

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. The abundant natural resources of the Mekong River have provided important revenue streams and contributed to the economic development of the region. However, if these resources are managed in an unsustainable way it can lead to significant losses in natural capital. Sida supports its partners in the region to address transboundary challenges in the river basin and to find solutions that can best materialise through regional cooperation.

The Mekong, one of the largest rivers in Asia, is shared by Cambodia, China (Yunnan Province and Guaxi Autonomous Region), Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The Mekong region is well endowed with natural resources and the river system provides freshwater resources, productive soils, rich forests, and supports one of the world's most productive fisheries



Fishing boats on the Kamchay River in Cambodia. Fish catches from the Mekong and its tributaries are an essential to food security and livelihoods in the basin. Photo: International Rivers.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Over the past twenty years, the Mekong region has experienced rapid economic growth. During the last decade, annual GDP growth has averaged more than 10 per cent. This economic expansion has been fuelled in part by the export of natural resources. The natural capital of the region provides important revenue streams and the water resources – that have been widely harnessed for electricity generation 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 and despite the impressive GDP growth, many individuals in the region remain relatively poor, with people in poverty ranging from 7 % of the total population in Vietnam to 26 % in Myanmar.

Another major challenge is that the Mekong River Basin is already experiencing significant impacts of climate change. Changes in temperature, rainfall, river flow and flooding due to climate change affect agriculture and fisheries and, as a result, reduce food security, especially for the poor. In addition, the rise in sea level is increasing salinity and flooding in the Mekong Delta, causing damage to crops and aquaculture in the most productive area of the basin.

## SWEDEN'S ENGAGEMENT

Swedish support to transboundary water cooperation in the Mekong River Basin is governed by the *Strategy for Sweden's regional development cooperation in Asia and the Pacific region 2016–2021*. It aims to improve regional collaboration and sustainable use of transboundary natural resources in the region as well as to improve institutional and organisational capacity to manage common challenges and capitalise on opportunities. The integration of human rights, environment and climate change is central to Sweden's engagement in the region. Gender equality is also a key feature of this integrated approach.

## Examples of Sida's support to transboundary water resources

### MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) was founded in 1995. The MRC governs the allocation and utilisation 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. This is done by implementing strategic programmes and activities and by providing scientific information and policy advice. Sida has been a donor to MRC since its very start and aims to be an active and engaged partner. The support focuses on capacity development and outreach by the commission to promote dialogue among member countries on finding solutions and strategies for the highly challenging task of sustainably managing and utilising the natural resources of the river.



Sweden has supported the Mekong River Commission since it was founded. The MRC is trying to strike a balance between the development and protection of the Mekong River. Photo: MRC

Sweden's support to the MRC not only contributes to sustainable water resource management, but also to long-term improved relations and greater trust between the countries. Sweden also, in dialogue with the commission, seeks to enhance the MRC's gender and human rights integration, partly by promoting MRC's engagement with the public, research institutes and civil society.

### SUPPORT TO CSOs IN THE REGION

A number of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Mekong River Basin are supported by Sweden with the aim to promote capacity development within local communities to facilitate their participation in decision-making processes on water resource management. Sweden's CSO partners in *EarthRights International (ERI)* trains community leaders, campaigners, and public interest lawyers in skills such as grassroots campaigning, legal advocacy, environmental protection and human rights to be better prepared to lobby

and advocate for development decisions that respect local communities' environmental and human rights. ERI mentors and supports legal campaigns that address power imbalances and ensure that local voices are heard.



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)* is targeting the poor coastal and inland communities, which continue to experience declining fish catches as well as increased competition and conflict over natural resource use and space in Southeast Asia. Beneficiaries also include governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international organisations. The beneficiaries receive support and guidance through collaborative arrangements that aim to develop better management of fisheries and important habitats in national and sub-regional contexts.

*Mangroves for the Future (MFF)* is an initiative started by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and is supported by Sweden, Denmark and Norway. MFF promotes community resilience, adaptive management and knowledge sharing in coastal communities across eleven countries in Asia. In the Mekong River Basin, MFF works in Thailand and Vietnam to sustain the ecosystem services from the mangrove forests growing in the Mekong Delta and Thailand's coasts that provide important income and food security for the livelihoods of 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.