



Mekong River Commission

Communications Strategy

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Executive Summary

The Mekong River Commission is a regional inter-governmental agency for the sustainable development of water and related resources in the Mekong River Basin. Committed to coordinating work across many sectors, the organisation's effectiveness is dependent on communication with its stakeholders: the governmental; civil society; and private sectors of the Mekong nations.

MRC needs a higher public profile. A more timely and accessible approach to communications is also required, with the MRC pro-actively taking the lead in commenting on water and related issues in the media and making data and information more widely available.

This Communications Strategy seeks to promote the MRC as a world class river basin organisation that serves the peoples of its Member States in their need to sustainably develop the water resources of the Mekong River Basin, so as to reduce poverty while maintaining essential environmental services. Senior government officials from the four member countries have endorsed a five-year plan that recommends development of "an up-dated communications strategy". The Strategic Plan also recommends that the organisation take steps to market itself better, to ensure that products and services meet client demand. This Strategy at the same time takes note of the Independent Organisational, Financial and Institutional Review and incorporates opinions expressed by the NMCs, MRC staff, and various other stakeholders.

To improve the responsiveness of the MRC to its Member States, partners and stakeholders it is important that all communications be directed at specific audiences or groups of audiences. A list of Messages and Frequently Asked Questions is to be used to define important statements that explain the nature and purpose of the MRC. A blend of new and currently-used communications tools, products and events is recommended to transmit technical information, messages, and reinforce the MRC's position.

As the main public platform of the MRC, the websites will be redesigned to encourage greater use. Branding of these and all other communications products is a crucial element for boosting understanding and recognition of the MRC across the basin: all communications material needs to identify clearly what the MRC is. More opportunities should be taken to put out press releases, which should report on events from a results-based perspective, focusing on how MRC actions will help the people of the Basin. New reports and work programmes should be accompanied by news conferences, as should the annual rotation of the Council and Joint Committee chairs.

All Programmes will be encouraged to use the three main publications series and the distribution of these publications will be reviewed to determine if they are reaching target audiences. Pricing of publications will also be reviewed. Programmes will assess the need for new policy briefs and newsletters and management shall do the same for new general publications. Existing products should focus more on the results and benefits to stakeholders of MRC work and less on the processes and internal meetings. The lack of a current video on general MRC activities will be addressed in the near future.

Regular meetings such as the Mekong Fisheries Symposium, the Annual Mekong Flood Forum and other annual meetings can be used to promote wider recognition of programmes. Council and Joint Committee meetings will be positioned as platforms for greater interaction

with media and other stakeholders. Other regular events such as Mekong Day (5 April) can be used to promote programmes or the general role of the MRC.

To extend the reach of messages, sustain the MRC's relevance across the basin, and help meet the challenge of 'riparianisation' of the Secretariat, more documents need to be translated into the national languages of the Member States, though care needs to be taken to ensure that key messages are accurately translated. A Media Relations Guidebook ought to be developed for use in all member countries and programme coordinators will be assisted in engaging directly with the media to publicise MRC activities to a wider audience.

In the course of 2009, it is expected that the Secretariat will be in a position to hire a communications officer from a riparian country and redefine the job of the international communications officer to play an advisory role.

A renewed drive for public participation and consultation within communications activities will concentrate on practical measures rather than further research and analysis. The programmes already geared for this approach require a fully-functioning and adequately resourced communications unit to ensure that their efforts manage to include a wide range of participants and share information between them.

MRC documents that meet the criteria for disclosure as specified in the attached disclosure policy will be made available to the public through a number of sources, including the corporate website.

Significantly more resources need to be devoted to communications than at present for the activities discussed in this Strategy to be implemented, and the organisation to achieve to the goals of riparianisation and a higher profile and role for the MRC in basin affairs. The MRC could approach existing or potential development partners to seek funding for a dedicated communications project focusing on capacity building with a defined timeframe and concrete objectives.

National Mekong Committees need to consider training and support in communications for running and riparianising their own media events within each of their Secretariats.

Monitoring and evaluation procedures will be governed by the new harmonised system to be established throughout the Secretariat in 2009 and 2010 and some recommendations are given here for communications specific monitoring and evaluation.

1 Need for an MRC Communications Strategy

The Mekong River Commission is a regional inter-governmental agency for the sustainable development of water and related resources in the Mekong River Basin. Its members, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, signed a cooperative treaty in 1995. China and Myanmar are dialogue partners but not yet full members. The organisation was established on an existing body, “on the unique spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance that inspired the work of the Committee for the Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin”¹.

As an international body committed to coordinating work across many sectors, the organisation’s effectiveness is dependent on communication with its stakeholders: the governmental; civil society; and private sectors of the Mekong nations. This communication needs to be multi-directional, disseminating information, gathering news and opinion, encouraging engagement and promoting the goals of Mekong River Basin cooperation. It has been acknowledged by many sources that communication links between the MRC Secretariat (MRCS) and the National Mekong Committees (NMCs) and national government line agencies require substantial reinforcement.

It has also been noted internationally that the MRC’s purpose and relevance to current debates concerning development within the Mekong Basin has been questioned by media and civil society voices. This reflects past failures to communicate the achievements, capacity and ongoing planning efforts of the MRC, and its value to the member countries. The MRC has a relatively low public profile compared to other regional and international organisations such as the World Bank and the ADB, although it has to be recognized that these organizations also have considerably larger resources at their disposal for communication activities.

The MRC needs a higher public profile. Opportunities through regional initiatives and organisations should be fully explored, as should closer engagement with governments and politicians.

A more timely and accessible approach to communications is required, with the MRC proactively taking the lead in commenting on water and related issues. The MRC runs programmes in various technical fields, conducting research, analysing indicators and implementing activities designed to promote the organisation’s vision of an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin. These programmes require two-way communications services that provide them with appropriate information while allowing them to get their messages out to partners and target communities. Such services would further enable the MRC to engage with stakeholders across various sectors, increase interest in participating in MRC initiatives, and remind public and private bodies of the relevance of the Commission to water resources development issues.

Senior government officials from the four member countries of the Mekong River Commission have endorsed a five-year plan that recommends development of “an updated communications strategy”. The overall goal of the Strategic Plan for 2006-2010 is to help member countries use the Mekong’s water and related resources more effectively to al-

¹ excerpt from the 1995 Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin.

leviate poverty and protect the environment. According to the Plan "*communications issues are both internal and external in the MRC and are a key part of the strategy for promoting regional cooperation and conflict prevention*". The purpose of the communications strategy is to "*increase understanding and recognition of the MRC in the basin and internationally*" with a strong emphasis on publications, brochures and general information. Proactive efforts in communicating with stakeholders are expected to improve transparency and openness, identified as key characteristics of future operations.

The Strategic Plan also recommends that the organisation take steps to market itself better, to “more clearly identify and analyse the customer/stakeholder environment” to ensure that products and services meet client demand. This communications strategy addresses some of these marketing requirements and is expected to increase understanding between the Commission and its stakeholders, leading to greater credibility and trust. The current communications set up can be described as ad hoc and opportunistic, relying on consultants with short-term contracts and a small team of support staff with no defined strategic objectives and little budget.

Disseminating the capabilities of the MRC by communicating programme activities will reinforce the organisation’s position and help meet its objectives of assisting the Member Countries with meeting the Millennium Development Goals of “eradicating extreme poverty and hunger” and “ensuring environmental sustainability”. A comprehensive strategy will increase ability to present issues-based and topical information. The strategy should also enable programmes to achieve faster turn around on publication of important data and reports, and to deal effectively with sensitive issues that emerge. These include the MRC’s role in relation to environmental issues, mainstream dams, navigational channel improvements, and potential diversions of water for agricultural purposes.

This Strategy is also designed to take note of the Independent Organisational, Financial and Institutional Review of the MRCS and NMCs, which recommended a review of “practices in the control of information with a view to maintaining credibility”. Subsequent meetings of the Task Force of the Member States, established by the MRC Joint Committee to monitor implementation of the Review recommendations, suggested that this be built into a communications strategy. The Review also emphasised the importance of “riparianising” international staff positions at the International Cooperation and Communication Section and argued that not publishing information sensitive to member countries goes against the MRC policy of openness and transparency. It noted that the credibility of the MRC was threatened by a growing perception that it does not release information showing the negative impacts of developments in the basin.

One of the current weaknesses of MRC communications may be traced to the lack of materials released in the national languages of the Member States. This strategy provides the rationale for addressing this shortcoming, presenting options for increased translation of materials into Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese, and arguing that better coordination with NMCs and state agencies in each country will be crucial to the design and dissemination of materials in local languages.

2 Defining the MRC Communications Strategy

2.1 Objectives

This Strategy seeks to promote the MRC as a world class river basin organisation that serves the peoples of its member states in their need to sustainably develop the water resources of the Mekong River Basin, so as to reduce poverty while maintaining essential environmental services. It identifies the MRC's target audiences, then defines branding, publishing, dissemination and marketing practices. In doing so, the Strategy will improve the ability of the organisation to meet its vision, mission and goals (see below) and ensure that communications activities are in line with the MRC Strategic Plan 2006-2010 and also address the recommendations of the Independent Review.

Visions and Mission

VISION for the Mekong River Basin

An economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin

VISION for the Mekong River Commission

A world class, financially secure, International River Basin Organisation serving the Mekong countries to achieve the basin Vision

MISSION of the Mekong River Commission

To promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries' mutual benefit and the people's well-being.

The Strategy aims to improve the responsiveness of the MRC to its Member States, partners and stakeholders. In this regard it addresses the issue of stakeholder consultation and public participation in MRC activities, and incorporates the opinions expressed by National Mekong Committees, MRC staff, and various other stakeholders following interviews and a survey on communications needs and practices. The Strategy is also informed by the communications strategies of various relevant regional and international organisations, and by surveys of regional media.

2.2 Guiding Principles

The MRC Communications Strategy is informed by the need to:

⇒ Reinforce the Member States' ownership of the MRC and 1995 Agreement, and promote knowledge of the roles of the Council and Joint Committee;

Many stakeholders appear unaware of the MRC's role and limitations, expecting the organisation to take actions that go beyond its mandate and are unlikely given the structure and founding principles of the organisation.

⇒ Enable fast, accurate communication of the Member States' joint priorities/positions;

The MRC is an organ of the four countries, and as such should broadcast decisions and initiatives made in cooperation through national, regional and international media.

- ⇒ Focus on disseminating and making available MRC knowledge and analysis;
The immense collection of data and experience built up by the organisation and its predecessors over 50 years, and the unique research and scientific capability of its programmes must be communicated more effectively to potential partners and stakeholders.
- ⇒ Improve local accessibility to materials through more translation;
Basic communications tools, including website data, press releases, and newsletters, plus some of the renowned technical publications of MRC programmes, should be accurately translated into the national languages of the member states to improve the relevance of the organisation to its primary stakeholders.
- ⇒ Embrace openness, transparency and balance;
The MRC has at times been criticised for keeping information and the results of its work unavailable. Such an approach is ultimately unconstructive, and in the view of the Joint Committee and various development partners, information gathered and details of MRC activities should be made freely available as much as possible.
- ⇒ Make as much material as freely available as possible through web downloads;
The MRC website represents the most convenient way for most audiences to access information produced by the organisation. Distributing material electronically is economical and environmentally friendly.
- ⇒ Increase the appeal of communications materials to the public and practitioners;
Too often programme and publicity information is written and designed without sufficient consideration of target audiences. Wherever possible, materials should be written in plain, easily understood language and designed to look attractive.
- ⇒ Be responsive to demand by quickly publishing information in the public domain.
Data has more effect when fresh: reports and results from programme work should be made available as soon as possible to maximise their effectiveness in achieving the goals of the organisation.

2.3 Target Audiences

To be effective, communications need to be directed at specific audiences or groups of audiences. That is to say messages should be designed for clearly defined target groups: those whom the information is aimed at. These groups are fluid and often overlap, but may be divided for general communications purposes into the following categories²:

² These categories include all stakeholder groups of the forthcoming MRC Stakeholder Engagement Policy. As this policy is however also process oriented and communication with stakeholders is but one engagement modality, the clustering of stakeholders in categories will slightly differ. It is important that communication activities and stakeholder engagement activities are closely coordinated and mutually inform and reinforce each other. This is facilitated by the fact that both processes are housed in ICCS.

- ⇒ Government agencies and decision-makers
- ⇒ Elected officials at various levels
- ⇒ Dialogue Partners
- ⇒ Development Partners and other regional bodies

Communications with decision makers will target governments in the Mekong River Basin and development partners. Strategic engagement with decision makers has to involve NMCs. Strategic engagement with donors on MRC issues should be facilitated by the MRCS.

- ⇒ The general public
(local, regional and international)
- ⇒ Affected groups, community groups
- ⇒ Civil society/NGOs

Strategic engagement with the public should involve NMCs wherever possible, facilitated by the MRC Secretariat. Civil society targets in the Member States include mass organisations, NGOs relevant to regional water resources development, watershed management associations, and new groups as they emerge.

- ⇒ The private sector

Private-sector targets include potential sponsors, small and medium enterprises in relevant sectors (e.g. navigation), national power companies, private hydropower developers, and natural resource use businesses (e.g. the financiers of fishing lots in Cambodia).

- ⇒ Media (print, broadcast and internet-based)

Of the many media outlets the following are major targets: national and international news agencies, internet-based news services (e.g. VietNamNet), national and provincial newspapers in local languages plus in English, French and Chinese (including website editions), national and regional magazines, regional newspapers and magazines, national radio networks, international radio networks with a presence in the basin, national, regional and international television networks.

- ⇒ Youth (schools, etc)

Outreach activities aimed at school children of all ages can educate people for a lifetime on ways of sustainable interaction with the environment and sharing of resources in equitable ways. Messages aimed at children and young people also tend to permeate out among wider communities.

- ⇒ Research/academic/scientific community

Technical cooperation experts working in water resource fields constitute an important audience. Strategic engagement with such experts should involve NMCs wherever possible, coordinated by the MRC Secretariat. Among this group are engineers, environmental specialists, economists and social scientists.

- ⇒ Internal audience within the MRC and NMCs

The strategy survey revealed that even within the MRCS there is often a poor understanding of the role and functions of the organisation. The strategy recommends that this be addressed through improved inter-programme communication and more regular opportunities for interaction and informal MRC business-related discussion.

2.4 Key Messages

A list of *Messages and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)* is to be used to define important statements that explain the nature and purpose of the MRC. They should be used as a basis not only to formulate answers to specific questions posed by stakeholders and the media, but also to inform general and programme communications. A sample list of questions/messages and preliminary answers are given in [Appendix 1](#). When fully developed, the FAQs can be referred to by Directors and Programme staff whenever statements are needed in reports and when questions are asked by partners and stakeholders. The list of questions and the answers are to be revisited regularly for addition or update, according to events and policy. The FAQs will be posted on the website. Responses of various lengths are needed for different purposes and audiences, such as *Core concept; Sentence; Short paragraph; Standard paragraph and Long paragraph*. An example of a short paragraph response is given below:

FAQ on the nature of the Mekong River Commission

Short paragraph:

The Mekong River Commission is a regional inter-governmental agency established for the sustainable development of water and related resources in the Lower Mekong River Basin. Members are Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, which signed a cooperation treaty in 1995. China and Myanmar are dialogue partners who attend MRC meetings and exchange information with the member countries.

2.5 Tools, Products and Events

The branding of tools, products and events is crucial for boosting understanding and recognition of the MRC across the basin. Translating the logo into the languages of the four member states could be considered and the logo should be attached to all internal documents.

All communications material for external audiences needs to identify clearly *what the MRC is*. Over the past 12 years, MRC communications material has tended to skirt this issue. Most definitions have focused on *when* it was established, *how* it was set up, *who* makes decisions or *why* they are made, rather than what it actually is. The definitions given in [FAQ 1 of Appendix 1](#) are targeted at audiences in different contexts. Given the legally-binding nature of the 1995 Agreement, it is recommended that disclaimers be considered (the World Trade Organisation, for example, notes that simplifications used to clarify text on its website cannot be taken as an official legal interpretation of the multilateral agreement).

A blend of new and currently-used communications tools, products and events is recommended for transmission of technical information and MRC messages, and to reinforce the organisation's position.

Website

The MRC website acts as the main public window into the activities and objectives of the organisation, and as such it should offer a clear and comprehensive view into the work of all programmes. There are currently four sites hosted at the Secretariat: the MRC website, an intranet, the document repository MekongInfo, and a prototype web-portal. Although these contain much information and are widely used, they need rationalising and consolidating so that specific contents can be more easily located and accessed. Products and

services should be prominently displayed and navigation made more intuitive. New elements could be introduced, such as coverage of topical issues and a comprehensive events calendar covering upcoming activities in all programmes and projects. To attract first-time users, other new elements could include news related to member countries and news on water and related issues of regional significance.

Extension of the local-language sections of the website is required, and it would be useful to include Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese scripts on the home page. This will require additional language capabilities being available to ICCS through an established translators network. The National Mekong Committee logos should be used to highlight the existing links, which are not obvious.

Interactive Documentation Centre and Knowledge Hub

This Strategy encourages Information and Knowledge Management Programme (IKMP) plans to upgrade the Documentation Centre into a location “*for education, information extraction and outreach*” with interactive exhibits, educational materials, and showcasing publications such as maps illustrating development and conservation issues. IKMP also aims to develop an international network to exchange information with academic institutions, international agencies, development banks, non-governmental organisations and other partners. This would fit with a recent Asia-Pacific Water Forum initiative to create ‘knowledge hubs’ that will share solutions to the region’s many pressing water challenges. New communications tools and a management information system are also envisaged. A separate component includes visualisation tools for modelling scenarios and assessments as a specific output. Optional activities include three-dimensional animation to illustrate processes such as flooding, water quality development and erosion.

Press Releases

More opportunities should be taken to put out press releases, which should report on events from a results-based perspective, focusing on how MRC actions will help the people of the basin. Programmes are to be encouraged to request press releases from the Communications Unit to document each accomplishment and new initiative. Press releases should be news articles, avoiding development jargon, scientific overload and bureaucratic formulation. More press releases should be translated into local languages and circulated to the press in each country. Press releases in English and riparian languages will accompany annual reports.

News Conferences

The publication of significant reports and work programmes will be accompanied by news conferences by the Chief Executive Officer or other staff. Local and regional journalists should be invited to such events, which may be held in whichever location is most relevant to the topic. Reports not deemed newsworthy enough, or not relevant to people without the technical skill to understand them, will not warrant a news conference – however, in the tenet of transparency these will still be made freely available to the public.

Advocacy

Exchanges of visits between politicians and provincial governors in the four member countries will be encouraged. Such visits could focus on parliamentary committees dealing with foreign affairs as well as water and related resources including members of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarians Conference on Environment and Development (coordinated by South Korea) and the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (coordinated by Japan). Mechanisms for engaging more closely with parliament or assembly members must be flexible, taking into account the different protocol arrangements in each country. Regular informal lines of communications already exist with one National Assembly.

In some member countries, National Mekong Committees may wish to take the lead in engaging with politicians on a more formal basis. In other cases, the MRC Secretariat may be a more appropriate avenue. Briefing materials should be developed in the four languages to facilitate briefing sessions at the MRCS or at National Mekong Committees.

Programme Publications

All programmes will be encouraged to use the three main publications series. These are the MRC Technical Series (17 published by mid-2008, of which 13 are on fisheries, 4 on environment), the MRC Conference Series (eight published of which six are on fisheries and two on floods) and the Mekong Development Series (five published, of which four are on fisheries, and one on navigation). Special attention will be given to publishing the large backlog of programme reports and studies.

The distribution of hard copies of all serial publications will be reviewed to determine if they are reaching target audiences. New channels of distributing publications to stakeholders may need to be considered, especially to those at the provincial and district levels as well as remote areas. Books can, for example, be distributed through local government offices and NGO networks, though the success of such a move would depend upon products being accurately targeted to specific audiences. In addition to news conferences and news releases, mechanisms for alerting target audiences about the existence of new publications need to be in place.

Following the instructions issued by the Secretariat in 2007 to increase consistency in terms of corporate profile, programmes are to use the following colour schemes for programme reports and CD-ROM products:

Table 1: Programme Colour Codes

MID GREEN	ENVIRONMENT
DARK GREEN	AGRICULTURE, IRRIGATION AND FORESTRY
PALE BLUE	HYDROPOWER
MID BLUE	INTEGRATED CAPACITY BUILDING
DARK BLUE	NAVIGATION
RED BROWN	FISHERIES
PALE BROWN	BASIN DEVELOPMENT PLAN
MID BROWN	FLOOD MANAGEMENT AND MITIGATION
DARK BROWN	INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

The colour codes complement the standardised covers for programme and project proposals (pale blue), documents (mid blue) and reports (dark blue) developed in 2006.

Programmes may wish to consider the success of the Fisheries Programme’s regular newsletter, *Catch & Culture*, and assess the audience and impact for developing products that showcase their own work in a similar fashion. However, before such projects are begun, it must be ensured that the subject matter, funds and human capacity are available to guarantee a similarly high quality standard of product and continued need beyond the first issue.

Presentations

In general, MRC staff are to be encouraged to speak directly to audiences without using presentation software, unless visual information increases the clarity or effect of the message. When presentations are required, slides should add extra information to the oral message delivered by the speaker: presenters should avoid reading out bullet points on the screen to their audience. Graphics and photographs should also be encouraged provided they reinforce the message. Externally delivered training will be sought to improve the standard of speaking and presenting within the Secretariat staff. A standard dark-blue PowerPoint format available on the shared computer drive is to be used for presentations

Internal Review Process

All reports and materials to be distributed externally should pass through the internal review process, which requires the document to be peer reviewed then approved and commented on by the programme coordinator or adviser, the division director, the technical coordination adviser, the chief of the International Coordination and Cooperation Section, the communications officer, and finally the CEO.

Download, Sales and Distribution

Free download of electronic versions of publications shall be promoted, while pricing of hard copies of serial publications will be reviewed to comply with the policy of recovering the costs of materials used. Currently identical prices can be found on publications ranging from 16 to more 300 pages. A mechanism for sale of electronic versions of archive documents through the website shall be established. Money collected through these sales will recover some of the costs incurred through the software, hardware and labour required to scan and digitise archive volumes. The MRC archives can then be gradually digitised according to demand for publications currently unavailable electronically.

In general, distribution of MRC products and publications needs to be more strategically targeted. In this connection a review and updating of the addresses database for Mekong News is required.

General MRC Publications

Management will assess the need for new general publications. In addition to programme brochures, policy briefs that illustrate procedural rules in simple language may be considered. A revived statistical bulletin on water and related resources of the Mekong River Basin could complement statistics published by other international agencies.

The Annual Report requires an overhaul to make it more interesting to partners and stakeholders. The report should be more results-based, focusing on the effects of programme work for the benefit of people in the basin, and concentrating much less on internal procedures and planning meetings. One possible way to accomplish this would be to give each year a theme.

The quarterly general newsletter *Mekong News* will be revamped to focus more on the results and benefits to stakeholders of MRC work and less on the processes and internal meetings of programme administration. In addition local language versions of the newsletter should be developed. These could focus on articles of particular relevance to each member and include additional material from the National Mekong Committees.

Video

The lack of a current video on general MRC activities is recognised as a corporate weakness, which should be addressed in the near future. Given the power of video messaging and the frequent opportunities for displaying this medium, to broad range of audiences at meetings, it will be a priority of the reformed communications unit to commission a professional film maker to document the MRC. Programmes will also be encouraged and helped to make videos documenting their activities. Some materials already exist for the Fisheries Programme, and the communications unit is advising on a new video for the FMMP.

The Navigation Programme has also expressed an interest in video promotion. All these products could be used in combination for fresh footage to create a positive overview of the organisation as a whole. Such a product should be cut into different lengths for different purposes (e.g. national television stations, pre-meeting icebreaker, school classes) and should be available in all riparian languages plus English. Footage should primarily feature beneficiar-

ies (i.e. users of MRC outputs) and results, and imaginative use of graphics ought to display the MRC's unique capability in areas such as modelling, flood forecasting, and water quality analysis. Short video presentations of each programme would be an asset for the website and for an interactive display that could be featured in the MRCS lobby and at exhibitions organised at regional events. The videos could also be uploaded onto websites such as YouTube.

Governance and Dialogue Meetings

Council and Joint Committee meetings will be positioned as secondary and tertiary platforms, with greater interaction with media and other stakeholders. Ministers attending Council meetings are the public face of the commission, along with the Chief Executive Officer. Annual meetings are a unique opportunity for the chair and other ministers to highlight achievements and future developments to a broad audience through news conferences, news releases and background briefings with senior officials. The ADB approach of opening both the formal and informal proceedings of annual ministerial meetings to the media also needs to be considered. Such an approach could consider the declassification of non-sensitive documents for public distribution. For meetings of the Joint Committee, briefings rather than formal news conferences could be considered. Increasing the number of NGO observers requires careful consideration. As a first step, the number attending Council and Joint Committee meetings could be extended to observers who already take part in the annual meetings of MRC programmes.

Annual Programme Meetings / Symposia

Regular meetings such as the Mekong Fisheries Symposium, the Annual Mekong Flood Forum and other annual meetings are complementary platforms to promote wider recognition of our work. Media invitations for such regular meetings should be systematic. If possible, organisers will arrange background briefings for journalists covering the event. If appropriate, parliamentarians and business leaders could be encouraged to take part as keynote speakers.

Other regular events that can be used to promote particular programmes or the work and role of the MRC in general are Mekong Day (5 April), World Water Day (22 March), World Wetlands Day (2 February) and World Environment Day (5 June). One of these events should be targeted each year as a focus for outreach activities. Other occasions that can be considered in each country include water and river boat racing festivals. It is important that activities organised to mark events are conducted in tandem with NMCs, and they can be used to build the capacity of communications focal points and to strengthen relations with line agencies.

Where there is a clear and expected benefit, irregular public events that the MRC is invited to, such as hydropower or environmental conferences and workshops, can be used to spread information through exhibition booths and distribution of leaflets and publications. Translation of programme brochures and posters into riparian languages may be an asset at such events.

2.6 Language and Accessibility

To extend the reach of messages, sustain the MRC's relevance across the basin, and help meet the challenge of 'riparianisation' of the Secretariat, more documents need to be translated into the national languages of the Member States. Care needs to be taken to ensure that key messages are accurately translated when management communicates in other languages to non-English speaking audiences. While the risk of communicating different messages to different audiences should also be avoided, it is not always necessary to translate the full texts of releases or documents. To make texts accessible to wider audiences, it is ad-

visible to confine the translation of some documents to the key messages only. Decisions on when and how this should be done are to be made by the communications unit in consultation with programme officers/division directors.

Translation itself does not guarantee greater exposure for communications products and messages, but must rather be linked to targeted design, publication and distribution.

The survey carried out for this strategy revealed that 50% of all respondents were aware of the MRC Environment Training Kit and River Awareness Kit - the other half were “not aware at all” of these products even though the former has been translated into Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese and free downloads are available from the website. A similar proportion of respondents was unaware of the fisheries newsletter *Catch and Culture*, even though it is also translated and freely downloadable.

Servicing requests for MRC data forms a daily part of communications unit activities and the staff coordinate with the programmes to answer enquiries to the satisfaction of the public. The unit also receives requests and enquiries from international organisations and government agencies in various countries, and must deal with occasional complaints that arise. Dealing with such matters in a personal and professional manner is very important for the public image of an organisation, and it should be made clear to all Secretariat staff that enquiries should be addressed with due care and attention in liaison with the communications officer. Enquiries are often of a technical nature and require the assistance of technical staff. These matters should be dealt with in a timely and efficient manner in line with the Disclosure (and Pricing) Policy (see [Related Policies](#) section below).

2.7 Capacity Building

A Media Relations Guidebook developed specifically for MRC-related use would help MRC, NMC and line agency personnel in all member countries promote the vision, goals and mission of the MRC through their dealings with the press. Such a guide could be based on the existing Press and Publications document produced by the communications unit. This is a relatively short document (six pages) divided into nine sections (public relations; media arrangements at conferences and workshops; the website and intranet; language; styles; authorship; ownership of research findings; editing, layout and design; and printing and distribution).

Programme coordinators will be given greater assistance in disseminating their knowledge through communications activities. Programme coordinators who are confident in dealing with the media, either in their own language or in English (or both) could be given training in public relations. However, the communications officer will remain the ‘information gatekeeper’ as the first point of contact, fielding inquiries to the programme coordinators based on individual judgments of which people and organisations are able to deal with the media professionally.

Senior management, programme staff and NMCs will be given training in dealing with the media. Specialists in developing key messages and interacting with journalists will undertake a needs assessment and design and implement appropriate capacity building activities including simulated interviews. Focus points within the NMC will be identified and given assistance in dealing with the media in an effort to promote the riparianisation of the public face of the organisation. NMCs will be encouraged to run their own media events with MRCS support. This support will constitute and incorporate capacity building and training in events management.

Once advocacy tools are in place, the possibility of conducting awareness-raising activities with politicians and provincial governors will be explored. These could be undertaken through the Secretariat and the NMCs or together with other partners such as UNDP, which has good links with National Assemblies in at least two member countries through its Governance Programme.

Field trips for print and broadcast media as well as journalist training in the area of environmental reporting will be encouraged. In 2007, the ADB-funded Tonle Sap Environment Management Programme found that field trips were an extremely cost-effective way of raising awareness of environmental issues, especially if television reporters were involved. A local education NGO has since pioneered collaborative activities with an international NGO specialised in journalist training. Among other developments, Cambodian and Vietnamese translations of the WWF publication *Ten Tips for Environmental Reporting* are already being developed for launch in 2008/09.

As the Information and Knowledge Management Programme moves into full gear, management could consider the establishment of a Mekong University Network to strengthen ties with many universities in the region. Such an initiative would not only allow the MRC to share knowledge and data with a wider circle of academics, but would also expose future decision-makers and members of society to the vision and mission of the MRC. If possible, such a network should avoid duplicating the ASEAN University Network, which has 20 members including six universities from the Lower Mekong Basin. One option would be to partner with the Mekong Institute in this respect.

2.8 Related Policies

Public Participation and Consultation

Background

The MRC has since its inception been committed to including public participation in its planning, programming and activities. The current strategic plan stipulates that

“The MRC will be guided by several management principles and approaches during the 2006-2010 strategic period. These are:

- *Stakeholder participation, through close communication and collaboration with civil society, NGOs and emerging River Basin Organisations;*
- *Transparency and openness, through pro-active efforts in communication with the MRC’s stakeholders;*
- *Close communication and collaboration with emerging River Basin Organisations in the Member States can lead to more effective and active stakeholder participation”.*

However, the principles of the MRC and the recommendations of the Joint Committee require a greater level of public participation than is currently applied by programmes and the MRC as a whole.

Principles to follow

In the MRC, public participation is seen as a process through which key stakeholders gain influence and take part in decision making in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of MRC programmes and projects. Participation needs to be encouraged at two

basic levels: involvement in MRC programmes; and access to the governance structure of the organisation.

The focus in MRC programmes is on incorporating stakeholder participation in order to meet programme objectives. In the Basin Development Plan (BDP), stakeholder participation is a cross-cutting theme supporting participatory basin planning. BDP phase 2 (2006-2010) aims to engage stakeholders in a strengthened national, transboundary and regional participatory planning process with a particular focus on expanding the engagement of concerned NGOs, community-based organisations, mass organisations and civil society representatives, as appropriate to the development context. The BDP held its first BDP Stakeholders Consultation in March 2008 and a second consultation in November 2008. Other programmes undertake situation-specific public participation, engaging with different stakeholders in different ways, depending on the context of their programme and the requirements of programme development and implementation.

At governance level, having adopted an Integrated Water Resource Management approach as one of the basic tenets of its strategy, the MRC has *de facto* included stakeholder participation as a management principle. This is now further developed into a Policy for Stakeholder Engagement at Governance Level pursuant to a recommendation of the Organizational Review.

Action

The MRC has begun widening its public participation activities through the second phase of the Basin Development Plan and through increased public consultation in the Hydropower Programme. It has, in addition, initiated a revision of its Public Participation guidelines on the basis of the above-mentioned new Policy. The communications capacity of the Secretariat will be important to the success of this Policy.

Disclosure

Public communications requires a proactive disclosure policy. Although the MRC currently makes a great deal of information available, there is a perception among certain groups that much data is withheld. A Policy on Disclosure of Data, Information and Knowledge, drafted initially in 2007, sets out the administrative rules and regulations on access to data, information and knowledge held by the MRCS and details the limitations placed on disclosure of certain data, information and knowledge. The move to draft a disclosure policy was a necessary requirement of plans to develop a user-friendly next-generation portal for the MRC Information System under the IKMP. Approval of this policy will enable the MRC to clearly define what data can be made available, thus improving transparency and openness. A disclosure policy is a prerequisite for successful website management. Based on the principle of a presumption in favour of disclosure, it will also allow the sharing of more information than is currently possible. Once approved, public launch of the disclosure policy could be turned into a positive event that would help stakeholders understand the role of the MRC and provide an opportunity for further dialogue.

The draft Disclosure Policy (presented in [Appendix 2](#)) envisages that “all stakeholders have the widest possible degree of access to relevant data”. For unrestricted electronic material, the draft stipulates that information from the website may be used for “non-profit” research but must be properly credited to the MRC, the same condition applied to photographs which may not be used for “commercial” purposes”. Implementing the policy would mean that several categories of material currently not generally released would be made available for free download on the website. These include minutes of governance meetings, programme strate-

gies and documents, legal information and funding agreements, salary scales and financial statements.

Access to datasets on the website (www.mrcmekong.org/spatial/spatialdata.htm) or the public section of the MRC Information System portal (<http://portal.mrcmekong.org>) launched in 2006 is either free or subject to MRC pricing policy and copyright regulations. The draft Disclosure Policy depicts the concept of the MekongInfo website (www.mekonginfo.org) as a useful informal information platform, and its regional reputation as a valuable research tool should be preserved, even if the site is brought into the portal system.

Style Guides

A Style Guide to guide professional writers and staff looking to publish high quality publications for the MRC is under preparation. This is partly based on guidelines developed for the Fisheries Programme in late 2005. The Style Guide is important for setting rules for consistency within documents produced for the MRC, regarding spelling, presentation, usage and scientific conventions. It will provide a benchmark for Secretariat staff when writing, though it would be unreasonable to expect non-native speakers to achieve that level of writing in internal communications. Instead, **an in-house writing guide is also to be prepared to advise on preparation of internal communications and limited release reports.** This is likely to be more useful to staff with less experience of writing in English.

3 Implementation and Resource Requirements

Given the rapid speed of development across the basin and the massive scale of proposed infrastructure projects that will affect water resources, it is important that the MRC adopt a clear communications strategy as a matter of priority. A task force of representatives from each programme should therefore be appointed to implement the recommendations of this report by approving or adapting the proposals without further delay.

Issues for Task Force on Communications

- ⇒ Human resources and funding: consideration of a Communications Capacity Building Project (CCBP);
- ⇒ Policy: adoption of communications strategy;
- ⇒ Riparianisation: establishing communications networks with the RFMMC and NMCs;
- ⇒ Redesign and consolidation of the websites;
- ⇒ Translation: decision on how to proceed with translation work and policy.

3.1 Communications Capacity Building Project

If the activities discussed in this strategy are to be implemented, and the organisation is to achieve to the goals of riparianisation and a higher profile and role for the MRC in basin affairs, then significantly more resources need to be devoted to communications than at present. Additional funding should be sought for a Communications Capacity Building Project (CCBP) that will expand activities as described in this document, bringing more riparian staff and associates into the process and so making a results-based communications approach self-perpetuating. If such funding does not become available, the possibility of funding implementation of the Communications Strategy through components of IKMP and the Integrated Capacity Building Programme should be explored.

The CCBP would need to attract sufficient finances to enable the hiring of a contracted international communications advisor, to complement a full time riparian communications officer, and the existing Communications Unit support staff of webmaster, graphic designer and secretary.. Additional computing and printing equipment would be required, as would budgets for in-house translators, and travel and training to develop capacity at the National Mekong Committees, coordinate with the Phnom Penh-based Deputy Communications Officer, undertake annual initiatives, and build awareness among regional journalists and politicians.

3.2 Communications Network

As a short-term priority, National Mekong Committees ought to consider assigning communications focal points to receive capacity building and training in communication, as well as to help arrange more independent communication activities within each Secretariat. The group could then meet on a quarterly basis to coordinate individual and collective plans for communications.

3.3 Website Design

To assist with overhaul of the websites, management will establish a task force to identify areas for improvement in overall messaging, format, reorganising and adding content, adding cross links, correcting errors, and adding new features. Recommendations may also be sought from external sources, such as communications and public relations agencies or consultants.

This task force will require the input of the Information and Knowledge Management Programme, which will lead it in drafting recommendations on how to incorporate the four existing sites into a sophisticated yet user-friendly portal for MRC communications. The portal was developed within the IKMP to integrate the MekongInfo website with the Document Management System and the House Data Clearing Mechanism. The component provides for close cooperation with the communications unit, establishing a web team and improving internet infrastructure at government agencies in member countries.

A consultancy for web-site redesign is being launched in early 2009 with the aim of having a new website functional by mid-2009.

3.4 Translation

To ensure an efficient and accurate translation process, translators for work processed through the Secretariat should if possible be based at MRCS within the Communications Section. The reason for this is that all translation work must be verified for technical accuracy, and often reworked over a number of drafts. Quality-control mechanisms for translating communications materials need to be put in place, in cooperation with National Mekong Committees and line agencies as necessary. As it is the Directors who are responsible for guaranteeing the quality of translations, it would be best if all translators were able to come regularly to the MRCS HQ to discuss drafts of their work and amend these on the spot, until agreeable final versions are reached. Otherwise, significant email traffic and redrafts may occur over a long period, until the relevance of the piece in question has already passed.

Decisions on what to translate into which languages should be made after consideration of the target audience, purpose, and practical circumstances for each document or product. Programme managers and/or authors should have a clear idea of who will read published materials and how these will be delivered to the target audience. Adequate time must be allowed for finalisation of English version and the translation, verification and correction process. Press releases should be translated at least into the language of the country hosting events where the news item occurs, and preferably into all four riparian languages. Programme brochures, posters and publicity materials should all be printed in the four languages, while reports and other large publications could perhaps be translated after consideration and made available electronically, in order to minimise printing costs.

Public Relations, Participation, and Networks

For a more comprehensive approach to public relations, it is recommended that the communications unit considers using a specially adapted media relations guidebook. This could be based on the recommendations of public relations analysis of the MRC and on the EU-funded *Media Relations Handbook for Non-Governmental Organisations*. Jointly published by Independent Journalism Foundation in New York and the Media Diversity Institute in London in 2003, major elements of this 89-page document have already been adapted into Vietnamese for NGO training. Once an adaptation for MRC use is complete, the guidebook could be translated into all four languages.

The programmes which are already geared for public participation activities require a fully-functioning and adequately resourced communications unit to ensure that their efforts manage to include a wide range of participants and share information between them. Extension of this approach to new programmes and those currently not actively encouraging participation is also possible if the communications unit is given the mandate to lead the drive for greater public participation.

3.5 Quality Assurance and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

M&E procedures will be governed by the new harmonised, results-based system to be established throughout the Secretariat in 2009 and 2010, and will need to be related to the CCBP logframe, but some recommendations are given here for communications specific M&E.

Indicators to monitor progress in achieving the overall goal of the strategy include publications, media coverage, website traffic and surveys, distribution figures for serial publications and sales. Secondary indicators such as news releases, news conferences, background briefings, meetings and reports indicate communications productivity but not necessarily how effective the activities are. Assuming a three-year communications project will commence in 2009, a mid-term review would be envisaged for mid-2010 to measure quality and progress in reaching targets.

Continuous M&E of communications activities will allow CCBP staff to gauge the relevance of products and services to users both within and outside the MRC and its immediate partners, and also to track the evolving needs of the various target audiences. Feedback and input will be sought through email and website surveys, telephone calls using set questionnaires, media monitoring and interviews with network associates and counterparts.

The communications unit shall improve monitoring of production distribution and stock by recording numbers of incoming and stored products, following an initial stock take. All outgoing products, including CD-ROM and DVD-VCD products, will be recorded along with their destination. Monthly distribution reports for all materials will be compiled monthly and sales figures from the distribution centre. Programmes distributing their own products will be asked to report on all distribution also.

The communications office at the Secretariat will continue to monitor print media in tandem with the communications associates at the RFMMC and National Mekong Committees. Once the communications network is in place, associates can start collecting press clippings of relevant articles in riparian-language newspapers. The communications office can then distribute these articles and summaries to staff including other associates, programme coordinators and division directors. The office will also compile monthly reports on media reports, likely to be small at first but to grow over time.

One of the duties of the communications task force will be to review the options for a new more detailed web traffic statistics package, a report on which has already been produced by the communications unit. While website traffic is already being monitored, detailed statistics on which pages of the site are most visited and how often individual documents are downloaded are not available. This situation will be remedied to improve M&E of programme, project, and product performance, and to help programme officers realise the importance of dedicated communications tools.

Quantitative and qualitative surveys of stakeholders are also envisaged on an annual basis towards the end of each year. English-language surveys can be carried out by email by the communications unit at the secretariat. Local-language surveys can be carried out by the National Mekong Committees (including by hard copy if necessary) with results distributed widely to all stakeholders.

3.6 Funding Implications

Existing Arrangements

Current communications activities considered essential to the MRC's mandate should be maintained through the continued contribution of the operational expenses budget (OEB) and each programme. Programmes should continue to cover costs for communications services for programme-related products on the basis of service arrangements agreed with ICCS at the beginning of each year. The OEB, which is funded by member countries and the management and administration fee levied on donors, covers communications expenses for the routine and standard MRC communications work. All present communications personnel and general communications activities will need to be continued and expanded upon significantly if the organisation is to realise the communications-related goals of the Strategic Plan 2006-2010. These expansion activities include hiring a riparian Communications Officer under OEB funds and an international Communications Adviser and establishment of communications associates at NMCs to reflect growing riparian ownership.

Services offered by the communications unit need to be recognised not only as a Secretariat function but also as a necessary activity if programmes are to achieve specific objectives, including capacity building and 'riparianisation' targets. While communications activities were once largely limited to the Fisheries Programme, they are now an integral part of many programmes, especially among the Information and Knowledge Management; Navigation; and Flood Management and Mitigation programmes. Similarly the Environment Programme is

committed to making information more accessible and communicating trends in areas such as water quality and ecology.

The newly formed Sustainable Hydropower Programme will also need communications expertise to clearly show the role of the MRC and what is being achieved in this politically sensitive field. Clear mechanisms are therefore needed to ensure that programmes cover all costs incurred by the Secretariat in generating products and services related to achieving programme objectives. The Communications Unit is currently funded mainly by service agreements negotiated with each programme on the basis of the services demanded of the unit by that programme each year. To avoid the need for programmes to pay communications fees, a communications project with an independent budget is required to keep and improve the range of essential services provided.

The MRC could approach existing or potential development partners to seek funding for a dedicated short-term communications project with a defined timeframe and concrete objectives. This would have a large enough budget to allow execution of the activities described in this strategy and would seek to attain the goals of the strategic plan and organisational review, particularly vis-à-vis riparianisation and better coordination with National Mekong Committees, over a three-year period. This would supplement the core communications activities to be financed through the OEB and would meet short-term needs. In order to increase capacity the MRCS is proposing donor support for longer-term activities. A suggested budget is given below.

The annexes to this document on data information sharing, commercial and non-commercial data licences and MRC pricing policy and copyright are not included in order to keep the report concise, but will be available once the general principles of the policy have been agreed.

MRC Policy on Disclosure of Data, Information and Knowledge

PREAMBLE

The MRC Disclosure Policy sets out the administrative rules and regulations on access to data, information and knowledge held by the Mekong River Commission Secretariat and the materials available. It details the categories of data, information and knowledge available to the general public or to interested individuals and groups and is built on a presumption in favour of disclosure. Limitations precluding the disclosure of some data information and knowledge are kept at a minimum. The Policy relates to all electronic and printed data, information and knowledge.

There are a number of policy relevant processes with regard to data, information and knowledge ongoing at the MRC, most importantly the Policy and Implementation Strategy being developed under the Information and Knowledge Management Programme (IKMP). This Disclosure Policy will act as an umbrella policy under which all other data sharing policies fall, and will be updated as the IKMP Policy and Implementation Strategy matures.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Mandate and scope of the Policy

- 1) The Mekong River Commission (MRC) was established in 1995 through the Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin between the Governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. Sustainable development, as called for in the Agreement, can only be achieved through a transparent and open decision making process and organisation, in which all stakeholders have the widest possible degree of access to relevant data, information and knowledge. Within the MRC there is therefore a presumption in favour of disclosure.
- 2) The MRC consists of three permanent bodies: The Council, the Joint Committee and the Secretariat. The ministerial Council makes policy decisions and has overall governance of the MRC. The Joint Committee is responsible for the implementation of the policies and decisions of the Council and supervises the activities of the Mekong River Commission Secretariat. The MRC Secretariat provides technical and administrative services to the Joint Committee and the Council, and is under the direction of a Chief Executive Officer.
- 3) According to the 1995 Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, one of the functions of the Joint Committee is to regularly obtain, update and exchange data necessary to implement this Agreement (Article 24). It also

states that the Joint Committee can assign tasks and supervise the Secretariat as is required to implement the Agreement including the maintenance of databases and information necessary for the Council and the Joint Committee to perform their functions.

- 4) The Secretariat is consequently required to maintain databases of information as directed (Article 30.E.) This function is discharged through the MRC Technical Assistance and Coordination Team (TACT) at the Secretariat. The Secretariat is also required to perform an information provision function to Member States and donors (Rules of Procedures of the MRCS, Rules 5 and 11). The Secretariat should also be a repository of knowledge on the Mekong and inform the media and general public. The MRC has provided for a Communications Unit within the International Cooperation and Communications Section whose tasks include supervising and upgrading the MRC website.
- 5) In order to facilitate and operationalise data, information and knowledge exchange between Member States and with the Secretariat, the Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing (PDIES) were adopted by the MRC Council on 1 November 2001 at its Eighth Meeting in Bangkok, Thailand (Annex 1).
- 6) The MRC Strategic Plan 2006 – 2010 tasks the MRC to work towards operating as a highly effective, transparent and innovative international river basin organisation. (Goal 4, objective 1); and to enhance and maintain a common GIS-based information and knowledge management and dissemination system to support all MRC activities. (Goal 4, objective 3).
- 7) To further these goals the MRC Council, at its Thirteenth Meeting in 2006, approved the Information and Knowledge Management Programme (IKMP). The IKMP, under component 5 also provides for the development and launch of an accessible and user-friendly next generation of MRC Information System web portal. It is therefore necessary for the MRC to develop a Policy on Disclosure of Information to govern access to information as set out in the IKMP and required by its mandate.
- 8) This Disclosure Policy has been prepared by the Secretariat under its Rules of Procedures (Rule 1) and endorsed by the Joint Committee. It also provides guidance for the implementation of the MRC Secretariat Administration Manual. The stipulations of the Policy will not change ownership and confidentiality of data and information produced under subcontracts with the MRC. For such data and information the contractual arrangements prevail.

2. DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this Policy, the following terms are defined as they are in the MRC Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing:

Data: Representations of facts, expressed as measurements or statistics, suitable for communication, interpretation or processing.

Information: Data interpreted, processed and refined, and then displayed by the competent authorities having ownership or possession thereof, which is required for exchange and sharing for the purpose of the implementation of the Mekong Agreement.

Furthermore the following definitions will apply:

Document: A piece of written, printed, or electronic matter that provides data and/or information and/or knowledge.

Data processing tools: Software or interconnected suites of software to which the MRC holds propriety rights.

Knowledge: Awareness and understanding of a subject gained through the collation, organisation and analysis of information, experience, study and consultation with other individuals. Knowledge within the MRC may be held in policies, strategies, plans, guidelines, procedures, reports and other publications (hard copy and electronic), decision support tools, or within individual people.

Publication: The action of making available data, information and knowledge, generally in the form of documents, to a third party, so as to make them generally known and accessible.

3. POLICY PRINCIPLES

- 9) In order to implement a policy of transparency and disclosure it is necessary to establish relevant categories and criteria. It is also necessary to establish a process for MRC staff to publish information or data, or disseminate it outside the MRCS. Part of this internal process, in particular as it relates to Press and Publications, Correspondence, and Electronic Mail, has already been established in the MRC Secretariat Administration Manual (Parts one, two and three).
- 10) This Policy aims to further strengthen these processes and clearly define the parameters of disclosure and therefore access to data, information and knowledge. This classification system will also be applicable to all electronically based and computer-generated information, as well as photographic and graphic material.
- 11) The MRC's presumption in favour of disclosure will enable it to meet the goals of transparency and accountability to its Member States, donors and stakeholders. An approach encouraging the fullest possible disclosure of information has several advantages:
 - i. Increased disclosure of information encourages debate and dialogue on policies and operations, which, in turn, results in an increase in flow of information back to the MRC, providing new and varied perspectives.
 - ii. Increased disclosure of information can assist in ensuring effective local participation in decision making, leading to "ownership" of decisions by involved participants, and improving project and programme implementation and sustainability.
 - iii. An improved flow of information from the MRC helps to broaden understanding of the MRC's role among Member States, donors, NGOs, academic institutions and the public at large, ensuring both financial and intellectual support for the MRC and its mission.
 - iv. Increased availability of information helps facilitate coordination with others interested in the common goal of sustainable development of the Mekong Basin.

- v. Finally, as a public institution, the MRC is accountable to its Member States and others providing support to the organization, and has a responsibility to provide the fullest possible information to its supporters.

4. ACCESS CATEGORIES

12) This Policy aims to enable access to data, information and knowledge. A large proportion of such material will take the form of electronic or printed documents; the following categorisation therefore refers to documents. The same stipulations apply to accessing data, information and knowledge in databases housed at the MRC.

13) The three access categories under the Policy are:

- **Unrestricted;** available to the general public.
- **Restricted;** may be released to a specific audience following the appropriate approvals.
- **Confidential;** not for release beyond the author and addressees nor to the public.

4.1 Unrestricted Access

General

14) MRC embraces a policy of transparency and disclosure, therefore the following documents and categories of documents are publicly available. The list is not exhaustive, but is intended to provide guidance to supplement the classification criteria.

- Documents and Minutes of the MRC Council and Joint Committee Meetings;
- Documents and Reports of the MRC Informal Donor and Donor Consultative Group Meetings;
- Documents and Reports of the MRC Dialogue Meetings;
- Newsletters;
- Press releases;
- Annual Reports;
- MRC Strategies;
- MRC Annual Work Programme;
- Project / Programme Information Documents;
- Programme Strategies and Documents;
- Programme progress reports;
- Consultants reports (draft and final)
- Published or publishable maps;
- MRC Publication Series;
- Funding agreements and unrestricted legal information;
- MRC interagency Memoranda of Understanding;
- Historical and research information from the MRCS Documentation Centre;
- Real time data on river flows and historic hydrological and water quality data;
- Project related Environmental Impact Assessments and similar reports upon public release under prevailing national regulations.

Finance and Administration

- Annual income and expenditure and donor contributions (as published in the MRC Annual Report);
- Staffing figures (as published in the Annual Report);
- Procurement rules and procedures are available in the MRC Procurement Manual;
- Financial Statements;
- Income and Expenditure Statements;
- Statement of Contributions Received, Expenditures Incurred and Fund Balances by Donors;
- Briefing notes on Income and Expenditure;
- Information on how the MRC uses the Management and Administration Fee.
- Procurement opportunities and tendered contract awards;
- Vacancy announcements
- Salary scales and general conditions of employment
- MRCS Headquarter agreements

15) The criteria for unrestricted access are:

- All documents that have not been proactively classified in the “confidential” or “restricted” categories.
- Standard MRC approval and quality control procedures have been completed.
- Technical data, subject to user signing the relevant data use licenses.
- Documents made available already through official website of MRC Member States.
- Information designed specifically to be shared publicly, such as information brochures on programme work, press releases etc.
- All de-classified documents.

16) Unrestricted access is the general rule at MRC; it does not, however, imply general access free of charge. At the same time, charges should not constitute a barrier to data, information and knowledge access. The MRC pricing policy, based on a cost recovery principle is set out in Annex 3.

4.2 Restricted and Confidential Access

17) There are some legal and practical constraints regarding disclosure of data, information and knowledge which must also be taken into account, to protect the MRC’s interests and the legitimate interests of those who deal with the MRC. These constraints, which should be balanced against the MRC’s presumption in favour of disclosure, include the following:

- i. Information provided to the MRC on a confidential basis cannot be released without the prior consent or approval of the party providing such information. In some cases, such confidentiality relates to legal requirements in the jurisdiction of the party providing the information, or is governed by an agreement or understanding between the MRC and the party providing the information.
- ii. Documentation or proprietary information may be the legal property of other parties and therefore may not be released by the MRC without the permission of such owners.
- iii. Internal documents prepared by Secretariat staff, including initial negotiating positions and meeting deliberations, should be restricted to ensure the free flow of ideas. It is essential to protect the integrity of the deliberative process of the MRC, and as such,

to encourage frankness of dialogue and the free flow of ideas internally. Thus, Confidentiality protects these decision-making processes, and ensures that all participants can candidly express views without self-imposed limitations in anticipation of an external audience.

- iv. Legitimate business interests must be respected and proprietary information of the private sector protected.

18) The MRC has an internal non-disclosure policy applying to confidential data, information and knowledge concerning the personal details of MRC staff.

19) The MRC cannot be made liable for any results or actions emanating from the use of data, information and knowledge made available; details in this regard are set out in the MRC website policy. Copyright stipulations are set out in the MRC Pricing Policy and Copyright Regulations (Section 3.5 of the MRC Secretariat Administration Manual).

4.2.1. Restricted access

Examples of restricted documents include

General

- Internal correspondence (restricted to circulation within the MRCS);
- Working papers / reports and project and programme documents in progress;
- Consultants' reports before consideration by MRCS or clearance by the client or other involved party.

Finance and Administration

- Specific audits requested by donors for programme activities. Donors may choose to release these audits on their own websites and should then inform the MRCS, so that it can do likewise.,

20) Data or documents classified as 'Restricted' are those which can be released to a restricted audience. Such restricted audience would normally comprise of persons or entities which are part of the MRC or with which the MRC has a MOU or a working relationship within its approved Work Programme.

21) Documents classified as Restricted will be automatically de-classified after five years. Restricted documents may be accessible for research purposes upon request at the originating office and / or the MRC documentation centre.

22) Documents which come under this category need to meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Contain information which was initially intended for internal use, but which does not fall into the confidential category, and where restricted access is judged beneficial for a work process or a working relationship.
- Need prior approval by a donor, such as project / programme evaluation reports or where prior approval of a client is required.
- Contains technical data or comments considered by the Secretariat to be sensitive and where wider distribution would be prejudicial to an ongoing process.

4.2.2. Confidential

Examples of Confidential documents include:

General

- Correspondence on personnel matters;
- Performance Appraisal Reviews;
- Un-validated data;
- Minutes and summaries of discussions at internal MRCS meetings;
- Internal position papers;
- Minutes of the Preparatory Meetings of the Joint Committee;
- Commercial contracts.
- Reports where permission from the client has not been provided

Finance, administration and staffing

- The MRC's Principles of Staff Employment require the MRC to maintain appropriate safeguards to respect the personal privacy of staff members and protect the confidentiality of personal information about them. Information of a generic nature can be distributed to Joint Committee members and donors if the funding agreement so stipulates, any staff information involving personal or privacy issues is restricted solely to the relevant departments within the MRCS and the individual staff member. This information will not be disclosed without the express permission of the staff member concerned.

23) While every effort is made to keep constraints to a minimum, the MRC is bound by its rules to maintain a degree of confidentiality on some information. Certain documents may thus only be distributed to a limited internal group requiring the information they contain as part of the work process.

24) To be classified as confidential, documents need to meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Contain information which has been determined by Member States as being subject to laws and regulations concerning national; defence or security as per the agreed principles of the MRC PDIES.
- Contain privileged or propriety information or are under copyright that limits or prohibits copying or distribution.
- Have been provided to the MRC on the explicit or implied understanding that they will not be disclosed outside the MRC, or that they may not be disclosed without the consent of the source.
- Come from the MRC's deliberative or decision-making process, such as internal staff memoranda, minutes and summaries of discussions at internal meetings unless such information has been authorised for disclosure through the process set out in this Policy.
- Be derived from similar decision-making processes involving exchanges of ideas between the MRC and any of its members, unless the relevant body approves the release of such information.

25) Subject to restrictions placed as a result of the above conditions, confidential documents can be made available only to MRC member countries, MRC staff and agreed donors and partners with a demonstrated need to know the information contained in the document. Such data can only be released with the consent of the CEO, MRCS.

5. APPROVAL PROCESS

5.1 Categorisation process

- 26) The following section sets out the categorisation process for documents in terms of definitions, and approval of classification and de-classification.
- 27) Normally, a document will be considered unrestricted and any restrictive classification needs to be given careful consideration as to its impact on transparency and openness of the organization.
- 28) In general, the author of a document is responsible for determining whether any restrictive access is needed and noting this on the cover page or first page of the document. For correspondence, only classification as Confidential needs to be indicated specifically. All restrictive document classifications need to be approved by the respective Division Director or Section Chief in order to retain a general preference for non-restriction. For documents produced by contractors, the contract manager will consider whether any restrictions need to be introduced to reflect terms of the contract. Those having access to or receiving confidential or restricted documents must not circulate or pass on such documents or the information contained within them.
- 29) Any restrictive classifications should be established in general for types of documents and will be valid for all documents of the same type. Classification as Confidential will normally require additional review of the document.
- 30) De-classification of documents at a later point can be initiated by the author or other MRC staff subject to the approval of the respective Division Director or Section Chief. De-classification from the category Confidential to another category will require approval by the CEO. If de-classification of a document originating from a third party is considered, consent of that third party for de-classification must be sought.
- 31) Reports and data which require approval from the four Member States under MRC procedures need to clearly indicate their status as 'pending approval' until final approval has been granted. Similarly, results of scientific studies or data which MRCS considers technically sound, but which have not been verified by the Member States need to clearly indicate this status when being made available.

5.2 Other Requests for Information

- 32) When an interested party requests additional information about an MRC project not covered by any of the preceding arrangements, that request should be relayed to the International Cooperation and Communications Section (ICCS), which, in consultation as necessary with the appropriate Programme, Division, and the CEO, will provide a response to the request, either by providing such information or indicating the reasons such information cannot be provided.

6. ELECTRONIC DATA AND INFORMATION AVAILABLE

33) Use of electronic data and information is governed by the following principles:

- All information posted on the MRC website www.mrcmekong.org is publicly available and may be used for non-profit activities, namely research, provided the MRC is properly accredited. Prior permission need not be sought.
- Digitally stored photographs may be reproduced with the specific approval of the MRC and must be accredited to the MRC. Photographs may not be used for commercial purposes.
- Information contained on the MekongInfo website is information contributed by many researchers, students, non-government organisations and others whose work involved the Mekong River Basin. MRC holds no responsibility for information posted on this site and reproduction is at the discretion of the author.
- Datasets concerning Data in a number of categories may be requested from the Mekong River Commission Secretariat.
(Visit <http://www.mrcmekong.org/spatial/spatialdata.htm> website for details).

34) To request data, users can fax or email the MRC with a brief description of their organisation, the intended use of the data and a list of requested datasets with titles quoted from the website. They can download the appropriate license and send a completed signed form with their request. Two types of licenses are available; for non-commercial data users and for commercial data users (see Annex 2 for examples).

35) Data available on the publicly-accessed section of the MRC-IS portal is free of charge or subject to the same pricing costs for datasets and subject to the user completing the appropriate data user license. Datasets currently available include:

- Administrative Boundaries
- Climate
- Culture
- Environment
- Fisheries
- Forestry
- Hydrology and Meteorology
- Inundation
- Irrigation
- Planning
- Population and human settlements
- Soils
- Topography
- Transportation
- Water Quality
- Water Resources

7. ANNEXES to Disclosure Policy only (not included here at this stage of policy discussion)

ANNEX 1.

Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing

ANNEX 2

Commercial and Non-Commercial Data Licences

ANNEX 3

MRC Pricing Policy and Copyright Regulations (Section 3.5 of MRC Secretariat Administration Manual)

Appendix 3: Replies to Some Frequently Asked Questions

An example of a ‘nested’ hierarchy of responses to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) is given in FAQ 1 below. This level of detail will also be developed for other FAQs.

1. What is the Mekong River Commission?

Core concept

The Mekong River Commission is a regional intra-governmental water agency.

Sentence

The Mekong River Commission is a regional inter-governmental agency established for the sustainable development of water and related resources in the Mekong River Basin.

Short paragraph

The Mekong River Commission is a regional inter-governmental agency established for the sustainable development of water and related resources in the Lower Mekong River Basin. Members are Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, which signed a cooperation treaty in 1995. China and Myanmar are dialogue partners who attend MRC meetings and exchange information with the member countries.

Standard paragraph

The Mekong River Commission is a regional inter-governmental agency established for the sustainable development of water and related resources in the Lower Mekong River Basin. Members are Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, which signed a cooperation treaty in 1995. China and Myanmar are dialogue partners who attend MRC meetings and exchange information with the member countries. Most of the Commission’s regional programmes in fields such as basin planning, fisheries, hydrology, navigation and the environment are managed from Vientiane, where the MRC Secretariat has been located since 2004. The Flood Management and Mitigation Programme is managed from Phnom Penh, where a new Regional Flood Management and Mitigation Flood Centre opened in 2008.

Long paragraph

The Mekong River Commission is a regional intra-governmental agency established for the sustainable development of water and related resources in the Lower Mekong River Basin. Members are Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, which signed a cooperation treaty in 1995. China and Myanmar are dialogue partners who attend MRC meetings and exchange information with the member countries. Most of the Commission’s regional programmes in fields such as basin planning, fisheries, hydrology, navigation and the environment are managed from Vientiane, where the MRC Secretariat has been located since 2004. The Flood Management and Mitigation Programme is managed from Phnom Penh, where a new Regional Flood Management and Mitigation Flood Centre opened in 2008. Under the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the four countries agreed to cooperate in developing, using, managing and conserving the basin’s water and related sources in areas such as fisheries, flood control, irrigation, hydropower and navigation. In developing the full potential of sustainable benefits and addressing harmful effects such as pollution, they also agreed to promote joint interests: to prevent water from being wasted, to sustain livelihoods and to protect the basin’s environment including its natural resources, aquatic life, water conditions and ecological balance. The Commission is overseen by a Council of four ministers, which meets once a year. A Joint Committee of four senior government officials meets at least twice a year and oversees the work of the Secretariat, which is managed by a chief executive officer and four directors from the member states.

The following FAQs include a range of different response lengths. The full set of nested responses as outlined in section 2.4 will be formulated as part of the implementation of the Strategy.

2. What does the MRC do?

The role of the MRC is that of an advisory body, not a decision-making authority. It is a knowledge and analysis based Commission set up, as described in the 1995 Agreement, "to promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries' mutual benefit and the people's well-being." The MRC fulfils this role by implementing strategic programmes and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice. Its current range of programmes comprises:

- Agriculture, Irrigation and Forestry
- Basin Development Plan
- Environment
- Flood Management and Mitigation
- Fisheries
- Sustainable Hydropower Programme
- Information and Knowledge Management
- Integrated Capacity Building
- Navigation

3. How is the MRC managed and governed?

The MRC is governed by its four member countries through its Council and Joint Committee. Both of these bodies are comprised of one member from each country. Members of the Council, which meets once a year, are cabinet ministers. Members of the Joint Committee are usually senior civil servants heading government departments. The Joint Committee meets two to three times a year to discuss urgent business, and approve strategic plans and budgets. Technical and administrative support is provided by the MRC Secretariat. The Secretariat is based in Vientiane, Lao PDR, and employs over 120 scientific, administrative and technical staff. A Chief Executive Officer manages the Secretariat. The Commission is dedicated to ensuring that nationals from the four Member States gradually assume all positions of responsibility in the Secretariat, and has built in schedules for achieving this goal.

4. What do the National Mekong Committees do?

National Mekong Committees provide a link between the MRC and national governments and coordinate MRC-related activities at the national level through government line agencies. They implement programme and project activities in their respective countries for the MRC and other agencies and partners.

5. How is the MRC funded?

The MRC is funded through member country contributions and international development partners. The Member States have committed themselves to gradually increasing their contributions so that they will eventually assume full financial responsibility for the organisation. Annual figures for contributions and expenditure are available on the website <http://www.mrcmekong.org>

6. Where can I find information about the MRC and its activities?

You can contact the MRC Secretariat at any time for information on activities and policies or to request results or reports from research or analysis. You can send an email query to

mrcs@mrcmekong.org or contact us by telephone or fax. Much information is always available from the website <http://www.mrcmekong.org>.

7. How does the MRC remain relevant in this time of rapid development driven by private business and financial institutions?

The MRC's advisory role in serving the joint interests of the Member States and administering the 1995 Agreement covers at least five areas:

Firstly, understanding the existing river system across all facets of water resources management through data collection, analysis and modelling. The MRC already provides its Member States with considerable capability in this area and works continuously to further develop predictive capacity.

Secondly, in preparation of objective analysis of future development scenarios in order to protect the joint interests of the four countries. This analysis includes study of regional, bilateral and national projects of a significant nature, and assessment of their cumulative effects on hydrology, water quality, fisheries, sediment transport etc.

Thirdly, by bringing stakeholders from various parts of society and across the whole basin into the development discussion. A timetable for this work was discussed at the BDP Stakeholder Consultation Forum in March 2008. In a related initiative, the MRC is exploring ways of involving stakeholders in the formulation of its new Initiative on Sustainable Hydropower.

Fourthly, through providing advice on individual project proposals as requested by member countries.

Lastly, the Secretariat is the body responsible for administering the procedures on water utilisation developed under the 1995 Agreement. Many details of these procedures, for example for notification and prior consultation regarding Mekong mainstream projects, have already been agreed among the four countries through MRC facilitation efforts. Some details are still to be worked out and will be publicly disseminated once agreement has been reached among all member countries. The principles of information sharing, good faith and cooperation will continue to guide the Commission in all its activities.

8. Can the MRC Secretariat tell the countries how the Mekong should be used?

The Secretariat's role, as defined by the 1995 Agreement, is an advisory one: responsibility for decision-making rests with the countries concerned. The policy of the MRC Secretariat is that we will do whatever we can to ensure that the diversity of views of various stakeholders is reflected in our work and that the outcome of our objective scientific analysis is made available to those responsible for taking such decisions.

9. Is the MRC pro- or anti- dams and hydropower?

The MRC recognises that there are both opportunities and risks associated with hydropower development. All the Mekong countries include hydropower options in their development strategies, seeing this as a renewable technology and to some as a means of bringing in much needed revenues that will enable them to improve social structures, including education, health and internal infrastructure. Under the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the MRC has a mandate to 'optimize the multiple-use and mutual benefits of all riparians and to minimize the harmful effects that might result from natural occurrences and man-made activities'. The MRC therefore supports sustainable hydropower development implemented under the framework of the 1995 Mekong Agreement and which serves the joint interests of member states.

As part of this approach, the MRC believes that if hydropower projects are to be implemented and the basin's power potential fully tapped, a well-structured and integrated programme founded on ba-

sin-wide planning, fully accounting for environmental and social aspects and sustainability principles is required. As an independent body, the organisation believes careful consideration must be given to all risks as well as opportunities and that effective mitigation measures need to be incorporated from the very outset of all hydropower projects.

To this end, the MRC conducts a number of activities aimed at better informing dialogue about and management of hydropower projects in the Mekong Basin. These include:

- undertaking applied research to improve understanding of the natural processes in the river system and the consequences of development proposals;
- monitoring river hydrology, environmental health and productivity;
- analysing the cumulative impacts of various future development scenarios;
- undertaking specific studies and interpreting project proposals when requested;
- providing a basin-wide integrated water resources management strategy within which individual project proposals can be assessed;
- building capacity for sustainability assessment; and
- administering formal notification and consultation procedures of the 1995 Mekong Agreement among member states.

Bringing together this work and providing a focal point for facilitating dialogue between all stakeholders interested in and affected by hydropower development, the MRC Secretariat is formulating a wider sustainable hydropower initiative that defines objectives, structure and outputs, to ensure this vital work can play a prominent role in energy development and the MRC can facilitate sustainable hydropower development based on a strategic assessment of its potential and consequences.

The Initiative on Sustainable Hydropower will work with government agencies, the private sector and civil society in the member countries and provide advice on the planning, construction, and operation of hydropower plants and dams, using the MRC's extensive records, data and independent studies to identify the issues and provide advice to decision-makers in its member countries who are ultimately responsible for determining the chosen option.

Formal procedures exist under the 1995 Agreement for the notification, prior consultation and agreement covering projects on the tributaries and mainstream. These ensure all member countries are informed of potential projects and have an opportunity to enter into dialogue with the country promoting a project. The MRC has also formed a partnership with the Worldwide Fund for Nature and the Asian Development Bank to promote environmental considerations for hydropower development. A key challenge will be to ensure that the benefits of hydropower accrue to a wide community including those affected by project developments.

11. What does Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) actually mean?

Announced at the 1992 Dublin International Conference on Water and Environment, IWRM is an approach that encourages the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in water resources management and the integration of planning and management across sectoral uses (such as irrigation, hydropower, fisheries etc) and across administrative borders (national, provincial and district) to promote a river basin management approach.

The theory and practice revolve around what researchers call “the three 3E’s”: economy, equity, and environment. This means that water bodies should be used to provide economic well-being to people, without compromising social equity and environmental sustainability.



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12. What is the MRC's role in national projects?

Given the wide range of activities it is involved with, the MRC must prioritise its efforts, and it does that in the following order:

- Basin-wide projects and programmes, initially including the four riparian states of the LMB.
- Transboundary projects, or suites of complementary projects, between two or three riparian states.
- National projects, or land and water policies, with significant or cumulative basin-wide implications.

The mandate of the MRC focuses mainly on basin-wide and transboundary aspects. However, through the BDP, the MRC has an important role in registering all developments in the basin, enabling: i) the comprehensive development and analysis of scenarios; and ii) the analysis of implications of projects, including the cumulative effects of national developments. The MRC also plays a role in screening suites of smaller projects in a broader basin context, hence assisting in identifying and prioritising projects to be further developed by national agencies and their donors.