

Vientiane Declaration Innovation and Cooperation for a Water Secure and Sustainable Mekong

April, 05/2023 - 19:23

Vientiane Declaration Innovation and Cooperation for a Water Secure and Sustainable Mekong, 5 April 2023

Preamble

We, the Heads of Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), the Kingdom of Thailand, and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, *meeting in Vientiane, Lao PDR*, for the 4th Summit of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and:

Recalling the 1995 signing of the Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin (herein referred to as the 1995 Mekong Agreement) and the establishment of the MRC by the representatives of the Lower Mekong River Basin Governments, based on basin-wide perspectives, and building on a long history of Mekong cooperation since 1957 with the establishment of the Committee for the Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin.

Noting the priority actions and commitments from prior MRC Summits and their ongoing relevance to MRC Member Countries including from the 1st Summit in 2010 in Hua Hin, Thailand, *on meeting the needs, keeping the balance: towards sustainable development*, the 2nd Summit in 2014 in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, *on water, food, and energy security in the context of climate change*, and the 3rd Summit in 2018 in Siem Reap, Cambodia, *on enhancing joint efforts and partnerships towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Mekong River Basin*;

Recognising the importance of the Mekong River Basin's contributions to the water-related aspects of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the

Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the ASEAN agenda on regional integration, connectivity and closing the development gap within the ASEAN community, and the need for a strong recovery from Covid-19 in the midst of changing and complex international and regional challenges, and in that context, reaffirming the value of multilateral cooperation;

Recognising the growing sense of urgency around the critical challenges, risks and opportunities facing the Lower Mekong River Basin countries now and in the future resulting from the interaction of development and climate change, and that optimal water management to achieve a water secure Mekong River Basin is crucial to environmental integrity and the underpinning of economic and social well-being of basin communities, but that new ideas and innovative ways of working together will also need to be found to adequately address the growing risks and trade-offs involved in basin development and management;

Acknowledging the enhanced opportunities for water, food and energy security that are available to all Mekong countries through regional cooperation and joint efforts that are possible if all countries work together;

Emphasising the importance of a strong and financially sustainable treaty-based River Basin Organisation within the evolving institutional environment in the Mekong River Basin for managing water and related resources;

Welcoming the greater engagement of all basin countries in the sustainable management and development of the basin in a spirit of friendship and cooperation;

Acknowledging the participation and cooperation of MRC Dialogue Partners, and Development Partners and others, for their continued commitment to cooperating with MRC Member Countries;

Reaffirm our highest political commitment to the effective implementation of the 1995 Mekong Agreement, and the role of the MRC as the primary regional water cooperation and diplomacy platform as well as knowledge hub in enhancing the implementation of basin-wide strategies, procedures, guidelines, and data and information sharing that drives peaceful and mutually beneficial cooperation to achieve our shared vision for an economically prosperous, socially just, environmentally sound and climate resilient Mekong River Basin.

Achievements since the 3rd MRC Summit

As Heads of Government of the MRC Member Countries, we hereby:

1. *Recognise* the significant MRC achievements and developments in recent years, including the continuous contribution to peaceful and mutually beneficial cooperation and sustainable development in the Mekong region through dialogue and cooperation between the Member Countries and with our partners, and in particular:

- The enhanced knowledge generation and sharing that has supported better planning and decision making, as reflected in the 2018 State of the Basin Report, and various studies and technical assessments including joint research with China, Myanmar, International Water Management Institute, United Nations and other partners;
- The regional guidance provided to the countries' national plans for more sustainable basin development and management of water and related resources, including through the ambitious and forward-looking Basin Development Strategy 2021-2030, the finalisation and initial implementation of sector strategies for sustainable hydropower, environmental management and drought management, the updated guidance on design of mainstream dams, and guidelines for transboundary environmental impact assessment with voluntary application;

- Strengthening key partnerships including with MRC Dialogue Partners, Development Partners, and other regional cooperation mechanisms, including ASEAN, Mekong Lancang Cooperation, Mekong – United States Partnership, Mekong – Japan Cooperation, and Mekong – Korea Cooperation, as well as broader stakeholders, based on concrete agreements, improved consultation processes and outreach, regional fora and dialogues, including increased data and information sharing among Member Countries and by China and intensifying joint activities;
- The shift in collective action towards the proactive identification of regional investment solutions and adaptive responses to basin challenges including joint efforts for sustainable hydropower, irrigation, navigation and other water developments, the coordinated management of water infrastructure, and the improved implementation of the MRC Procedures to address transboundary impacts and emerging operational needs;
- Helping to reduce adverse impacts on vulnerable communities from flood and drought with the establishment of more accurate flood and drought forecasting with modern tools and collaboration to support early warning and disaster preparedness through integrated regional flood and drought management;
- The increased support to national planning and decision-making process with reinvigorated data and information management including working towards a more sustainable Core River Monitoring Network to support regional and national river monitoring, and modelling and communication systems, and more integrated regional and national decision-support systems that are fit-for-purpose, innovative and timely in helping to address current and emerging needs; and
- Embedding a riparian owned and led MRC that is closely guided by the Council and Joint Committee, with a riparian Chief Executive Officer and staff, its Headquarters in Vientiane and integrated Regional Flood and Drought

Management Center in Phnom Penh, and increased financial contributions from all Member Countries which have put the organisation on track to full self-financing of core river basin management functions by 2030.

2. *Express* our deep appreciation of the continued technical and financial support provided by Development Partners, international organisations, the private sector, and other relevant partners to the MRC and Member Countries, and the cooperation of MRC Dialogue Partners and all relevant stakeholders, in these and other achievements;

3. *Acknowledge* these achievements put new and improved foundations in place to fully realise MRC's mandate and core functions as an River Basin Organisation by: (i) supporting optimal and sustainable development while increasing regional water security and building climate resilience, (ii) supplementing national planning with whole-of-basin planning and where needed, coordination of basin operations, (iii) providing continuous and transparent information on current and near future conditions for improved early warning, (iv) increasing country ownership and capacity for implementing core river basin management functions, and (v) further institutional development of the MRC for the higher levels of regional cooperation needed to address the Basin challenges.

Regional opportunities and challenges

As Heads of Government of the MRC Member Countries, we further:

4. *Acknowledge* the considerable opportunities for sustainable development in all water-related sectors, including hydropower, irrigation, navigation, and others, and that the provision of water security to protect societies from water risks, especially floods and droughts, is essential both as an integrated part of other sector investments and as a development opportunity;

5. *Acknowledge* that while the development and utilization of the Mekong's waters contributes considerably to economic growth, it can also have adverse impacts, including transboundary impacts that need to be jointly addressed, on the basin's environment and vulnerable communities especially when exacerbated by climate change, such as severe floods and droughts, erosion and sedimentation, the impacts of rapid fluctuations in river levels and flows in parts of the basin, and the deterioration of environmental assets and fisheries including due to loss of connectivity; and

6. *Reiterate* that to address the basin's challenges, which have become much more complex, we need both development and management options to ensure sustainability of the environmental resource base, to identify alternative investment solutions and adequately consider the linkages between different sectors, to move beyond water resources planning to encompass operational management, including through opportunities for transboundary coordination, especially in terms of timely and regular sharing of operational data from dams and other water infrastructure, and to identify joint investment projects that contribute to water, food and energy security.

Priority areas of action

We call on the MRC, all partners and stakeholders to find innovative solutions to cope with these challenges, and to seize the opportunities and intensify cooperation for a water secure and sustainable Mekong River Basin, while abiding by the principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness, mutual benefits, equality, consultation, coordination, cooperation, and respect for sovereignty, with a focus on:

7. Identifying, through more Proactive Regional Planning leading to an adaptive basin plan, new joint and national investment projects of basin-wide significance and related enabling activities that can increase synergies and reduce vulnerabilities at the basin and national levels, and that provide a comprehensive response to climate change, including through infrastructure and

nature-based water storage options, environmental limits and improved sediment management, and that support the implementation of integrated regional sector planning that goes beyond water-related aspect, such as non-water related and renewable energy generation, regional grid connection and upgrade, power market development and trade, and multimodal transport hubs;

8. Enabling basin countries to support communities to adapt to changing river conditions by ensuring a more effective and timely communications and notification system for unusual water flows, water quality issues, flood and drought and other water-related emergencies both among basin countries and to the communities, and by working towards the increased sharing of operational data from water infrastructures in a timely and regular manner for better preparedness and response;

9. Supporting development and operational decisions through improved use of technology, including enhanced decision support for the implementation of all river basin management functions from water-related monitoring and operational basin management to long-term strategic assessments and planning;

10. Ensuring that consultations are conducted more effectively to achieve common objectives by implementing, in partnership with MRC Dialogue Partners, a Multiple Stakeholder Platform for the entire basin, with increasingly joint and innovative activities with other regional cooperation platforms, Development Partners, communities, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, and other relevant stakeholders;

11. Strengthening the entire river basin management in accordance with the mandate of the MRC through innovation in policy, technology and mechanism for cooperation and partnership with other Mekong related regional cooperation frameworks;

12. Maintaining and exploring innovative financing in the support of the above endeavors including through new public and private sources and global funding mechanisms; and

13. Ensuring that the MRC is on a sustainable transition to self-financing by 2030, including through ongoing organisational development that strengthens the capacity of the MRC and national agencies to implement the core river basin management functions, including water-related data acquisition and monitoring supported by joint basin expert groups, a cost-effective Core River Monitoring Network, enhanced implementation of the MRC Procedures and their associated mechanisms, modality of work, and uptake of regional strategies and guidelines.

Way ahead

14. We reiterate our commitment to joint efforts to further strengthen the role of the MRC in helping to ensure a water, food and energy secure and economically, socially and environmentally sustainable Mekong River Basin.

15. We welcome the strategic shift to proactive regional planning and coordinated operational management, and call on all basin countries, partners and stakeholders to continue to work with the MRC to uphold the 1995 Mekong Agreement and its Procedures, and to support the implementation of the BDS 2021-2030 in accordance with this Declaration and the One Mekong One Spirit.

16. We task the MRC to coordinate and monitor the implementation of this Declaration.

17. We express our sincere gratitude to the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic for hosting the 4th MRC Summit, and we look forward to the 5th Summit to be held in 2026 in the Kingdom of Thailand.

Adopted in Vientiane, Lao PDR, on 5 April 2023 in the English language.

