

The 3rd State of the Mekong Address

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Excellencies, colleagues, Mekong friends,

Two years ago, I launched the first State of the Mekong Address, or SOMA, to highlight the sense of urgency of Mekong issues and to call for actions at local, national, regional and global levels. With the scale of the challenges, I said our feet should be on fire.

One year later, I gave my 2nd SOMA, highlighting progress at different levels, but that there were still 5 troubling trends that may compromise Mekong well-being: Flow regime change, sediment reduction, salinity intrusion, plastic pollution, flood and drought.

And then on the 5th of April last year, the leaders of the Mekong countries convened their 4th MRC Summit, where an ambitious political declaration was issued, recognizing the challenges of the Mekong and laying down 7 strategic priorities to renew our collective efforts to tackle them.

In fact, at the International Conference of the 4th MRC Summit, delegations from around the globe congregated here in Vientiane to learn about and from MRC cooperation, which they viewed as a leading model of transboundary river governance in the world.

This year we will release our highly anticipated State of the Basin Report as well as the Mekong Atlas. Compared to 5 – 10 years ago, the Mekong has changed dramatically, for better and worse.

Among better news, the Mekong region has continued to enjoy peace, which sadly it's not the case everywhere in the world.

Economically, Mekong countries have seen rapid growth, fuelled by developments in the water and related sectors, bringing benefits and poverty reduction.

Various sectors contributed to a robust economic performance, with a total value of USD 63 billion in 2020. Hydropower, rice production, and tourism have seen significant growth; and so are navigation and aquaculture.

Socially, all Mekong countries have made considerable progress in enhancing living standards and well-being, compared to ten years ago.

Food availability and access to drinking water, basic sanitation, and electricity has increased across the board. Rates of malnutrition and water-related diseases have decreased.

But we should not rest on our laurels. As we check the environment state of the Mekong, I have mixed news for the five troubling trends I spoke about last year.

In 2023, the basin experienced a rollercoaster of hydromet conditions. The central part of the lower Mekong faced drought. From February to April, rain was scarce – for example, with only 5mm in February, and 9 mm in March.

But then, from June to October, we experienced tropical storms and monsoons, where in August, for example, water levels went up to near alarming levels at Chiang Khan (around 14 m), Vientiane (almost 12 m), and Nakhon Phanom (around 10 m).

The storage by some water infrastructure projects helped alleviate flooding at some level. But for most of the wet season, we experienced lower flows than historically the case.

And this continued to impact the reverse flow into the Tonle Sap, Southeast Asia's iconic and largest lake.

And while from mid August last year, the reverse flow reached its minimum acceptable level; The trend is still alarming: since 2020, the reverse flow always happens late, it expands way less than it should, and lasts much shorter than usual.

Climate change continues to wreak havoc on the basin. During the wet season, while we are spared mainstream flooding, the Lao part of the basin experienced the most flash floods, followed by Cambodian and Vietnamese parts.

Overall however, it seems to be the case that the last decade, 2011-2022, is marked by more frequent and severe droughts than the one before. But with climate change, nothing is certain. The next decades could bring more floods than droughts.

On sediment, we know more than we do 1 or 2 years ago.

On the one hand, we did observe some stability or slight reduction from Chiang Saen to Kratie (or the northern part of Laos/Thailand to Cambodia), and receive initial sediment monitoring result last year at the Xayaburi hydropower project where they did not see any major change for total suspended solid between upstream and downstream of the project.

We are concerned, however, with a significant sediment drop further downstream. Since 2009, Phnom Penh witnessed a 70% reduction, and Tan Chau (50%). In the Mekong Delta, a recent study finds that 35 to 55 million cubic meters of sand are being taken out compared to only 2 to 4 million cubic meters that are naturally going in.

Luckily, the changes in flow regime, sediment and salinity intrusion have not seriously affected the overall water quality condition of the Mekong. Of 22 measuring sites, 15 are rated “excellent” and 5 “good”.

And while wild fisheries in general are facing significant threats throughout the basin from overexploitation, drought, and infrastructure barriers, with declining species and catch in the 3S and Tonle Sap, but we cannot blame one factor alone; our monitoring data shows stability in fish abundance in other parts of the basin, namely from the Chinese-Lao border to the central part of the lower Mekong in Khammouane as well as in the Mekong Delta.

Now that you see a broad picture of the basin – some good news, some bad news – we will turn to what are being done about them.

This may surprise some people, but the Mekong is lucky than most international rivers.

This is because we have the 1995 Mekong Agreement, which is comprehensive, relevant and fit-for-purpose. We have regional institutions like the Mekong River Commission, which is an organization by, for, and of the member countries.

The very title of the Mekong Agreement, if you recall, is an agreement “for cooperation”.

It is an agreement supportive of development, but not just any development, sustainable development.

The Agreement provides a framework, a platform, and a set of principles, procedures and obligations for international water use. But at the end of the day, it requires cooperation. Some of us may want the Agreement to have more legal authority.

Yet, that would be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it may increase compliance and enforcement. On the other, it may increase strict interpretation (with no action if it is not in the agreement), or disputes over interpretation (with armies of lawyers arguing in courts).

Both cases are not only bad for relations among countries; they are also bad for Mekong management. So be careful what you wish for.

Instead, our approach has been to actively call for cooperation, based on the One Mekong One Spirit. We commend and appreciate each other when cooperation is shown. We politely remind each other, often quietly, when actions may not be in line with the Agreement and procedures.

We request,

We nudge,

And we encourage each other to show cooperative spirit, and sometimes, when necessary, to even go beyond the existing procedures in order to work together.

The vision for the Mekong River basin is clear and shared by our countries: to have a basin that is economically prosperous (this means, we fully support countries’ sustainable development);

a basin that is environmentally sound (this means we need to maintain environmental balance with development), and a basin that is socially just (this means we need to take care of the most vulnerable peoples, who are left behind by development or devastated by climate change).

How does the Mekong River Commission contribute to this vision? Our mandate is to coordinate and promote.

We do not regulate. We plan, we monitor, we advise, and we build capacity in order for the countries to regulate and police developments in their own countries, which have bearings on other countries.

Here are three broad sets of strategic actions that we have done and continue to do.

First, economics. By the end of this year, our proactive regional planning, complemented by the Joint Study phase 2 with China, will deliver new ideas for joint investment projects and national

projects of basin significance, including seasonable and pumped storage as well as complementary solar and wind.

Their implementation will increase economic benefits for the countries, support energy transition and regional grid connectivity, and address basin-wide water security such as floods and droughts.

We are also working on bringing in better irrigation technologies, and facilitating investments in navigation ports, river information service and common rules to increase trade.

Second, environment. To maintain environmental balance, we work with countries to ensure that significant adverse impacts from major development projects are avoided, minimized and mitigated. The Prior Consultation processes and Joint Action Plans for Luang Prabang, Pak Beng and Pak Lay hydropower projects have resulted in substantial enhancements to the design of mitigation measures. The notification of the Don Sahong HPP extension also went through MRC assessment, public information sharing in Cambodia and Vietnam, and site investigation of potential impacts. The application of the transboundary environmental impact assessment guidelines to the Sekong A hydropower project has yielded better information, independent assessment and transparency to concerned countries and their stakeholders. We are now working with relevant authorities to improve national EIA process, dam design and mitigation measures, and joint impact monitoring.

Speaking of monitoring, we are increasing our coverage of the basin both on the ground and via satellites. The member countries also recently agreed to share operational data from dams.

These new data sets will make us better monitor and forecast water flows, flood and drought situations, and communicate them through a new integrated dashboard, Flood and Drought TV, and MRC App.

Under intense development, an alpha version of the App, which will have a community engagement function, will be previewed at the upcoming Regional Stakeholder Forum in June.

Along with our enhanced drought monitoring and medium and long term forecast, we will issue the Regional Drought Adaptation Guidelines next month.

And if you visit our MRC Regional Flood and Drought Management Center in Phnom Penh, you will see the new Situation Room; and by October this year, a new Situation Room along with the new Educational Visitor Center will be in place here at the MRC HQ in Vientiane

Third, people. For all the above actions, we do with special attention to vulnerable peoples. Data sharing, timely information provision, and consultation and dissemination will help people better prepared for changes and disasters.

Yet for developments to be socially just, data and information are not sufficient. We need concrete investments to help people improve their lives.

This is why we are glad to announce a 12 million dollar investment from the Global Environment Fund (GEF) for transboundary fisheries management, aiming to improve value chains, reconnect swim ways, and offer viable livelihood alternatives.

We also have a 16 million dollar commitment from Germany to trial the Mekong Fund focusing on ecosystems and livelihoods. This year we will also announce new funding support from Canada, Germany, South Korea and the United States.

In addition to global finance, we can also learn from each other – South-South cooperation – and here I point to the entrepreneurial programmes and projects from Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research (TISTR) to help communities and industries adapt to changes.

Mekong citizens and friends,

For the Mekong to be prosperous, sound, just and resilient, we need a strong MRC that is led, driven and owned by the member countries, where they pat each other on the back when things go right, remind each other when things go wrong, and listen to each other's requests and work with each other to address issues without borders.

Yet member countries working together can go so far. We need to look north, south and beyond – and at the same time.

To the north, we need a strong relationship, cooperation and indeed friendship with China and Myanmar. Annual dialogue, data sharing, joint studies, institutional linkages and joint projects are vital in this regard.

To the south, we need a strong relationship, cooperation and friendship with the rest of ASEAN. After Indonesia, we hope other non-Mekong ASEAN member states will follow and become partners of the MRC.

There is no better time than this year, as the ASEAN Chair returns to a Mekong country – Lao PDR – after traveling to Cambodia in 2022 and Vietnam in 2020.

The MRC's cooperation with ASEAN will be further elevated this September when the 2nd ASEAN-MRC Water Security Dialogue will be convened, leading up to the ASEAN Summits in October. And in the future, there will be special MRC Summits on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summits.

And beyond north and south, we need to maintain the international identity of the MRC, born out of the UN almost 70 years ago, then nurtured and supported by various development partners to become a riparian-led world-class river basin organization of today.

The MRC is on track to be fully self-financed by 2030, but we could do it alone, there are lots of challenges left; so we welcome strong cooperation with development partners for years to come.

Dear friends, join us to make the Mekong economically prosperous, socially just, environmentally sound and climate resilient. Most of all, keep the Mekong peaceful – by looking north, south and beyond.

Happy Mekong Day.