Summits.

The 4th MRC Summit may be held in April 2023 instead of April 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and will be hosted by Lao PDR.

The MRC International Conference

The MRC International Conferences precede the MRC Summits of Heads of Government that are held every four years. The organization of these conferences serves a double objective: they offer a space for exchanges on transboundary water management between experts and stakeholders from the Mekong and other regions around the world; and they contribute to the leader's Summits by delivering key messages about best practices and new ideas for the sustainable management and development of the Mekong River Basin.

The MRC International Conference is free of charge and open to all interested participants. In support of public participation, a limited financial sponsorship is provided to assist participation from civil society and community-based organizations, based on request.

The MRC Council meeting

The MRC Council Meeting is an annual meeting usually conducted at the end of each year by the ministers of the four countries sitting on the MRC Council. The Meeting discusses yearly progress, and approves strategies and strategic directions for basin development and management.

MRC Development Partners, MRC Dialogue Partners, other partners, and observers are invited to participate in session 2 of the MRC Council Meetings, called 'Joint Session with Partners'.

The MRC Joint Committee meeting

The MRC Joint Committee Meeting is held twice a year, usually April and September, among the members, with support of the MRC Secretariat, to review work plan implementation and endorse activities for Council approval. It is usually not open to external stakeholders.

The MRC Dialogue meeting

The MRC Dialogue Meeting is officially convened every year to hold discussions between MRC Joint Council members and Dialogue Partners' governments (China and Myanmar) on transboundary water-related resources management in the Basin as a whole.

The MRC Informal Development Partners' meeting

The Meeting is a forum for exchanging views on matters of mutual interest, thereby strengthening the partnership between the Development Partners and the MRC. The meeting is chaired annually by the MRC Joint Committee Chairperson.

The Regional Stakeholder Forum

Recognizing the interests involved in the Basin and the importance of a shared and informed understanding of different stakeholders' perspectives, the MRC has been implementing various activities to strengthen relationships with a broad range of actors outside the Member Countries' governments, including in the private sector, civil society and academia, and other partners working in the Mekong region.

In 2016–2020, the MRC strengthened its engagement with **regional stakeholders** in the substantive development of knowledge products and consultations over proposed projects, guidelines and strategies through *Regional Stakeholder Forums* (RSFs).

The RSFs serve as a platform for the MRC Member Countries and other relevant stakeholders to share information and to provide, discuss, and exchange views and recommendations on the reasonable and equitable use of water and related resources in the Mekong River system in various key MRC's activities.

While the objectives of each forum will be specific to the topic(s), the general purpose of the forum will be to:

- share information about and promote the key works of the MRC that are of interest to the general public, including the roles and responsibilities of the MRC;
- consult external stakeholders and involve them in the preparation, implementation and monitoring of the MRC's key works including strategies, plans, guidelines, procedures and reports at different stages.

The RSFs are part of a multi-stakeholder platform that share and gain inputs and experience on diversified views on topics and works of public interest. Different opinions contribute to a more comprehensive understanding and inform measures that help meet the needs of the Mekong governments and people.

Key points, comments and recommendations shared during the RSFs are recorded in a matrix and fed into the decision-making process. Responses and reflections by the MRC Secretariat and Member Countries are provided and documented in Forum Reports.

The RSFs are free of charge and open to all interested participants. In support of public participation, a limited financial sponsorship will be provided towards participation from civil society and community-based organizations, based on request.

Expert Group meeting

The Expert Group (EG) meetings are technical platforms where regional and national experts meet regularly to jointly develop routine or ad hoc work related to transboundary water management, and to coordinate the implementation and uptake of activities and products at the national level.

Four Expert Groups have been established and activated since 2018 (see Figure 6). They aim to enhance the mode of collaboration between the regional and national levels: the MRC Secretariat and national line agencies, other institutions and organizations. Selected external organizations and experts may be invited to EG meetings based on the nature of expertise needed and the topics under discussion.

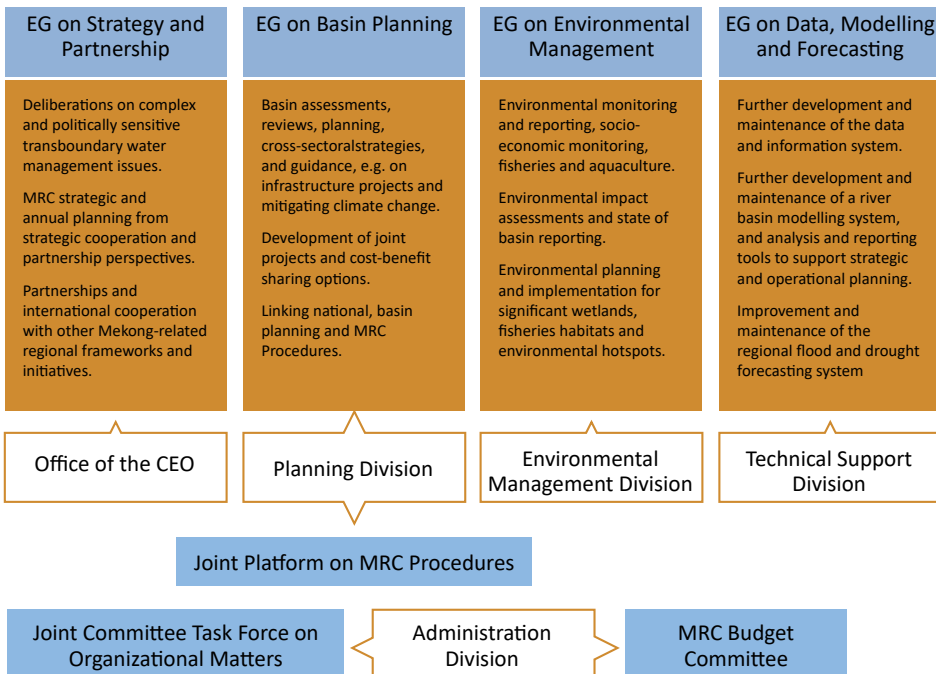


Figure 6. MRC expert groups

Partnerships

Stakeholder engagement involves two-way communication, sharing of information, an exchange of views, the contribution of inputs to the development and implementation of MRC's products, and recommendations to activities and works. Another distinct form of engagement, especially with external stakeholders, such as the private sector, academia or NGOs, can occur through partnerships and joint collaboration, mostly under Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), Letters of Agreement (LoAs), Cooperation Frameworks, and Partnership Agreements.

The collaboration activities then are jointly identified under the form of joint activities/projects, joint workshops, seminars, and technical forums, secondment of experts/exchange of staff, technical and reciprocal visits, and experience exchange.

3.5. SUMMARY

MRC has been working with different stakeholders in the past 25 years through diverse mechanisms and approaches to meet the changes and development in the Basin. Table 2 provides an overview of current engagement arrangements and their expected participants.



Table 2. Summary of current MRC stakeholder engagement arrangements

	Member Countries	Dialogue Partners	Development Partners	Other Partners	Non-state bodies	Media
MRC Summit (every 4 years)	✓	✓	✓	✓	by invitation	✓ during opening
MRC International Conference (every 4 years)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
MRC Council Meeting (once per year)	✓	✓	✓	✓	by invitation	✓
MRC Joint Committee Meeting (twice per year)	✓	by invitation as observers	-	-	-	-
MRC Dialogue Meeting (once per year)	✓	✓	-	-	-	-
MRC Informal Development Partners' meeting (once per year)	✓	-	✓	by invitation	-	-
MRC Regional Stakeholder Forums (at least twice per year)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
MRC Expert Group Meetings (several)	✓	by invitation as observers	by invitation as observers	by Invitation as observers	by invitation as observers	-

<p>Joint workshops, seminars, technical forums, secondment of experts/ exchange of staff, technical and reciprocal visits, and experience exchange.</p>	-	by exchange	by exchange	by exchange	by exchange	by exchange
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The MRC can promote and facilitate broader cooperation and collaboration among different stakeholders and actors including CSOs and people in the region, to bring policymakers, technical experts and the public to the same table to discuss common benefits for the Mekong people.

In line with the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aims at achieving sustainable development through inclusiveness, efficiency and equality, based on the principle of leaving no one behind, the MRC has been working on some initiatives and new approaches (e.g. the civil society platform) towards better engagement and collaboration with civil society, research and academia, and the private sector at the national and regional levels.



PART 4 ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND DATASET AT THE MRC

Stakeholder engagement involves building trust and confidence through ongoing communication and discussion. Transparency and credibility play important roles in enhancing relationships. Better engagement can be achieved initially with access to information and data.

Following the MRC Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing, **data** are defined as representations of facts, expressed as measurements or statistics, suitable for communication, interpretation or processing, while **information** is defined as data interpreted, processed, and refined, and then shared by the competent authorities that own or possess it. Ownership or possession is required for the exchange and sharing of information in the implementation of the Mekong Agreement.

The MRC embraces a policy of transparency and disclosure. All documents that are finalized and agreed by Member Countries are publicly available on the MRC's website. Working documents, such as drafts, are made available on request and/or as part of consultation through RSFs and national forums. Access to datasets on the website or the public section of the MRC Data and Information Services (Data Portal, see Figure 6) launched in 2006 and updated in 2020 is either free of charge or subject to the MRC's pricing policy and copyright regulations.



Figure 7. A screenshot showing the MRC Data Portal

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