Mekong River Basin Dams & 11 More: Hydropower Disaster?
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Mekong River is one of the largest rivers in the world. It flows 4,909 kilometers and crosses six countries which include: Myanmar, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. Mekong River is rated as one of the most diverse in terms of species. Its greatest source of productivity springs from the fact that it is a seasonal river which varies in level and range from time to time. The Mekong River biodiversity is fundamental as a natural resource-based ecosystem that supports millions of rural livelihoods along its riparian sites and within its waters. The Mekong River Commission estimates that over 60 million individuals, mainly from rural Asia, live in the Lower Mekong Basin and directly depend on this ecosystem as the main source of livelihood.¹

The fact that the River crosses six countries makes it a multi-stakeholder ecosystem where decisions on the use of the river by any of the six countries affect all the rest. In addition, China is a heavy exploiter of natural resources given its huge economy and thus other countries along the River feel intimidated because of the unproportioned use of the naturally endowed resource. In this article, I look at the role of stakeholders, the economic gains of the sustainable utilization of the River basin and lastly, recommendations on how to manage the Basin sustainably for the purposes of benefiting all stakeholders are outlined.

The role of stakeholders in Mekong River Basin

Stakeholders play a vital role in enabling sustainable utilization of Mekong River resources. As stated earlier, Mekong River Basin offers a vibrancy of life in many different ways to millions of lives along its riparian lifeline. As a result, it cannot be ignored that such lives matter and thus their voice at the decision table is fundamental. In the face of an increase in the power demand in addition to volatile prices in the international energy markets, it has become a primary concern for different stakeholders in Mekong River Basin to coin their objectives geared towards varied ends that Mekong River as a resource can provide.

The primary objective of the stakeholders such as the community agencies representing the interests of the communities, environmental agencies advocating for the River basin, the government executives championing for government projects such as hydropower dams among other stakeholders hold a sentimental position in designing a sustainable plan through which Mekong River basin and its bountiful resources can be utilized. Therefore, the role of stakeholders is important and should not be considered in any passive way at any time. Already, communities living in the Lower Mekong Basin are protesting at the increased dam constructions in the Head of the River with China being at the center of the controversy for its unending appetite for constructing dams along the Mekong River. When all the stakeholders are brought together at the listening table and their interests factored into final decisions, we shall have few to none of the protests that we continue to witness from both the upper and lower Mekong ecosystems.

Economic gains of sustainable utilization of Mekong River Basin

Over the past few decades, uncharacteristically, Mekong is at the crossroads in as far as efficient utilization of resources in its habitat is concerned. Whereas hydropower presents a great economic and clean energy gains, it also presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity in a sense that hydropower energy cuts back the carbon emissions because the constructed dams use mechanical energy to produce the same quality energy as produced by other methods.\(^2\) Hydropower is traditionally one of the few green energy sources provided and all aspects of the river basin are managed in an integrated manner. It is a challenge because such utilization of Mekong River denies the communities, especially in the lower Mekong Basin, the right to exercise and be able to retrieve their livelihoods. As stated earlier, over 60 million individuals depend directly on the river basin in the lower Mekong for their livelihoods due to their sea-based trade nature.

With the increased population coupled with growing urbanization in Asian countries there are also increased need for building water infrastructures, waste management systems, sources of energy, and transport infrastructure. In addition, there are gainful livelihoods that the river basin provides to riparian dwellers mostly in rural lower Mekong River basin. Balancing these conflicting needs on the river i.e. the need to construct utilities and the need to conserve the serenity of the river, are what will make the management of Mekong River gainful to all stakeholders. There are potentials to build a huge economy from all competing uses of the River basin. More Dams and transport systems should be constructed, but in recognition of fundamental integrity of the basin as well as in consideration of the lower Mekong communities’ livelihoods.

What’s the way forward?

• Pursue hydropower energy construction using integrated models to ensure that life in the Lower Mekong is not or less affected. Communities should be included in the proposing, planning and implementation as well as continued maintenance of the dams to ensure that their primary livelihood (river-based) are supplemented. This will ensure that their livelihoods are not completely eroded but replaced.

• The Mekong River Commission should develop an integrated Mekong River basin management that will factor in all the interests of the stakeholders; this will ensure sustainability of the basin.

• Develop a community-based plan for the lower Mekong communities on how they can take advantage of the new phases of development along the river as well as develop their capacity in adapting to new realities as far as Mekong River Basin is concerned.