



# Stakeholder Interview Mission 2018



Since 2016, GIZ has started the interview mission with MRC stakeholders as part of its support to MRC in transboundary water management in the Lower Mekong Basin. This 3<sup>rd</sup> interview mission has been jointly conducted by Ms. Duong Hai Nhu, MRCS Stakeholder Engagement Specialist and Ms. Pubill Panen Erinda, GIZ Junior Advisor.

We would like to thank all interviewees for their suggestions and constructive comments as well as their frank opinions and open discussion.

This report reflects the common interests of the interviewed stakeholders. We have tried to document all suggestions and perspectives that will contribute to the strengthening of the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of MRC, as ways to enhance MRC's roles and contribution in facilitating transboundary water cooperation as well as its stakeholder engagement process.



During November 2018 – February 2019, we have interviewed many stakeholder who are from National University of Lao PDR, Oxfam, IWMI, DFAT, VRN, World Bank, MOT Department of Road Transport, Pan Nature, Living River Association, Chiang Khong Conservation Group, Network of North-Eastern Thailand, Pact World, CSDS Chulalongkorn, International Rivers, SIDA, GWP Cambodia, CNR, IUCN, Royal University of Phnom Penh, FACT, MAFF Division of Fisheries, WLE, SDC, ADB, MOE, CK Power, SODA Laos, NGO Forum, River Coalition of Cambodia, EEAT, MOFA, MOWRAM and NMCS.

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## Executive Summary

Throughout the interview process, MRC is viewed as a good technical organization and knowledge hub on water resources, contributing significantly to peace and stability in the region. MRC can enable dialogue by being a water diplomacy platform among Member Countries (MC) at both regional and national level, providing a framework for transboundary water governance. It is also widely understood by all stakeholder groups that MRC has the mandate to implement IWRM at a basin wide scale. MRC is considered to be a good information portal, providing guidelines and procedures as good tools to support cooperation and steer the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) towards a common approach of river basin development. However, there is a common agreement that currently MRC holds limited political influence and is able to generate only reduced impact on policy and decision-making processes, given the current development waterscape in the basin. It is therefore highly recommended by a wide range of stakeholders to strengthen MRC's influence on policy making and its political engagement capacities. Political influence should be a long-term forward-looking vision. MRC needs to focus more on expanding its partnership in the region and earning further political buy-in from MCs.

MRC can and should contribute much more to social development and poverty reduction through bringing multi-stakeholders together to harmonize policy direction, technical opinions and public concerns. It therefore is suggested for MRC to increase its power and influence on decision-making processes through further and more meaningful engagement with the government, civil society and the private sector. MRC should also focus more on benefit-sharing among different sectors, with broader participation of government and line agencies at a higher level. Maintaining and strengthening collaboration and cooperation with other regional cooperation mechanisms and engaging with different stakeholders will further shape MRC's contribution to social development, potentially reducing the gap amongst the economic, environmental and social dimensions.

In order to overcome challenges, to promote political positions but still maintain good cooperation supporting economic development among member countries, there are several other dimensions and perspectives that MRC can look into: (1) MRC would contribute more to environmental protection if findings and recommendations are used by MCs for planning and development. For this, further capacity building (political and diplomatic skillset) and production of policy briefs is highly recommended, (2) Procedures should be revisited periodically to reflect current developments, together with updating guidelines to guide better implementation and foster cooperation among member countries, (3) the Basin Development Strategy (BDS) should focus more on the gender dimension and socio-economic development thereby adding value to MRC's role. The planning process for the BDS should involve line agencies more, to ensure that different sector's needs are adequately represented so that MRC can provide them with the right form of support. Together with regional needs, the BDS can also reflect country needs if MRC pays closer attention to local knowledge and local practices, (4) Maintain an accurate information-sharing portal with good sources of data, (5) More efforts need to be done in PNPCA national consultation process; especially, timely sharing of information, open invitation to all relevant stakeholders and translation of documents and information into local languages, (6) better knowledge management plan, and (7) a feasible uptake strategy.

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In line with the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aims at achieving sustainable development through inclusiveness, efficiency and equality with the principle of leaving no one behind, MRC has been working on some initiatives and new approaches to have better engagement and collaboration with civil society and private sector at both national and regional level. MRC can promote and facilitate broader cooperation and collaboration among different stakeholders and actors including CSO's and people in the region, to bring policy makers, technical experts and civil society to the same table to discuss common benefits for the Mekong people.

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## Introduction

MRC's key mandate is to facilitate transboundary water cooperation among Mekong countries. To achieve this outcome, MRC has developed and adopted a number of key processes and tools including knowledge generation (studies and guidelines), basin development planning, strategic planning, regional procedures for sustainable water use such as PNPCA, national indicative plans (NIP) etc. Given the fact that considerable efforts and resources are needed to implement these instruments and processes, it is important that their relevance, effectiveness, impacts, efficiency and sustainability are reviewed, assessed on a regular basis with the inputs not only from MRCS and NMCs/line agencies but also other key stakeholders that MRC has engaged with.

Furthermore, MRC has recently undergone significant organizational change towards decentralization or assumption of greater responsibilities by Member countries. MRCS will become leaner river basin organization with less staff and resources. MRC needs to adapt to this change and at the same time strengthen its role to support Mekong countries. Under this context, it is essential that MRC prioritize and focus its efforts to most strategic work and effectively engage and collaborate with key stakeholders to enhance the overall impacts. Obtaining a clear understanding of MRC key stakeholders' perceptions and expectations towards MRC's role and contribution is vital to inform and improve MRC's on going and future work to fulfill its mandates.

GIZ supports the MRC in transboundary water management in the Lower Mekong Basin with a focus on sustainable hydropower and climate change. One of the key objectives of the program is to support MRC in increasing the confirmation of different stakeholders on the effectiveness of MRC contribution to transboundary water cooperation.

Therefore, GIZ has been supporting an evaluation of MRC's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability with regards to its contribution to transboundary water cooperation through conducting in-depth interviews for 2016-2017, 2017-2018 and now 2018-2019 with the key stakeholders that MRC has engaged.

Results of these interviews shall further inform MRC on what areas are most relevant to its stakeholders, how to improve its processes and approaches, and how to improve its stakeholder engagement process overall. Therefore, the objectives of the evaluation interview mission were to:

- (1) Evaluate the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of MRC mandates as well as the progress of MRC towards enhancing its instruments and processes to fulfil these mandates.
- (2) Evaluate the perception and (changing) expectations and attitudes of different stakeholders towards MRC's contribution against the potential economic, social and environmental, regional economic cooperation, peace and security, governance benefits of transboundary water cooperation.
- (3) Identify (changing) critical factors that cause the success or limitation of MRC in facilitating the potential benefits of transboundary water cooperation.
- (4) Recommend ways to enhance MRC's roles and contribution in facilitating transboundary water cooperation and stakeholder engagement.

(5) Inform MRC-GIZ Cooperation Programme on the ways to improving its support to the MRC.

## Methodology

### Step 1: Identification of all stakeholders

All stakeholders are identified based on a stakeholder mapping. Stakeholders are grouped in three sectors (government, private, civil society) and at different scale/levels of operation (national/sub national, regional, international). The list of these groups is mentioned in the table 1 and 2 below.

It is noted that affected residents/community recognized as important stakeholder who are considered as indirect beneficiaries under MRC mandate and its governance structure are not approached directly in this evaluation. MRC has expanded its reach to the public through collaboration with national and international NGOs and associations / coalitions that are working with or representing local communities. These are actors that MRC engages directly with and which will be considered as representatives of the local communities in this evaluation.

*Table 1. Stakeholders of Public Sector*

	<b>Government/public sector</b>			
<b>National/sub National</b>	River basin orgs	Line agencies	SOEs	
<b>Regional Mekong, Greater Mekong, Southeast Asia</b>	Regional SOEs	Regional state banks	Regional intergovernmental orgs	Regional multilateral development banks
<b>International</b>	International RBOs	International development partner	International intergovernmental orgs	International multilateral development banks

*Table 2. Stakeholders of Private Sector*

	<b>Private sector</b>			
<b>National/sub National</b>	Developers	Consulting firms	Commerical banks	Business Association
<b>Regional Mekong, Greater Mekong, Southeast Asia</b>	Regional multinational corporations/developers	Regional consulting firms	Regional banks	Regional business associations
<b>International</b>	International Multinational corporations/developers	Multinational consulting firms	Multinational banks	International business association

Table 3. Stakeholders of Civil Society

Civil society sector			
<b>National/sub National</b>	NGOs	University/research institutes	Media/press
<b>Regional Mekong, Greater Mekong, Southeast Asia</b>	Regional NGOs	Regional research institutes	Regional media/press
<b>International</b>	INGOs	International research institutes	International media

### Step 2: Evaluation of stakeholder’s influence and interest

In the second step, stakeholder power and interest grid method was used to assess the level of influence and interest of all groups of actors. Based on the stakeholder mapping and desk review, the specific stakeholders are defined in the category of actors with high influence: the key players and the players whose needs to be met.

Figure 1. Power versus interest grid

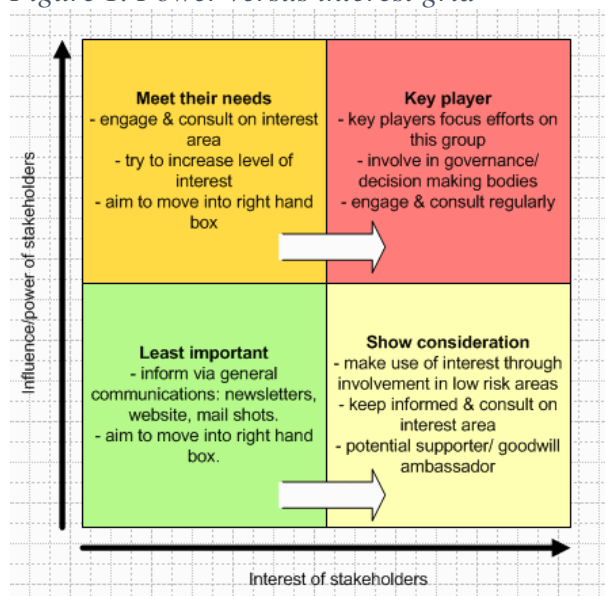


Figure 2. Specific actors of high influence



### Step 3: Selection of stakeholders for interview

In the third step, the specific number of each group of stakeholders is defined for an in-depth interview. Criteria for selection of organizations for interview are:

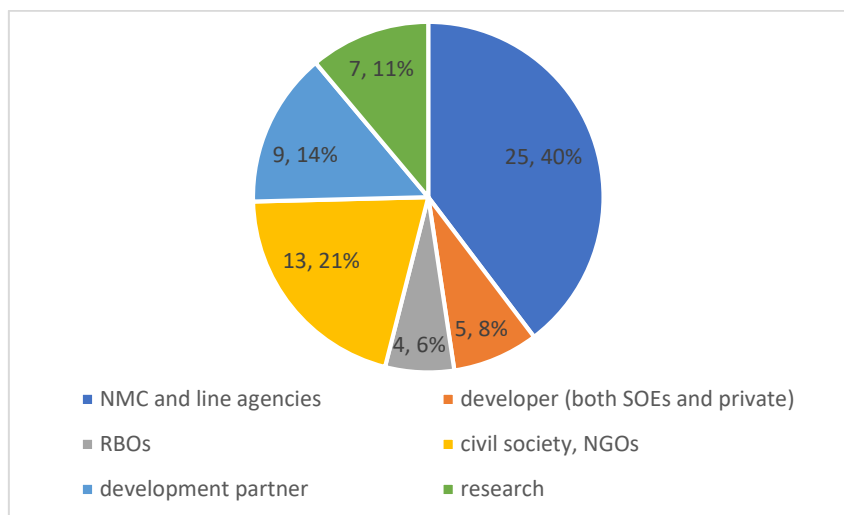
- (1) The actors that belong to the list of high influence actors
- (2) The actors who have been engaged with MRC.

Because MRC is intergovernmental organization, at least 45% of the interview stakeholders are governmental agencies. Civil society are well recognized as influential actors in the Mekong region, thus about 30% of informants are from this sector, including CSOs, (I)NGOs and research institutes. Approximately 15% of interview informants are from development partners and, and 10% are developers of the private sector. All of these actors are highlighted as key stakeholders in the MRC Basin Development Plan 2016-2020.



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63 organizations/stakeholders were initially identified and contacted, with a representative distribution as follows



*Figure.2. Proportion of interviewing stakeholders*

During the interview mission, several additional stakeholders were contacted and interviewed based on recommendations and their presence at some key events. Not all stakeholders that were identified could be interviewed. A list of stakeholders can be found in Annex B.

### **Scope and limitations**

The interview mission aims to understand different expectations and influencing factors towards MRC's contribution in the current context. With that objective in mind, the interviewees were identified based on their roles, their involvements, their activeness as well as their influence and impacts regarding MRC's areas of intervention. As water and related resources management often addresses multiple objectives, involves diverse interests, and has far-reaching effects, the mission has tried to approach multiple stakeholders from a wide range of backgrounds and sectors. However, due to the tight agenda of large number of stakeholders, the overlap with the Mid Term Review process and ongoing PNPCA process for Pak Lay hydropower project, the response rate for some specific sectors, especially the private sector was limited. It is also worth noting that the response rate not only varied among sectors but also among countries. This limits the comparison of results between countries.

During the interview process we experienced a variety of backgrounds, understanding and focus of interviewees which required a flexible approach towards the questionnaires and methodology based on the flow of the discussion and both side's interests, understandings and concerns. The mission also took advantage of the interview to explain and clarify some questions and concerns raised by stakeholders. Many interviewees raised the topic of public participation engagement and involvement in the PNPCA process allowing for MRCS to clarify certain aspects. Additionally, MRCS was able to clarify certain party's roles and

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responsibilities of different parties in the MRC governance structure and provide further clarity on MRC's roles and mandate as an Intergovernmental River Basin Organization.

Due to time constraint, the mission was unable to carry out an in-depth study of the roles of MRC in poverty reduction and socio-economic development and its linkage to other sectors beyond water resources management. The interview focused on water diplomacy and conflict management which was picked and experienced by most interviewees.

## Overview of key findings

This is the third year for this interview exercise, and to re-interview some of the same parties that were interviewed in the past together with new partners and representatives. Throughout the interviews, we observed a variety of interests in MRC work and activities by different stakeholder groups (external<sup>1</sup> and internal stakeholders<sup>2</sup>).

Interviewees have a wide range of working experience with MRC and have been engaged through different mechanisms and events, such as Procedures of Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (hydropower project PNPCA) consultation meetings at both national and regional level, monitoring MRC strategic environment assessments and other studies, participation in feasibility studies of mainstream hydropower projects and provisions of inputs to some specific MRC work such as the update of key MRC Guidelines, Strategies and Tools (e.g. PDG, SHDS, TbeIA).

For civil society group, their engagement to the MRC has mainly been in the context of hydropower project prior consultation processes (PNPCA). However, they expressed an interest to broaden their area of engagement in other areas of MRC's work. In general, external stakeholders are interested in increasing their interaction with MRC in addition to the existing consultation and communication channels. Examples for further engagement that were mentioned such as capacity building, training, joint research, peer review and more calls for public inputs during development of important products. Some other specific interests have been captured in the interview results matrix for MRCS internal use and will be used for further discussion with the interested stakeholders.

In reference to the MRC's roles and influence in water resources management in the region, most interviewees view MRC as a good technical organization and knowledge hub on water resources, contributing significantly to peace and stability in the region. MRC can enable dialogue by being a water diplomacy platform among Member Countries at both regional and national level, providing a framework for transboundary water governance. It is also widely understood by all stakeholder groups that MRC has the mandate to implement IWRM at a basin wide scale. Furthermore, MRC is considered to be a good information portal, providing

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<sup>1</sup> **External stakeholders** are non-state bodies such as NGOs, implementing partners, civil society organisations, policy advocates, research institutions, individuals, the media and other groups who have interests or stakes to lose or gain. They are the ones who can contribute information, views and their perspectives in discussion in development planning

<sup>2</sup> **Internal stakeholders** are defined as government bodies in MRC structures such as the MRC Council, Joint Committee, the MRC Secretariat, the National Mekong Committees and their Secretariats, and the principal line agencies in each member country

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guidelines and procedures as good tools to support cooperation and steer the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) towards a common approach of river basin development.

It is understood that MRC is a technical agency established, among other things, to provide capacity building and support to its Member Countries' governments. However, MRC's currently is perceived as having limited political influence on policy and decision-making processes and therefore reduced impact on management and development of the Mekong river basin. This has been identified as a limitation given the current development waterscape in the basin. It is therefore highly recommended by a wide range of stakeholders to strengthen MRC's influence on policy making and its political engagement capacities.

All interviewees acknowledged that MRC has played and will continue to play an important role for cooperation in the Mekong region. There is common agreement that the technical knowledge and coordination role of the MRC is irreplaceable. However, there is certain concern among stakeholders to whether MRC will maintain its strength and relevance in the future, in light of the changing regional geopolitics, waterscape and the rise of new initiatives such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Framework. In recognition of different Mekong cooperation mechanism in the region, it is perceived that the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework – under its water pillar – has a high degree of overlapping functions with the MRC. This is in contrast to many other more neutral mechanisms with different sectoral focus.

Even though many interviewees have viewed the LMC as a potential threat to the relevance of MRC, however, the MRC is still perceived to be of high importance, at least at this current context. This is based on a suit of different facts, one being that MRC is still the oldest, most well-established Mekong cooperation framework, building on the legally binding 1995 Mekong Agreement. Additionally, at level of regional cooperation, the vital role of the MRC as a platform for the four Lower Mekong Countries to discuss and negotiate on regional mutual interests has been recognized and is highly valued by all stakeholder groups. Meanwhile, the LMC cooperation, so far, are limited to bilateral cooperation. Information on the governance structure and establishment of the LMC management is still quite limited with a big question mark about the vision, mission and roles of the Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Center (LMWRC)<sup>3</sup>. In addition, it's not clear how LMWRC is cooperating with the Lancang-Mekong Environment Protection Center on coordination of water related environmental issues.

MRC has sound knowledge and a rich database on environmental, economic and social trends and developments in the LMB dating back to 1957; that is, over 60 years of data time series and knowledge accumulation. Meanwhile the LMC cooperation has been activated recently since 2015 and they are reviewing lessons learnt from MRC for establishment of their own data management and sharing mechanism.

As with the reduced capacity for high-level political engagement, however, MRC data and knowledge management has been seen to have some limitations and weaknesses. Therefore, it is recommended for MRC to be strengthened at different levels, particularly maintenance of an

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<sup>3</sup> The LMWRC is the assigned body of the LMC to facilitate and coordinate for water resources activities among 6 countries of Cambodia, Lao, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam and China.

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accurate information sharing portal with good data source. Further details on these recommendations can be found in the analysis and findings by stakeholder groups.

In general, MRC is a technical agency that provides capacity building for MC governments and being seen with limited influence on policy and decision-making process. However, different stakeholders still hold hopes to strengthen MRC's influence on policy making. When being asked what the added value that MRC can contribute to the region, most interviewees expressed their expectation for MRC to have a more focused scope of operations and increase its contribution to handle current and future socio-economic changes, challenges and impacts in the region. It was also expressed that MRC can and should contribute much more to social development and poverty reduction and facilitate dialogue between government and civil society through bringing policy direction, technical opinions and public concerns to the same table. It therefore is suggested that MRC should increase its power and influence on decision-making processes through further and more meaningful engagement with local community, line agencies and private sector, bilaterally and as a group.

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### *Summary of overarching key findings*

- There are divided opinions on the need to update the 1995 Mekong Agreement (MA) and the Rules of Procedure as suggested by the MTR. However, there is consensus that the implementation of the Procedures and the application of the MA principles need to be strengthened and better aligned with national priorities and current development trends.
- It is widely agreed by all stakeholders that the MRC needs to strengthen its political profile by building capacity for effective and strategic political engagement at all organizational levels, but especially within the MRCS.
- The potential opportunities that the establishment of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework represent for MRC and the added value of MRC for Member Countries as a joint platform for LMB dialogue need to be carefully assessed and harnessed. Strategic engagement with LMC is highly recommended by all stakeholder groups.
- As in previous years, the uptake and practical use of MRC key products and outputs is still perceived to be limited. The devising of uptake and dissemination strategies and the strengthening of MRC's knowledge and data management processes coupled with capacity building at the national level is strongly encouraged.
- In the context of organizational sustainability and in line with the MRC Reform and the roadmap for self-financing, as well as to increase effectiveness and efficiency it is broadly suggested that MRC should prioritize its areas of work to better align with its Core Functions.
- Increased and more direct engagement with national Line Ministries, as well as further strengthening the National Mekong Committees and building their capacity for improved coordination is widely encouraged.
- Bilateral discussions among Member Countries, coordinated by MRC, and bilateral discussion between Member Countries and MRC are perceived to increase effectiveness and efficiency as well as strengthen MRC's role as transboundary water diplomacy platform. This should be fostered and further developed.
- MRC's work within the social and economic sectors is perceived to be too weak and MRC is highly encouraged to increase its focus and enhance its skills in these dimensions.
- Stakeholder engagement processes need to be strengthened. The meaningfulness and timeliness of engagement is critical. Engaging all the right and relevant stakeholders in key processes, as well as prior to the commencement of certain processes to ease future workflows, is critical to maintain and increase MRC's effectiveness and added value to the Mekong region.

## Analysis of findings by topics and by stakeholder groups

This section summarizes views and opinions shared by interviewees from Line Ministries and National Mekong Committees<sup>4</sup>, 06 development partner representatives<sup>5</sup>, 09 CSO and NGO representatives<sup>6</sup>, 02 private sector representatives<sup>7</sup>, 04 representatives from national universities of three Member Countries and two international research organizations<sup>8</sup>.

### MRC's Role and Mandate

Regarding MRC's Role and Mandate “...*coordination and joint planning to achieve balanced and socially just development in the Mekong River Basin while protecting the environment and maintaining the region's ecological balance...*”, most interviewees are aware of that, but their views and expectation are different.

The majority of **government** representatives are aware of the advisory and coordination functions of the MRC. In their own wording, MRC's main function is transboundary cooperation and coordination among the member countries. However, some Line Agencies representatives view that MRC carries out an administrative role for the technical and financial support to Member Countries.

Most **Development Partner** representatives expressed their clear understanding of the MRC Mandate

For **CSOs and NGOs**, their views of MRCs mandate are different depending on expectation as a coordination body or a decision-making body. Most of interviewees don't see MRC as a decision-making body but also unclear on what its core mandate and functions are, especially referring to processes such as the PNPCA.

To **private sector**, both interviewees aware that it is non-binding agreement (i.e. MRC is not a decision-making body) and that MRC engages in water diplomacy and facilitation of transboundary dialogue, information sharing and capacity building.

**Research** representatives have a clear understanding of MRC's mandate and the role it plays in cooperation and transboundary dialogue.

<sup>4</sup> from all four Member Countries

<sup>5</sup> of which four are active donors and two collaborate with MRC on a regular basis through technical exchanges

<sup>6</sup> local and national NGOs, CSOs and INGOs

<sup>7</sup> They work in the energy sector, particularly in hydropower, and have collaborated with or been consulted by MRC on the development and/or implementation of different processes, guidelines and strategies (e.g. PNPCA, PDG, SHDS, JEM). Furthermore, both work directly with a wide range of government stakeholders of the MRC

<sup>8</sup> Their fields of study range from international development studies and transboundary water governance to natural and water resource management, agriculture and irrigation, fisheries, environmental management and ecosystems. All have engaged with MRC to some degree, be it through consultations, collaborations or indirectly through national processes.

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*Textbox 1. Key findings from interviews with Development Partners*

- MRC's mandate is still perceived as highly relevant. It is suggested to strengthen it though, and to improve the application of its principles.
- DPs are concerned with the potential threat the LMC can represent to MRC. MRC is encouraged to engage closely but strategically with the LMC, and to increase the political focus and capacities within the MRC not only to face LMC but also to improve engagement with MCs by elevating MRC's political profile.
- MRC's effectiveness is largely attributed to the role it plays in facilitating transboundary dialogue and providing evidence for decision-making processes. It is suggested that MRC increase its work on the social and economic dimensions of basin planning, together with a broader spatial scope (beyond the Mekong mainstream) to increase effectiveness.
- To increase efficiency and assure sustainability of the organization, it is highly encouraged for MRC to focus on key strategic functions, draft realistic and achievable workplans, to develop uptake strategies for its outputs and to improve the engagement with MCs.
- DPs share the view that MRC knowledge and data management needs improvement and should be seen as key priority.
- Stakeholder engagement has improved, but still much room for improvement is found. Particularly receiving and responding to comments and requests needs improvement.

## **MRC's relevance**

Most of interviewees agree that MRC's mandate is still highly relevant, and that the transboundary dialogue led by MRC has a high added value. However, limitations to the implementation of the mandate and the need for update have been identified by a number of interviewees.

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Several *government* interviewees expressed the need to update either the Rules of Procedure or the 1995 Mekong Agreement (MA), or both, and clarify the terminologies used to avoid misinterpretations. Moreover, there is a need to improve implementation and enforcement of both the Procedures and the 1995 MA. For those who do not wish to update the Procedures and/or the Mekong Agreement, their concern is possibility of getting a common agreement on new version.

Some *development partners* expressed their concern towards the alignment with national priorities and the weakness this can represent. With other initiatives on the rise, especially LMC, it is perceived that the MRC and its 1995 MA need to be strengthened and the application of its principles need to be improved. Nevertheless, the value of having an organization to provide a joint position to LMB countries is recognized.

*CSOs and NGOs* pay attention to improved benefit sharing and further research into trade-off mechanisms among member countries. It was suggested by some to further look into mechanisms where upstream countries make compromises for sustainable development and downstream countries provide their upstream neighbors with some form of counter benefit in exchange for the reduced impacts. Additionally, further alignment with Member Countries priorities was identified as a priority need. MRC's political influence was also questioned.

For *private sector*, they view room for improvement in the implementation of the Mandate. Particularly the operational work of a River Basin Organization needs to increase, i.e. cascade management, and the Joint Environmental Monitoring (JEM) initiative is perceived as a step in the right direction.

*Researchers* perceived this differently though. Three out of six representatives see the mandate as relevant, and to a larger degree it is still in alignment with Member Countries Priorities. The remaining interviewees, however, are of the opinion that the mandate is increasingly losing its relevance. Most interviewees believe that an update and re-alignment with current trends and national priorities would be advisable as trends and knowledge are ever-changing.

## MRC's synergies and opportunities

One of the key questions that how the establishment of other initiatives and organizations within the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) could potentially affect the relevance of MRC, and where synergies and opportunities could be identified. Other regional cooperation mechanisms (ASEAN, ADB, LMI, Japan-Mekong Initiative, India Ganga, etc...) have been mentioned and briefly discussed, however the LMC establishment and its increasing influence as one of big donors was the focus. All interviewees identified the cooperation between LMC and MRC as an opportunity in terms of better understanding different actors and players in the region and to gain access to whole Mekong/Lancang, to have better understanding of the upper trends. The funding provided at the national level by LMC could be better allocated if using the MRC's knowledge and experience. The potential role of MRC in reducing the power asymmetry between the Lower Mekong Basin and the Upper Mekong Basin has been identified by a



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number of interviewees, through strengthening the political power of MRC. MRC is encouraged to capitalize on its strengths and to use its advantage against the lack of procedural engagement by other mechanisms.

All *government* representatives expressed the high added value of MRC as a platform serving a strong joint stance for the Lower Mekong Region. It was even raised that if China would have joined the 1995 MA, it could potentially lead to an imbalance in power. Most interviewed parties agree that MRC has to strengthen its political influence and position to maintain its relevance. It is encouraged that MRC should pay increased attention to the social and economic dimensions of the basin trends to increase MRC's influence and relevance.

*Development partners* have expressed their concern on the possible loss of relevance or decrease in power of MRC due to the overlap between the LMC Water Sector Joint Action Plan and the MRC Mandate. The same focal persons at the Member Countries level for these two cooperation mechanisms has been identified as a potential threat and opportunity. In addition, the fast advancement and high funding potential of LMC initiatives add to this concern, as they appeal to Member Countries' short-term gains and development goals. However, synergies could be found and opportunities for collaboration identified. DPs suggest that MRC should closely, but strategically, engage with LMC. It is also encouraged for MRC to increase its political focus, and thus influence, in the region.

All *CSO and NGO* interviewees identified the fast advancing establishment of LMC as a potential threat to MRC due to the partial overlap in functions and financial power. They view the complement of strength of MRC's long experience in Mekong cooperation and well-developed knowledge base together with the LMC's financial potential could help maintain sustainable development in the region. MRC has a comparative advantage to LMC as they can represent a larger number of interests in the region and help balance the power of local communities and Chinese-driven investments.

*Developer interviewees* identify the emergence of the LMC as a potential opportunity to better engage with the Upper Mekong Basin. For the management of hydropower projects in particular, but also for other basin management functions such as flood and drought forecasting, it is of utter importance to be aware of developments and trends upstream. Thus, if MRC and LMC can establish a cooperation mechanism it would be highly beneficial for many sectors in the LMB. It was recommended that perhaps changing the approach by striving for a Joint Action Plan between the LMC and MRC [rather than a MoU] might harness better results.

*Researchers* view an opportunity for MRC to highlight the knowledge MRC produced to date, that they can still be relevant to current situation and development. To improve the political influence of MRC and avoid a loss in relevance, it is suggested to decrease the hierarchical nature of the organization and increase cooperation and engagement with different levels of government at all levels of the MRC, not only through NMCs and high-level meetings.

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## MRC's outcomes and products

The use of MRC Products are varied by different stakeholders.

Several **government** interviewees stated the use and/or dissemination of different tools, the outcomes of MRC studies, especially the Council Study and the Climate Change Basin-wide Assessment, and technical guidelines (even before approval, e.g. TBEIA). However, all interviewees agreed that the uptake and practical use of MRC products and outputs is still limited. Some representatives even voiced their concern that if MRC does not improve the uptake strategy and live up to the standards of engagement that are expected, Line Agencies will use tools and procedures developed in cooperation with other organizations and development partners which they have ownership. Tools need to be piloted in combination with sufficient capacity development and translation into local languages.

Two out of six **Development Partners** expressed their high appreciation for MRC Products. One DP confirmed the use of MRC products especially in their bilateral projects, and that MRC's work supports their Country's investment in the region. The other DP highly values the use of MRC tools by other organizations and stakeholders in the region but only make use of the regional results framework by adopting some key indicators into their own strategy.

Only two out of nine **CSO and NGO** representatives used MRC products. For national and local NGOs and CSOs, MRC products are often not translated into local languages and the format is not conducive for dissemination to broaden public. It is recommended that MRC produce more videos, fact sheets and summaries of key processes and findings in local non-scientific or political language to ease awareness raising, knowledge and information sharing.

**Developers** have used some of MRC products, such as the fisheries and sediment publications. One of the interviewees stated the high value of engaging with MRC experts as it provides new insight and knowledge into current developments and best practices in the sector, especially for PNPCA.

All but one **research** representatives have confirmed the use of MRC products in their work. The results of studies such as the SEA and the Council Study have been mentioned several times, and the integration of some tools such as the RSAT and PDG into the university curriculum have been confirmed in two member countries. Some MRC data has also been used for national projects implemented through some universities.

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*Textbox 2. Key findings from interviews with government representatives*

- Divided opinions on update of the MRC Rules of Procedure and/or 1995 Mekong Agreement (MA). Common agreement on the need for better implementation and enforcement of both the MA and the Procedures.
- MCs view the opportunity the MRC provides them as a joint platform to represent lower Mekong countries' specific interests towards other initiatives within the region. However, some representatives indicated that MRC should strengthen its political influence to live up to its potential and to the expectations. MCs also encourage MRC to increase engagement with LMC.
- MRC products are valued by MCs but uptake and practical use is still limited. MRC is expected to devise uptake strategies, enhance dissemination and build further capacity at the national level.
- MRC is asked to focus on quality before quantity. Focus on strengthening implementation, prioritize outputs in line with MRC Core Functions and produce clear, realistic and up-to-date products, in line with MC needs and possibilities.
- Increased involvement of Line Ministries in strategic planning processes is requested. Ownership of MCs needs to be increased by aligning better with national needs, showcasing the benefits of cooperation and focusing on national and regional processes and projects.
- Further bilateral discussions among MCs and between MCs and MRC are requested, together with improved and more direct engagement between MRC and Line Ministries.

## **MRC's effectiveness and efficiency**

The effectiveness of MRC in contributing to transboundary benefits is seen as indirect and difficult to quantify by many. MRC produces assessments, recommendations and tools to provide benefits to the different areas (environmental, social, economic, peace and security, regional integration) but ultimate impact depends on uptake by member governments. In general, social dimension is still being one of the weaknesses. Uptake of MRC products and adequate implementation of procedures should be improved to better communicate MRC's roles and values.

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One *government* representative suggested to better align the 1995 MA with national legislation to create a legal framework beyond the Mekong Agreement. The strengthening of implementation rather than production of abundant knowledge products, focusing on right approach, right data, being realistic and adapting to the actual needs and possibilities of Member Countries is also expected by several representatives. Additionally, it was reiterated that the refinement of the formulation of the 1995 MA should be undertaken to avoid unilateral interpretations. Working on uptake is perceived as fundamental for enhancing effectiveness.

Two *Development Partners* who commented on the use of MRC products agreed that MRC is contributing indirectly to benefits in all listed areas. The success of MRC contributions was attributed largely to the key role it plays in facilitating transboundary dialogue and providing evidence-based information for decision making. The contribution to regional peace and stability was rated highest, together with providing the platform for civil society to engage in dialogue given the decreasing openness towards CSOs in the region. However, some limitations to the effectiveness where mentioned, including the political sensitivity and delayed decision-making processes. Scope of engagement with the two Upper Mekong Countries, especially China, has been identified as a major challenge to effectiveness since it hampers Integrated Water Resource Management intervention to the whole basin.

*CSO and NGO* representatives have seen the impacts of MRC on the listed areas as indirect. The effectiveness in water diplomacy has been acknowledged by some. Most, however, are of the opinion that the effectiveness ultimately depends on Member Countries and benefit sharing that yet to be accomplished. Some interviewees recommend that studies should be more context and space specific, rather than cumulative for the whole basin, increasing local awareness. In contrast, others have confirmed the high added value of regional studies and impact assessments which provide a solid knowledge base for more sustainable development and environmental and social protection. Ultimately, main recommendation is continuation of information sharing, dialogue and engagement, improve the cooperation framework.

*Developers* have concern on the methods of data collection. The process needs to be systematized and a balance between the environmental and social dimensions needs to be found. MRC has to increase awareness raising and capacity building and support the harmonization of systems at the regional level for key products and processes to be effective and taken up or implemented at the national level (e.g. PDG, HYCOS).

The effectiveness of MRC is viewed differently among *research* representatives. Most interviewees are of the opinion that MRC has an indirect contribution to especially environmental and peace and security benefits through the technical work and the facilitation of transboundary dialogue among its Member Countries. Effectiveness should be increased by improving data management and sharing and better communication of results. Uptake of MRC products and adequate implementation of procedures is needed as well. The voluntary nature of MRC processes and products is seen as a limitation to effectiveness as a whole.

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With reference to efficiency, views and opinions are different by individuals. In order to become more efficient, we need politically and technically be strong. It combines of power in negotiation, prioritization with core functions and focus more on the region, utilization of riparian expertise and knowledge rather than depending on international consultants. On the other side, there are opinions that the implementation of organizational reform and decentralization process have jeopardized the effectiveness of MRC, particularly referring to knowledge management with loss of institutional knowledge and capacity. It is recommended that MRC should focus more on key strategic functions with more realistic and achievable workplan and a feasible uptake strategy. Moreover, it is expected that capacity building and better use of human resources at national and regional level would increase efficiency. One recommendation is to strengthen national focal points to become more effective knowledge platform for each member country.

*Textbox 3. Key findings from interviews with private sector representatives*

- The MRC Mandate is perceived as relevant, but implementation needs improvement. Better understanding of the mandate and MRC Core Functions could be of benefit.
- The establishment of LMC is seen as an opportunity to improve understanding and coordination of and with the Upper Mekong Basin. It is recommended to aim for a Joint Action Plan. The reduced scope of MRC work (limited to the lower Mekong mainstream) has been identified as strong limitation.
- MRC products and the engagement with MRC experts is highly valued. Some of MRC product generation processes need improvement though.
- MRC data collection processes need to be systematized and a balance between the social and environmental dimension needs to be found. Further work with Member Countries is needed to update and improve the sharing of data between the national and regional level.
- Capacity building, awareness raising and stronger involvement of NMCs and Line Ministries in key processes is highly encouraged.
- The role and expectations of and towards developers in the Joint Environmental Monitoring process needs further clarification to avoid potential misunderstandings.
- There is a clear wish from the private sector to further engage with MRC, including informal engagement prior to kicking off formal processes.

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## MRC's sustainability

MRC is planned to become self-financed through Member Countries by 2030, to ensure sustainability of the organization and its core functions.

Many *government* representatives voiced their concern with the set timeline, it might be too ambitious for at least two out of four Member Countries in terms of national budgets. In terms of ownership, member countries have shown their commitment with increasing contributions past years, They view that MRC should be able to achieve self-financing on time as long as MRC prioritizes its work in line with *Transboundary Water Resource Management*, and expectations of Member Countries are met (e.g. improved information sharing, improved political role and competencies of MRC as organization, and improved processes such as monitoring and forecasting).

*Development partners* believed that new riparian leadership and increasing contributions of Member Countries, MRC is on the right track to be self-financed and technically equipped to carry on with its mandate once DPs decrease or cease their contributions. In contrast, there are those that believe MRC is losing relevance due to new emerging initiatives, especially LMC, and that poses a risk to the sustainability of the organization as organizational sustainability is not only reliant on financial security. MRC should better align with the decentralization capacities of Member Countries, and to work with Member Countries on the uptake of MRC products and processes. With regards to ownership, one critical aspect is the role of NMCs leadership in ensuring trust and transparency

*CSOs and NGOs* representatives view that organization may be at risk after 2030, if DPs stop their contributions. There is little confidence that Member Countries will increase their contributions enough to reach self-financing by 2030. Some of the work that has been done by MRC is seen as directly contributing or aiming at contributing to a more sustainable development of the LMB. However, the strong development trends in the past years and future projections don't bode well. MRC is expected to have a

To *developers*, the sustainability of MRC will depend on the contributions of DPs and Member Countries. They need to support the MRC in maintaining its relevance both financially and politically. Ownership of Member Countries could be enhanced through capacity building within and among National Mekong

There is an agreement among most *research* representatives that MRC mandate is set out to contribute to the agenda 2030. However, the organizational sustainability is yet to be surely confirmed. With DPs decrease in contributions it is not ensured that Member Countries will be able to keep the organization running as it is now. It is therefore recommended for MRC to draw upon other international organizations such as the UN to support its vision and to give more time to some of the Member Countries. Strengthening capacities and cooperation mechanisms among all four countries is also seen as key, as there been seen to be

For increasing the ownership, the interviewees see that MRC should further increase awareness and showcase benefits of cooperation and take a role in increasing the influence of MRC at higher political level. The level of involvement and decision-making of Member Countries in the Strategic Plan drafting process should be increased.

among MRC and Member Countries. For this, accurate and timely information sharing is crucial, coupled with the adequate engagement of all relevant stakeholders at political and other levels. It has been strongly suggested that MRC should gain higher political traction and engagement to better align with national agendas, i.e. a wider range of ministries in high level meetings (MRC Council and Summit)

greater influence on making a change, especially on hydropower development. Some interviewees suggested that Member Countries which deriving larger benefits of an effective MRC (i.e. downstream countries), they should increase their proportion of the contributions.

Committees, with a special focus on their role as an effective coordinator at country level. NMCs should also be strongly involved in the piloting and scaling up of projects.

asymmetries in resources and capacities among them. Here, the increase in ownership through increased negotiation capacity, further strengthening national focal points and a strengthened knowledge sharing mechanism is recommended to foster organizational sustainability.

*Textbox 4. Key findings from interviews with civil society representatives*

- MRC Mandate is perceived as relevant but effective implementation is seen as very limited. More research into benefit- and tradeoff-sharing mechanisms together with better alignment to national agendas and identification of common interests is needed.
- LMC can be a potential threat with partial overlap in mandates and bigger financial resources. However, MRC has better open stakeholder engagement. It is encouraged for MRC to enhance its political profile.
- Effectiveness of MRC work has yet to be seen, as it depends on Member Countries uptake which is still seen as limited. MRC is encouraged to increase and continue information sharing, improve the cooperation framework and increase dialogue and engagement.
- The limited spatial scope of MRC work (mainly Mekong mainstream) is seen as strongly reducing effectiveness. MRC's weak capacities to work on the social dimension, in particular on gender, as well as the knowledge and data management processes.
- Strengthen cooperation between the different bodies of the MRC, particularly NMCs and MRCS. NMCs should be reformed, be attributed more political influence and the scope of Line Agencies involved broadened beyond MONRE.
- Timely and more meaningful engagement with stakeholders is strongly encouraged, as well as the consolidation of an appropriate stakeholder engagement framework.

## MRC's stakeholder engagement

The stakeholder engagement process is seen to have improved, but further room for enhancement has been identified.

For internal stakeholders, it was expressed that MRC needs to provide information and engage in a timelier manner, and that engagement at national and regional level initiated by the MRCS would be of benefit. In line with the results of previous years it was also voiced that the indirect engagement of MRC with line agencies (through NMCs) can, in some instances, limit effectiveness. Therefore, it is recommended to take a mixed approach and MRCS should have the freedom to engage the relevant ministries directly. In line with this, and to smoothen and improve the national budgeting processes, MRC should include ministries such as the Ministry of Planning and Investment or the National Assembly in key meetings, to raise profile of the MRC, to keep MRC related work being highlighted in government agenda and enabling process of budget allocation.

For external stakeholders, the process needs to become more meaningful. Particularly, the receiving and responding to comments and request within or outside of specific consultation processes needs to improve in quality and timeliness. Increased engagement with CSOs and local NGOs is desired. These interviews are perceived as valuable however, and should be continued on an annual basis, as they can contribute to strengthening the stakeholder platform. The lack of feedback on how comments are being taken up or addressed and the untimely engagement processes is being perceived as a lack of interest from MRC towards stakeholders. Furthermore, the engagement of a wider range of stakeholder within governance meetings is encouraged in order to increase transparency and inclusiveness. Having the right stakeholder present, the right information and thus being able to provide adequate answers would strongly enrich the process (e.g. developers can present the hydropower project at PNPCHA forum, as they can answer questions related to the design better than members of the NMCs). This would foster more meaningful discussions. It was very clearly stated that further engagement with the private sector is wished and expected, and that informal engagement prior to the kick-off of main processes such as the Prior Consultation process would be of high benefit.

### *Textbox 5. Key findings from interviews with representatives from research community*

- The update of the MRC Mandate and the re-alignment with national priorities and current trends is recommended.
- It is recommended that MRC should increase its political profile, to decrease the hierarchical nature of the organization and to allow political engagement to occur at all levels.
- MRC products have been used in research and studies and further engagement and potential cooperation would be highly welcomed.
- Even though MRC's impact is perceived positively, the weakness of the social dimension has been pointed out yet again. Data and knowledge management as well as output uptake are also seen as key priority areas where issues need to be addressed to increase effectiveness but also efficiency.
- Strengthening capacities and cooperation mechanisms within and among Member Countries, as well as empowering national focal points and improving national negotiation capacities could highly contribute to organizational sustainability.
- Further engagement and collaboration with research group as well as broadening the scope of stakeholder engagement by increasing the diversity of sectors



## Conclusions and recommendations

For sustainable development in the Mekong, stakeholders expect to see a stronger political and technical influence of MRC in water resources management and development in the region. Diversified approaches are needed for which both top-down and bottom-up strategies can be used depending on the context. Political influence should be a long-term forward-looking vision. MRC needs to expand its partnerships in the region in a strategic manner and harness more political buy-in from MCs through high-level political engagement. MRC should develop a strategy on how to explore (new) ways to link MRC products to the policy level. Uptake of MRC outcomes and products has to be a key issue, as a tool supporting political strength of MRC. The outcomes of studies need to be better disseminated and tools should be piloted for a wider benefit sharing. Some suggestions for such exploration can include but not be limited to (1) issuance of opinion pieces reflecting MRC role in Transboundary Water Cooperation, (2) hold policy fora and discussions at MRC on (transboundary) water resources management, water-energy-food security nexus, and other relevant topics (3) maintain a regional approach, but with consideration to the local context through high-quality products and have country case studies (pilot projects), (4) increase the effort for uptake to make sure MRC products, guidelines and tools will be considered and included at the national level, i.e. key strategic functions with more realistic and achievable workplan and a feasible uptake strategy, and (5) better knowledge management plan and strategy.

For the well-being of the Mekong people and to support regional cooperation and economic development, MRC's contribution can be more efficient through environmental related intervention, especially if findings and recommendations are used by MCs for planning and development. MRC should produce more policy briefs that support planning process of the Member Countries. In addition, there should be an increased focus on benefits sharing among different sectors, with broader participation of high-level government representatives and Line Agencies. The Basin Development Strategy (BDS) should focus more on the gender dimension and on socio-economic development, opening the way for more engagement from MRC on these topics and thus adding to the value of MRC's role. The BDS drafting process should strengthen the involvement of Line Agencies to make sure the needs of different sectors, specific national needs and the role of MRC in supporting and coordinating those sectors is adequately reflected in the final Strategy.

Internal coordination has always been a challenge, especially regarding transboundary cooperation. Further national engagement both through the Line Agencies and through the involvement of national and regional consultants is recommended. There is also a need for better coordination and the identification of topics/issues that are better discussed at the bilateral level, to help address any potential conflicting national laws. It is recommended that capacity gaps should be addressed at national level, meanwhile roles and responsibilities between NMCs, MCRS and Line Agencies should be clarified and expanded.

With regards to MRCs Mandate and functions, the 1995 Mekong Agreement has proven to continue being the most effective and relevant cooperation framework in the region, continuing to effectively ensure and encourage the commitment and willingness for cooperation among Member Countries. To further ensure its successful implementation, the MRC Procedures should be revisited periodically to reflect current developments and changes, with updated guidelines to better guide implementation and encourage further cooperation among Member Countries. In addition to MRC's work on the Mekong mainstream, certain attention to tributaries needs to be given to ensure adequate mitigation of transboundary impacts of

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developments such as irrigation schemes, hydropower projects or navigation. Most interviewees agreed that MRC should operate on a wider spectrum coping with changes in the context of water resource management as well as new developments in the region. MRC can contribute much more to social development and poverty by expanding its function to other technical work and in joining efforts with others, for example, (1) more support and initiatives toward drought management and mitigation, (2) expanding scope of water quality in dealing with chemical control on the river, and (3) plastic debris strategy on the river.

Being a technical organization and knowledge hub on water resources, contributing significantly to peace and stability in the region, MRC should maintain an accurate information sharing portal with good data sources. Data and knowledge management is suboptimal. Better information sharing, and a robust data management system have been identified as one of priorities that needs to be addressed immediately. The promotion of MRC products should be improved by adopting more interactive and non-technical formats. Documents and publications should be designed in an infographic style with easy understandable language and translated into local languages.

Strengthening partnerships and broaden the engagement with stakeholders are important throughout implementation of MRC work and activities. MRC should maintain and strengthen collaboration and cooperation with other regional cooperation mechanisms through multiple coordination mechanism including existing dialogue meetings, technical working groups, MoU, joint researches and studies and data sharing. Data sharing with China should be strengthened to enable whole basin planning.

Moreover, engagement with different stakeholders will help to shape MRC contribution in the social development. MRC should (1) work more with youth, (2) create a platform for open discussion with people in the region, (3) more engagement with local community through joint monitoring network, (4) invite CSOs in research and project activities, (5) involve CSOs in the JEM and monitoring process, and (6) engage CSOs and private sector in some relevant technical working groups.

In line with the Agenda 2013 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), many interventions and approaches have been implemented by different organizations, including MRC Development Partners and Member Countries and partners, toward achieving sustainable development through inclusiveness and efficiency and equality. With that approach, all organizations are expanding their cooperation and support to make sure no one is left behind at both national and regional level, of which civil society and private sector should be engaged more.

In such direction, MRC has been working on some initiatives and new approaches to have better engagement and collaboration with civil society and private sector. MRC should facilitate broad cooperation and collaboration among different stakeholders and actors including CSOs and people in the region, to bring policy makers, technical experts and the Mekong people to the same table to discuss common benefits for the people in the Mekong region. It is viewed that currently MRC doesn't have a strong influence on decision making process, however MRC can gain more influence if it increases engagement with local communities.



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