

Mekong River Commission Summit in Laos: Looking for Synergies

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It is a well known fact that Mekong river Commission brings about the aspirations of the lower riparian countries of Mekong through regular dialogues on issues related to water resources management development, addressing issues such as plastic pollution, and developing expertise in critical areas related to climate change, food, and management of catchment area of the river basin. One of the challenges that most of the Mekong river countries have been facing is related to the irregular flow of water particularly during the floods and the drought season. Under the 1995 agreement among the Mekong river countries there had been clear cut stipulations with regard to collective cooperation for promoting sustainable development along the Mekong river basin. However, this agreement needs a review given the fact that it has been more than 28 years since the agreement was signed.

There is no denying of the fact that on issues like areas of cooperation projects programs and planning, protection of environment and ecological balance, sovereign equality, and territorial integrity and also addressing issues related to state responsibility and freedom of navigation as well as emergency situation under the 10 articles which have been envisaged in the initial draft. There is however need for introspection particularly under article 11, article 12, article 13, and article 14 which deal with institutional framework and these have been not very effective in terms of joint planning and making budgetary

allocations with regard to Mekong. Furthermore, there is a need for effective consultations with regard to training and capacity building among the Mekong countries particularly in regard to riverine communities which have been displaced and have been badly affected with the low fisheries catch during the lean season. These issues also need to be addressed from the point of view of increasing external debt on lower riparian countries. The increasing commodity costs and inflation has impact on the local population. Given the fact under article 37 there is a stipulation with regard to amendment modification, supersession, and termination, it would be prudent that the Mekong river Commission countries should undertake effective consultations to make this agreement much more in sync with times. With the disturbed water flow and reduced riverine areas , there is an immediate need to regulate the usage of water and work on a realistic basis on the sustainable development of the Mekong river basin.

While there is no denying of the fact that there are effective procedures for data and information exchange and sharing but there is no data fusion centre which can help scientists and agricultural experts to understand the different aspects of water flow particularly related to water resources ,topography, navigation and transport, flood management and mitigation and administrative boundaries as well as promoting tourism along the riverine areas.

There has been much more digitization across the global level with regard to monitoring of water use and effective transparent institutional mechanisms for undertaking prior consultation and agreement. One of the major challenges has been related to sustaining the tributaries of Mekong and effective mechanisms for improving water quality and flow of the mainstream Mekong river system.

Even if one looks at the Mekong basin development strategy and Mekong river Commission strategic plan 2021 to 2025, it needs to be seen from the point of view of how funding and capacities particularly in the technical domain can be undertaken between the four member countries namely Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

There is an acknowledgement that these are carefully drafted basin development strategy and strategic plans but there are important considerations which need to be accounted for particularly related to data collection, evaluation of data, and maintaining the ecological biodiversity along the Mekong river basin. There has been enough funding which has been coming from European nations and others but in terms of collecting data particularly related to fisheries capture, agricultural effects, migration of population, impact of greenhouse gas emissions and expanding the Mekong river Commission secretariat there is a need for select task force to work on these aspects .

In areas such as Laos and Cambodia with the building of dams while there has been overall prosperity but there has been reduced opportunities for people living along the basin which are dependent on fisheries and have limited expertise in developing expertise in other kinds of occupation. In this regard a comprehensive strategy should be built which should promote vocational training and also engaging people in packaging and distribution of products which are based on the river.

Vietnam has been effective through its initiative such as undertaking space based satellites and developing capacities which can help in geospatial mapping, undertaking low water yield rice varieties, crop base research, and helping the Tri-junction between Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam to develop as a major transit hub. With the development of ports and necessary road infrastructure within Vietnam, it is expected that it is going to help other countries such as Laos and Cambodia which are located close to the Vietnam border. Few of the important elements which can help in regional development is developing of transborder infrastructure and promoting tourism along the Mekong river. In this regard the lower per capita income countries such as Laos and Cambodia can developed resilient societies and also better integration with fast developing Vietnamese economy. In fact Vietnamese ports along the southern coast could be one of the important elements of promoting trade and infrastructure in the Mekong sub region.

Another aspect can be promotion of labour migration from Laos and Cambodia to work in Vietnamese factories for a limited time under the labour permit program. This way during the lean season the labour can on their livelihood from Vietnamese industries and thereby support their families. Vietnam has also worked on primary healthcare centres and this initiative should also be expanded to the other Mekong sub region countries particularly Laos and Cambodia given the increasing health costs and the lack of necessary infrastructure. The US has also been providing necessary support through equipment and medicines right since the Vietnamese chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020 and therefore there is need for network of primary healthcare centres and imparting training to local women for promoting basic care to the pregnant woman. Another important aspect could be providing short term loans for the people living along the riverine area for purchasing fishing nets and other equipment. In this context

Vietnam can undertake providing micro financing and loans to this local fisherman.

Efforts can be undertaken to providing alternatives to plastics so that reliance on plastics can be reduced and thereby the pollution can also be managed. Vietnam being the last country of the Mekong river basin-needs to undertake these so as to product its own biodiversity.

Vietnam can also undertake the personnel training programme further by training the officials and technical staff in undertaking data collection and information sharing. In this context India can also help in building capacities. In terms of developing digital repositories and better software applications, India could be the one destination which can help in weather monitoring and also predictive aspects of impact of water flow in certain areas. India can also help in geospatial mapping and also comprehensive satellite imagery for better planning of the dams and regulating water flow. One important angle which needs to be considered is desilting of the dams which can be catastrophic to the larger biodiversity of the Mekong river.

One of the initiatives which Vietnam can undertake is related to undertaking extensive study with the help of international institutions such as World Bank to understand the requirements of the coastal communities living along the river and thereby develop

specific projects and orientations which can help these communities in developing better livelihoods. Also with the help of India and other countries which are lower riparian countries it can develop a global consortium of lower riparian countries which can share data and best expertise in the related fields.

With regard to developing better expertise in water resources management and also undertaking effective programs for sustainable development, there is a need for pilot projects which can be undertaken in each of the countries and thereby develop effective programs for the long run. One of the important challenges related to Mekong river Commission has been primarily with regard to technical expertise, lack of hydropower experts, and also undertaking training programs with other international institutions which have developed effective modelling through better data management and information sharing. Vietnam along with Thailand can organise large international conference which can discuss challenges related to food and water security involving developing countries to share the expertise and suggest means to reinvigorate water flow of Mekong. In this regard it will be fruitful to involve different institutions at sub regional level such as Mekong Ganga cooperation, greater Mekong cooperative initiatives, and other regional bodies which can help in capacity building and training of experts.

Just like in the case of maritime security, Vietnam has undertaken effective dialogue mechanisms it will be prudent to develop consensus on the management and protection of Mekong River for a long term strategic planning which should be till 2045.

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