

Towards a Multi-Stakeholder Platform in the Mekong Basin

The UNDP Shared Waters Partnership (SWP), hosted by SIWI, undertook a broad survey and analysis of relevant non-state actors to identify opportunities and entry points to improve engagement between state and non-state stakeholders in the Mekong River Basin. The results indicate an overwhelming interest to form a new Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP) that complements existing institutions and networks to directly enhance regional intergovernmental processes, stakeholder engagement and regional cooperation.

The challenge

Governing the development and management of the Mekong River, one of the largest and most populated transboundary river basins in the world, is a complex challenge. It requires balancing diverging interest and priorities from different countries and actors. The six countries sharing the river (Cambodia, China, Laos P.D.R., Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam) all have legitimate, but often competing interests with regards to development.

In order to manage the wide-ranging aspirations and needs of each country, several intergovernmental platforms have been established to help countries progress their development plans in concert. However, while regular dialogue between countries takes place at a high diplomatic level, the engagement with broader non-state actors has been insufficient.

At best, the lack of formalized and transparent engagement with non-state actors is a missed opportunity by active intergovernmental platforms who could be making better use of highly capable and regionally focused organizations in order to optimize water resources management and development. At its worst, the absence of sincere engagement can increase tensions within the basin at the local or grassroots level, leaving vulnerable populations increasingly uncertain of their future food, water, and energy security.

Establishing a multi-stakeholder platform (MSP) for non-state organizations would benefit Mekong governments and intergovernmental platforms, providing them an avenue:

- To have a more sustained engagement and a more regular, systematic and institutionalized outreach to stakeholders.
- To share plans with stakeholders and researchers and get feedback on specific projects and to share such feedback with developers and other relevant actors – something not done regularly in the past.

Methodology

Some 39 regional organizations responded to an electronic survey*, 28 of whom also participated in follow-up interviews, relating to:

- Each organization's mandate, functional scope and capacity with regards to issues pertinent to Mekong water governance and cooperation in the Mekong River Basin;
- The nature of each organization's relationships and interactions with other stakeholder groups within the basin; and
- Their perspectives on the formation, design and purpose of a multi-stakeholder platform within the Mekong River Basin.

*The survey was sent to 100 non-government actors operating at the regional level; the criteria being that they are organisations that belong to or participate in a network or organisation that operates between two or more countries within the Mekong River Basin, including: regional, national and international NGOs/networks/CSOs, regional business associations or forums, and regional academic, university or research organisations, networks, think tanks or programs.

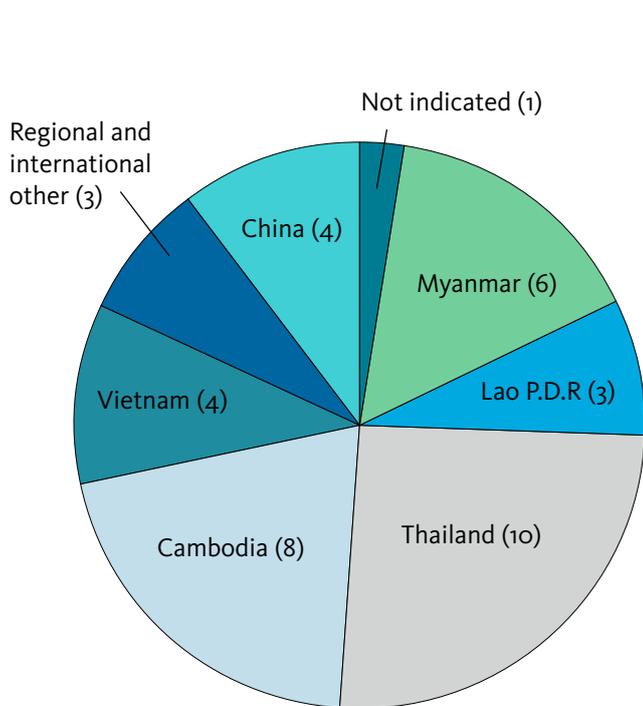


Figure 1: Survey respondents by riparian country.

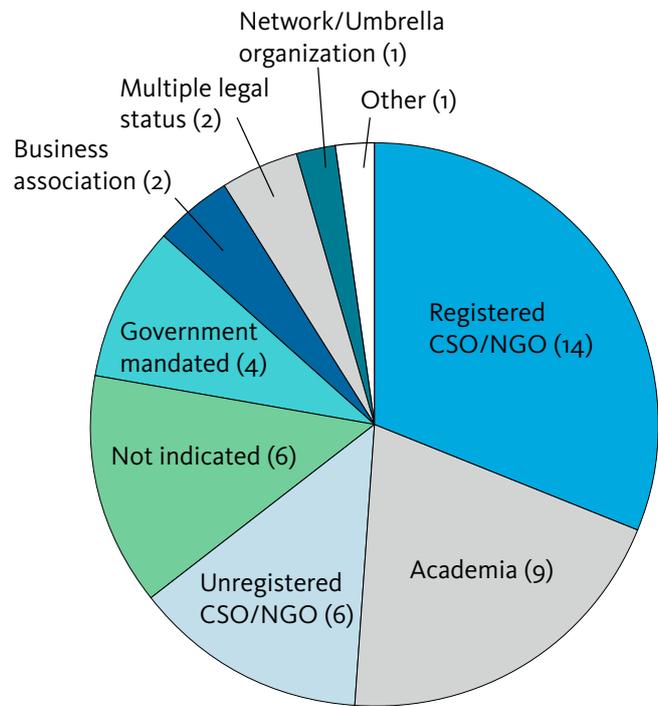


Figure 2: Survey respondents by self-identified legal status.

The findings of the survey were subsequently shared with select respondents in a meeting in Bangkok in November 2016 in which participants discussed the potential form and function of the proposed MSP. Ideas and questions that emerged from this discussion were then deliberated with representatives from the Mekong River Commission and Lancang Mekong Cooperation in separate sessions.

The findings

There is a need for broader stakeholder engagement in the Mekong Region | Despite the existence of a number of prominent regional water governance-related initiatives, criticisms abound around their lack of inclusion of non-state actors and their often inadequate and partially transparent communication and engagement approaches.

This marginalizes the inputs of the tens of millions of community members affected by water infrastructure developments, and constrains their understanding of development plans.

Additionally, there are several organizations in the region that have valuable experience and expertise in the field of natural resource management, but there are few opportunities for them to contribute particularly at the regional level in a formalized or consistent way.

Existing regional water governance institutions:

1. Mekong River Commission
2. Greater Mekong Sub-region
3. Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism

Regional organizations are very supportive of the idea of a multi-stakeholder platform | The stakeholder mapping found that there is very positive support for a multi-stakeholder platform. 34 (out of 39) organizations said they see value in establishing a multi-stakeholder platform that is at regional level,

includes all six countries, and connects and engages directly in regional intergovernmental processes. The remaining five respondents were also supportive, but noted they would like it to build on existing platforms.

What relationship would the multi-stakeholder platform have to the Mekong River Commission | Respondents see the Mekong River Commission (MRC) as an important target for engagement, and the proposed MSP as giving the MRC a clear entry point for stakeholder engagement in the region. However key concerns included the limitations of the MRC in influencing national governments, information sharing, and its greater focus on lower Mekong basin countries, with less engagement with China and Myanmar.

They emphasized that the platform should not be linked only or primarily to the MRC, but maintain its independence. It should engage at a regional scale not only with MRC but also with the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, Greater Mekong Sub-region, and ASEAN where appropriate.

Priority issues for regional organizations | Respondents were asked to select their organization's top priority Mekong River Basin (MRB) issues from a list of possible options. The list was identified from the basin needs and challenges described in the MRC Strategic Plan 2016-2020, The Basin Development Strategy 2016-2020, The 1995 Agreement and expert opinion. Respondents also had the option to write in an 'other' issue. 37 out of 39 responded to this question. While the respondents were asked to identify only three priority issues, many answered with more than three.

Top 5 priority issues for regional organizations:

1. Hydropower development
2. Transboundary water governance
3. Climate change
4. Environmental degradation
5. Energy

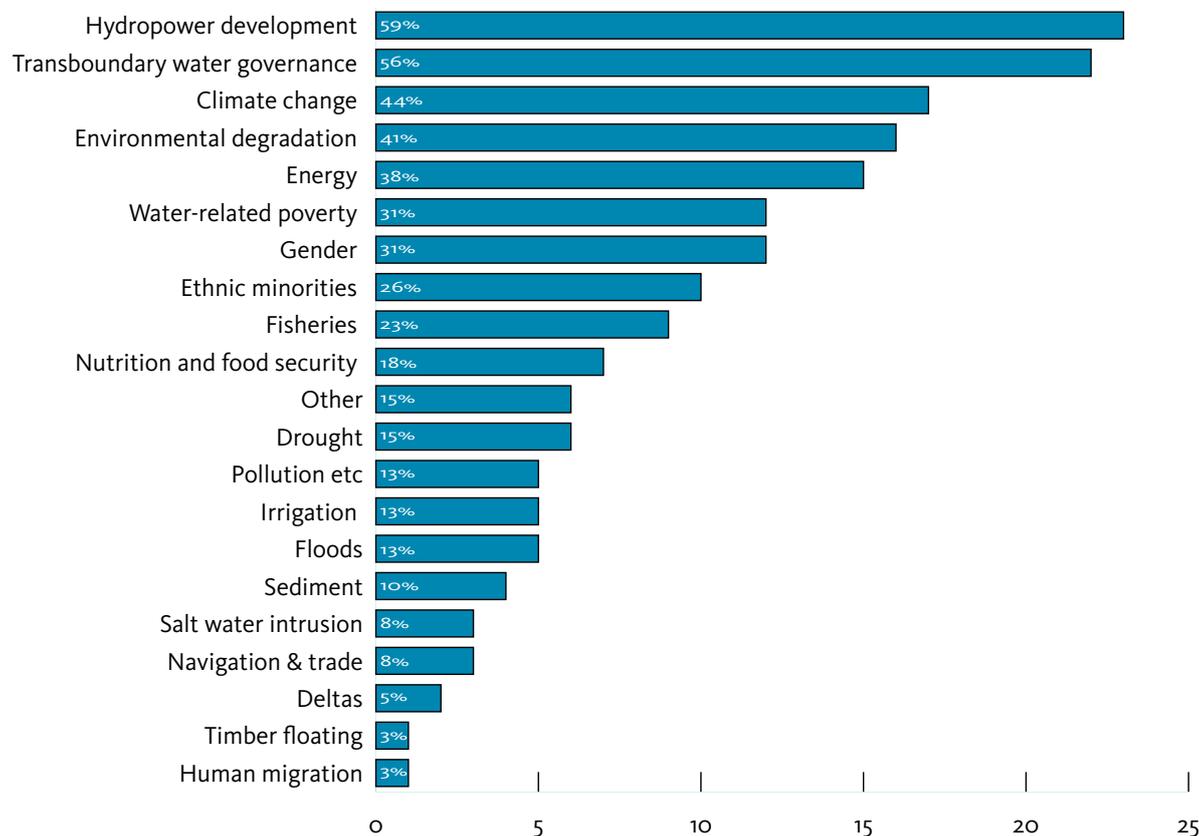


Figure 3: Priority of Mekong River Basin issues selected by the 39 participating regional organizations.

Recommendations

The results of the survey and the discussion with stakeholders in the meeting in Bangkok in November 2016 indicate that a Mekong Basin MSP could take on the below priorities and structure:

Priorities

- Improve dialogue, networking and cooperation
- Coordinate activities and interventions
- Capacity building
- Provide regional dimension to national level consultations
- Represent views from all countries in a shared vision
- Promote shared benefits across the basin
- Influence donor strategies
- Facilitate learning and information sharing
- Influence official platforms (MRC and LMC)
- Knowledge dissemination to bridge policy and science
- Establish neutral platform
- Reconcile conservation and development agendas

Design

- A small Secretariat, hosted by an existing legal entity
- Broad outreach functions
- Independent, neutral, impartial
- Strong legitimacy and good relations with stakeholders, both non-state actors and official governments

Potential hosts

- University or consortium of universities
- SIWI, IUCN, WWF, CGIAR/WLE, SUMERNET/ SEI, Save the Mekong, VRN, Save the Salween

Next steps

This report will be translated into Mekong languages and disseminated for further discussion with key stakeholders. An interim group of focal points has been identified (with representatives from SEI, SIWI, IUCN and Oxfam). This group will be responsible to:

1. Develop a concept note for the development of a MSP for the Mekong
2. Seek engagement and buy-in from Mekong countries
3. Donor engagement
4. Identify an organization to advance the development of the MSP.

About this publication

The Shared Waters Partnership (SWP), hosted by SIWI undertook a broad survey and analysis of relevant non-state actors to identify opportunities and entry points to improve engagement between official and unofficial stakeholders in the Mekong. The results indicate an overwhelming interest to form a new Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP) that complements existing institutions and networks to directly enhance regional intergovernmental processes, stakeholder engagement and regional cooperation.

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