

A RESPONSIBLE APPROACH TO BUILDING DAMS ON THE MEKONG

JEREMY BIRD

THE DRAMATIC fluctuations in oil and gas prices over the last year and the growing evidence of change in the planet's climate have focused global attention on the need for sustainable sources of clean energy. In Southeast Asia, there is a source of enormous collective energy potential, the 4,800 kilometre-long Mekong River, which runs through Yunnan Province of China, Burma, and the Mekong River Commission (MRC) member states of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. In the mid-20th century the Mekong and its tributaries were identified as holding great potential for hydropower generation. To date, only around 5 per cent of that potential has been realised.

Yet how does one balance this enormous electricity potential with the need to protect all the other benefits this great river has to offer? The Mekong is a natural resource that has nurtured great civilisations over human history. It is home to 1,300 types of fish, stocking a sustainable fishing industry worth at least US\$2 billion (Bt68.1 billion) per year. Its fish and the irrigation water supplied by the river's annual flood pulse provide food for over 60 million people each year.

This is the question that some 200 delegates will be discussing in Vientiane this week as the Mekong River Commission asks stakeholders throughout its member countries to comment on the MRC's role in regional hydropower development. It is widely acknowledged that the issues surrounding dams and hydropower are sensitive, but that is even more reason why they should be debated in an open and objective forum.

Eight years ago, the World Commission on Dams proposed a rights-and-risks approach to dam-planning, taking into account the rights of stakeholders and aiming to address and minimise the risks that each group is asked to face. We should add to this the element of responsibility – the responsibility the countries and the MRC have to promote sustainable economic growth and reduce poverty. It is up to the Mekong region, its governments and its people to ensure these considerations come to the fore in decision-making during a crucial era for the river, when as many as 10 dams are at preliminary plan-

ning stages for the mainstream of the lower Mekong. How can this be achieved?

At an intergovernmental level, there needs to be a regional approach to the assessment of each proposed hydropower project. This involves developing a clear understanding of how building a dam in one country could affect nations and people who share the river's natural resources. The issue here is who benefits and who pays the costs with each project.

At the MRC, we have been developing a model for regional cooperation in this area, based on what is appropriate for the Mekong region as a whole and going beyond the interests of individual developers or governments. Integrated into this regional focus is a basin-wide approach to hydropower decision-making, where the broad development needs of the Mekong countries are considered whenever a major decision on hydropower is made, taking into account fisheries, irrigation, environmental management, navigation of the river, flood management and tourism.

Answers are needed on the effects of each decision. What impact will a dam have on the migrations of the fish that are so important to rural people? What are the multiple benefits of building a dam in one of the Mekong tributaries beyond hydropower alone? Can flood management and mitigation be handled more effectively through greater control over river flow? All decisions and questions can be addressed within an integrated context.

Knowledge at the regional and basin level is of vital importance. Here, the MRC has built up strong international expertise, a comprehensive knowledge base and powerful mathematical models and planning tools that can be used to assess development scenarios. Placing this information and analysis on decision-makers' desks is an MRC priority.

With hydropower development now being more private than public-sector driven, planning cycles are shorter, and early identification of planning criteria is required to ensure that social and environmental concerns are addressed while risks and responsibilities are identified. This is all part of the consideration of reasonable and equitable use of the river's resources, as enshrined in the 1995 Agreement signed by the four MRC member states. The MRC is in an ideal position to promote dialogue among the various partners in the development and investment process for hydropower in the region.

Each individual project proposal can then be viewed within a more coordinated basin-wide context.

It is our responsibility to use this regional perspective on the Mekong to ensure that decisions lead to an outcome that reflects everyone's interest, and the MRC vision for the future, an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong Basin.

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THE MEKONG RIVER sustains a fishing industry worth US\$2 billion (Bt68.1 billion) per year, according to writer Jeremy Bird.