



Conflict Factsheet

Lower Mekong Basin: Challenges and opportunities for early cooperation

Type of conflict Sub	Intensity 1
Conflict Locality South Eastern Asia	Time 1957– 1995
Countries Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand	Resources Water



Transboundary water management

Conflict Summary

To promote peace, regional cooperation, and development in the Lower Mekong Basin, the United Nations (UN) encouraged the creation of an intergovernmental agency for joint water management. In 1957, the Mekong Committee was created. After an initial period of enthusiasm, momentum began to subside during the 1970s. Nevertheless, the Mekong’s early institutional architecture provided a forum for dialogue that was sustained even in times of regional hostilities. It also laid the groundwork for contemporary Mekong governance in times of rapid development.



Case Study

Contrary to many other transboundary river basins, in the Lower Mekong region, mechanisms for joint water governance were put in place well before water stress sparked a sense of urgency and crisis. With strong international support, the riparian states were determined to harness the Mekong's potential, and established a routine of water-related cooperation that later proceeded despite political tensions. The first initiative to coordinate water issues on a regional basis dates back to 1947, when the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) was created to assist with the development of Southeast Asia.

Early reports encourage regional cooperation

A 1952 ECAFE study, undertaken in cooperation with the four lower riparians Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, highlighted the Mekong's potential for hydroelectric and irrigation development. In 1955-1956, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation submitted a report on planning and development of the Lower Mekong Basin, urging joint management of the river. In 1957, a subsequent ECAFE report reiterated the need for close inter-riparian cooperation and coordination. The report provided a conceptual framework for developing the river basin in an integrated fashion, and advised the four riparian countries to cooperate closely on data collection, planning, and development. This was seen as essential for the success of several major projects whose location was planned to cross national boundaries. To facilitate collaborative water development and management, the report recommended the establishment of a permanent international agency (Delli Priscoli & Wolf, 2009; [Le-Huu & Nguyen-Duc, 2003](#)).

Establishment of a permanent agency

The 1957 ECAFE report was favorably received by the Lower Mekong riparians. Later that year, representatives from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam formed the Mekong Committee. The main task of this intergovernmental agency consisted in promoting, coordinating, supervising, and controlling the planning and investigation of water resources development projects in the Lower Mekong Basin. The Committee's membership was limited to the Lower Mekong nations only, since China was not a UN member in the 1950s (Taiwan held the Chinese seat until 1971), and Myanmar declined to participate (Delli Priscoli & Wolf, 2009; [Jacobs, 2002](#)). The expectation was that the Mekong Committee would act as an "opportunity-development institution" to assist the riparian countries in water planning and development, particularly with regard to mobilization of financial resources, improvement of the investment climate, and technical assistance and capacity-building ([Le-Huu & Nguyen-Duc, 2003](#)).

Initial enthusiasm

As [Jacobs \(2002, 357-358\)](#) notes, "[a]n atmosphere of optimism surrounded the committee's formation," often referred to as the "The Mekong Spirit." Shortly after the Mekong Committee's creation, a study team known as the "Wheeler Mission" developed an ambitious program of development activities, including projects on the Mekong's mainstream. The Mekong Committee quickly endorsed the mission's recommendations as its first five-year plan. In 1961, the so-called "White Mission" advised the Mekong Committee to broaden its prevailing engineering approach by also taking social aspects into account. Many of the mission's recommendations for training programs were subsequently adopted.



With rapid agreement among the riparian states came extensive international support for the Mekong Committee, and funding quickly flowed in from the UN and other donors, especially the U.S. During the 1960s, regional security issues were a paramount American concern, and one of the U.S. approaches to preventing the outbreak of armed conflict in Southeast Asia consisted in promoting water-related cooperation. Supported by abundant international funding and a newly-established Secretariat, the Committee undertook various studies and investigations, and also initiated programs on data gathering and standardization. While no dams were constructed on the mainstream, the Committee sponsored a number of tributary dams during the 1960s (Delli Priscoli & Wolf, 2009; [Jacobs, 2002](#)).

Loss of momentum and increasing tensions

In the 1970s, however, the work of the Mekong Committee began losing momentum. Several factors constrained progress on cooperative basin development.

First, a lack of financial resources and political challenges stood in the way of moving from data gathering and feasibility studies to large-scale project implementation. Additionally, the 1970 Indicative Basin Plan, which proposed a series of seven cascading dams, was received with skepticism by parts of the international community due to social and environmental concerns. Among other things, large dams were criticized on the basis of increased risks of diseases, pollution, and flooding of agricultural land. The impact of the proposed dams on fisheries was also unknown, although fish constituted a major protein source for Mekong Basin inhabitants. The absence of participation by the affected populations, and a lack of detailed information about the scope of potential displacement, were also seen as a matter of concern (Thomas, 1996).

Second, economic asymmetries between Thailand, the lower basin's "powerhouse" (Dinar et al., 2007, 229), and the Indochinese nations resulted in diverging visions for Lower Mekong development. While Thailand's economy grew steadily after 1957, the Indochinese economies grew only slowly, if at all. In light of its stronger economy and greater resource needs, from Thailand's perspective, the costs imposed by Mekong cooperation increasingly outweighed national benefits. Consequently, Thailand started pushing for revision of those Committee rules that allowed for an effective veto of Thai projects by downstream riparians. Also, Thailand found its own funding for some Mekong projects within its own territory, and was thereby able to circumvent scrutiny and potential opposition by downstream riparians (Delli Priscoli & Wolf, 2009; [Jacobs, 2002](#)).

Third, political turmoil, instability and civil wars in the region made parts of the basin inaccessible for scientific and engineering investigations. The political and security situation also brought about a sharp decline in international donor funding. In 1978, following the victory of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia withdrew from the Mekong Committee, which was then transformed into a three-member interim body (Delli Priscoli & Wolf, 2009; [Jacobs, 2002](#); Thomas, 1996).

Between 1978 and 1991, the Interim Mekong Committee operated under difficult circumstances, facing variety of political and financial challenges. In 1991, Cambodia re-approached the other Lower Mekong nations in order to end its international isolation and economic underdevelopment. In 1995, the committee structure was eventually replaced with the Mekong River Commission (MRC).



Although the Mekong Committee and its interim version proved unsustainable in the end, they made important contributions to early transboundary dialogue and cooperation in the Mekong region, even during times of regional hostilities and war:

Bridging riparian interests

For two decades, the Mekong Committee provided a forum for the member countries to bridge national interests, so that “...no development is missed or unnecessarily delayed, and no member country embarks on any water project without taking due account of the legitimate interests and legal rights of other member countries” (Le-Huu & Nguyen-Duc, 2003, 11). The latter was mainly achieved by the Committee’s rule of unanimous decision-making. The Committee also enhanced trust-building through technical cooperation and achievements in areas such as data collection and investigation, basin development planning, mobilization of funds, and human resource development. However, as noted above, national development needs among the riparians later diverged to such an extent that they brought about significant changes in the Mekong’s cooperative framework. These changes occurred in particular during the negotiations leading up to the establishment of the MRC in 1995 (Le-Huu & Nguyen-Duc, 2003).

Sustaining interstate cooperation in times of war

As pointed out in a UNEP report (2009, 30), the Interim Mekong Committee stands out as “...one of the regional associations to survive the difficult period of conflict in Indochina.” Despite regional hostilities and Cambodia’s absence, the Interim Mekong Committee persisted, providing “...a sustained forum for discussion on issues of common interest, especially during a long period during which these nations found little to agree upon” (Jacobs, 2002, 359). Under its purview, hydropower sales, for example between Laos and Thailand, continued during the war in Indochina. Hydro-meteorological stations likewise continued to function in spite of regional conflict. Through extensive data gathering and dissemination, the Mekong Committee and the Interim Mekong Committee helped create a solid foundation for joint water development and management. By offering a platform for cooperative dialogue on water-related issues, they allowed the riparian nations to build a lasting foundation of mutual understanding and trust for resolving differences and disputes (Delli Priscoli & Wolf, 2009; Jacobs, 2002). This history of cooperation later facilitated negotiations toward the MRC, and forms the historical basis for contemporary Mekong governance (see: [Mekong River Basin: Contemporary dam disputes](#)).



Intensities & Influences

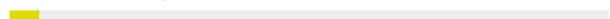


INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity

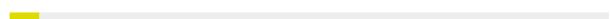


Human Suffering

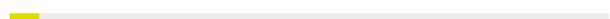


INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Violent Conflict

No



Resolution Success

Reduction in geographical scope

There has been no reduction in geographical scope.

Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.

Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been partially addressed.

Resources and Materials

Conflict References

[Dam projects and disputes in the Mekong River Basin](#)

References with URL

[Jacobs, J. W. \(2002\). The Mekong River Commission: Transboundary Water Resources Planning and Regional Security. The Geographical Journal, 168\(4\), 354-364](#)

[Le-Huu, T., & Nguyen-Duc, L. \(2003\). Mekong Case Study. UNESCO-IHP](#)

[UNEP \(2009\). Hydropolitical Vulnerability and Resilience along International Waters: Asia](#)

References without URL

Delli Priscoli, J. & Wolf, A. T. (2009). Managing and Transforming Water Conflicts. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press

Dinar, A., Dinar, S., McCaffrey, S. & McKinney, D. (2007). Bridges over Water: Understanding Transboundary Water Conflict, Negotiation and Cooperation. New Jersey: World Scientific

Thomas, C. (1996). Water: A Focus for Cooperation or Contention in a Conflict Prone Region? In: Bächler, G. & Spillmann, K. R. (eds.). Environmental Degradation as a Cause of War: Country Studies of External Experts. Vol. III. Zürich: Verlag Rüegger AG, 65-125

Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/lower-mekong-basin-challenges-and-opportunities-early-cooperation>