

Transboundary Water Cooperation in the Mekong

For generations the Mekong River Basin has served as a life-sustaining force, supporting the livelihoods and food security of more than 60 million people in the region. The river's rich mosaic of ecosystems supports the world's largest inland fisheries and exceptional riverine biodiversity that is only surpassed by the Amazon River. Sweden supports its partners in the region to address transboundary challenges in the river basin and find solutions that can best materialise through in regional cooperation.

The Mekong, one of the largest rivers in Asia, is shared by Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) is well endowed with natural resources and the river system provides fresh water resources, productive soils, rich forests, and supports one of the world's most productive fisheries.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The Mekong provides a variety of opportunities for human wellbeing and economic development. Over the past twenty years, the GMS has experienced rapid economic growth: during the last decade, annual GDP growth has averaged 6.5%. This economic expansion has been fuelled in part by the export of natural resources. The natural capital of the GMS provides important revenue streams and the water resources – that have been widely harnessed for electricity production from hydropower – have been particularly important for this beneficial development. However, these resources are often exploited in an unsustainable way, leading to significant losses in overall natural capital and increasing difficulties for subsistence fishery and farming activities. Additionally, economic benefits derived from resource exploitation are rarely distributed equitably. Despite impressive GDP growth,

many individuals in the GMS remain relatively poor, with poverty level ranging from 2% of the total population in Thailand to 44% in Laos.



Cambodian fishermen on the Sekong, a tributary to Mekong. Fish catches from the river are an essential to food security and livelihoods in the basin. Photo: International Rivers.

Another major challenge is that the Mekong River Basin is likely to experience significant impacts of climate change that is already affecting the region. There is an increasing trend in mean surface air temperature. Rainfall is trending down and sea levels up and the frequency of extreme weather events has increased. All these events have serious implications for management of regional water resources and for the people and wildlife that depend on the natural flood regimes of the Mekong system.

SWEDEN'S ENGAGEMENT

Swedish support to transboundary water cooperation in the Mekong River Basin aims to improve institutional and organisational capacity to manage common challenges and capitalise on opportunities. Implementation of pro-poor governance mechanisms is important, to ensure that the rights of poor and vulnerable groups are respected. The rights-based approach is central in Sweden's work.

Examples of Swedish support to transboundary water resources

MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION

The Mekong River Commission, MRC, was founded in 1995 pursuant to the “Agreement on the Cooperation for Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin”. The MRC governs the allocation and utilization of the Mekong River waters by four countries – Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos - and aims to promote and co-ordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources of the lower river basin for the countries’ mutual benefit and the people’s well-being by implementing strategic programmes and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice. Goals include promotion of dialogue among member countries on finding solutions and strategies for the highly challenging task of sharing the river’s resources for mutual benefits.



Sweden has supported the Mekong River Commission since it was founded. Photo: MRC

Sweden's support to the MRC not only contributes to sustainable water resource management, but also to the long-term improved relations and greater trust between the countries. Through a Sweden-sponsored global program “Shared Waters Partnership” Sweden has been able to contribute to regional knowledge development on the "Nexus approach" that is, to see that the water, agriculture /food and energy issues are closely interlinked. This is particularly important in relation to the plans for development of new hydropower dams on the Mekong main stream that will impact negatively on poor people’s livelihoods if an integrated approach to water resources management is not implemented.

SUPPORT TO CSOs IN THE REGION

A number of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Mekong River Basin are supported by Sweden in order to promote capacity development at local communities to facilitate their participation in decision-making process on water resource management in the basin. Sweden’s CSO partners in the basin include:

Wetlands Alliance, which was established in 2008 with support from Sweden, has during the last eight years helped develop local communities’ capacity to manage the shared water resources in a more sustainable manner. The programme has contributed to an increased information exchange between the Mekong countries and communities and has supported many projects that have improved livelihoods.



Fisherwomen harvest edible seaweed, an important ecosystem service from the Mekong River. Photo: Living Rivers Siam

Sweden’s support to *South East Asia Fishery Development Center (SEAFDEC)* has helped Vietnam and Cambodia to launch an action plan during 2014-2015 that will provide common standards and regulations for management of fish stocks of importance for food security.

Mangroves for the Future (MFF) is an initiative started by IUCN and supported by Sweden, Denmark and Norway that promotes community resilience, adaptive management and knowledge sharing, in eleven countries in Asia. In the Mekong River Basin MFF works in Vietnam to sustain the ecosystem services from the mangrove forests growing in the Mekong delta that provide important income and food security to communities living there.

Policy direction – water and sanitation

Sweden promotes efficient, fair and sustainable management of water and sanitation. Sweden’s interventions are directed by results strategies at country, regional and global levels.