

**Opening remarks of Mr. Jeremy Bird, Chief Executive Officer, MRC Secretariat  
at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Stakeholder Forum on the Basin Development Plan**

**15-16 October 2009, Chiang Rai, Thailand**

Mr. Sumet Sangnimnual, Governor of Chiang Rai City,

Dr. Saksit Tridech, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Vice chairman of Thai National Mekong Committee, Member of the MRC Joint Committee for Thailand

Excellencies and Distinguished Dialogue Partners

Representatives from Government agencies, Civil Society Organizations, River Basin Committees, Development Partners, Academia, the Private Sector and Colleagues

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Chief Executive Officer of the Mekong River Commission Secretariat, it gives me great pleasure to warmly welcome all of you here to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Stakeholder Forum on the Basin Development Plan for the Mekong River Basin. On behalf of the MRC Secretariat, I would like to express our sincere thanks to the Thai Government and to the Chiang Rai Municipality for hosting this important Forum here in Chiang Rai. I also thank Dr. Saksit for finding time in his busy schedule to be with us here today and for his inspiring opening remarks.

This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Stakeholder Forum on the Basin Development Plan (or BDP). In March last year, just before I joined the MRC Secretariat, a similarly broad group gathered in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR for the first such consultation. Many of you here also participated in that meeting. Over the course of our work, you have provided significant contributions to shape the focus of the basin development planning process so it can be relevant in the rapidly changing context of the Basin. Many inputs have been provided to us as part of a truly participatory and transparent BDP process.

A lot has happened since the 1<sup>st</sup> Stakeholder Consultation. Over the next two days, you will hear MRC and other partners sharing new knowledge on the Basin and its development context. This knowledge is essential for the forward looking basin planning process.

But before we start looking into the future, let us not forget that millions of people already depend on the water and aquatic resources of the Basin for their livelihoods and nutrition. But even a do-nothing scenario is not static as there are population growth and other pressures that bring challenges to existing resource use.

Moving then to the often hot topics surrounding economic development of the Basin. The knowledge we will share today brings a better understanding of opportunities and risks associated with hydropower development potential including potential fisheries losses, the rapidly changing trends in land use that

would significantly transform the agriculture production landscapes and the associated water resources demands in the Basin, and many other issues. Many of you here have also contributed to the scoping phase of the MRC Strategic Environment Assessment of the mainstream hydropower dams and the design of the Climate Change Adaptation Initiative.

These and other important issues are also provide inputs to BDP and are being considered in an integrated assessment framework of basin-wide development scenarios with the aim to determine how national developments can be achieved in a sustainable and equitable manner, as envisaged in the 1995 Mekong Agreement. But what is sustainable and for whom? Sustainability is a much over-used word and we hope to shed some light on what it means during this meeting.

MRC is increasingly recognizing the importance of stakeholder involvement, both at programme level and at a governance level. For BDP, a Stakeholder Analysis has been undertaken to support the implementation of the Stakeholder Participation and Communication Plan for basin development planning. At the governance level, MRC is improving its stakeholder engagement policy that would allow more dialogue and the consideration of stakeholders' views in the business of the Joint Committee and Council.

The road ahead is challenging. The Mekong River is abundant in water. Yet in many parts of the Basin, 30-40% of the people are still living under poverty. This explains the ambitious plans of the riparian states to exploit the water resources, for irrigation, for flood control and hydroelectricity generation that would both bring economic growth and contribute to poverty reduction. But as I mentioned, this water, the fish and other resources of the rich riverine ecosystem have been the source of nutrient and livelihoods for millions of people, especially the poor. The critical question is how to ensure that new developments would not materially affect the existing users and how to protect the sustainability of the resources.

It is the same question that faces national water resources planning in each of the Mekong countries, which, together, drive developments in the Basin. At the national level, it requires individual sector or project planning to be placed in an integrated framework of multiple uses and cross-sectoral concerns. At the Basin level, it is about how to achieve the national socio-economic development objectives without adversely impacting other riparian countries, their peoples and the Basin's ecosystem while leveraging regional cooperation. One is a microcosm of the other.

In this connection, I would like to our express sincere thanks to the MRC Dialogue Partners and welcome delegates from China and Myanmar for their participation at this Forum. Planning for sustainable development of the Mekong water and related resources is already benefitting greatly from the closer cooperation between Upper and Lower Mekong countries that has witnessed in recent years. Information sharing and technical discussions during the planning process will help us maximize opportunities such as navigation and trade, flood management and other benefits, while minimizing any risks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Against this background, the MRC and its Member Countries see the integrated basin-wide assessment framework of importance. Each country has declared its support for the principles of Integrated Water Resources Management. As witnessed by the first consultation last March and the meeting today, we are committed to seek your inputs into the assessment methodologies that will be used for the basin planning process. The process at the sub-basin, national and basin levels to harmonize the different interests and to jointly define acceptable options for sustainable basin development will be the key to success or failure.

As Dr. Saksit said, this would be possible only with a strengthened commitment and broad-based consultation and participation of all riparian states and stakeholders. Your presence here today and continued engagement in the MRC and its basin development planning process demonstrate this interest and commitment.

It is to listen to your views and generate a frank debate that we are here. The way forward may not necessarily all be clear at this Forum. But it is important that open discussions and perhaps also disagreements will occur and be recorded. Differing perspectives are inevitable when discussing water management. That is universally the case.

The outcomes of this Forum will be crucial for planners to further improve the assessments of options for sustainable basin development, for continued dialogue and for the various decision-making processes that will follow the BDP in individual Mekong countries. We are not just here to talk, but also to listen. The BDP and IWRM Strategy will form a critical framework within which future development proposals will be considered by MRC and its member countries.

I certainly look forward to the discussions and dialogue over the next two days and wish you all a very pleasant stay in Chiang Rai.

Thank you.