

## MRC PROGRAMS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) was established in 1995 with the signing of an Agreement on Cooperation for Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin (MRB) by the member countries, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam. Cooperative agreements between the countries date back to 1957 when the Mekong Committee was first formed. Previous mandates emphasised exploration of the potential for hydropower development and navigation in the Basin.

The vision of the re-born MRC is “an economically prosperous, socially just, and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin”. The MRC vision and its mission statement direct a different path for the 21<sup>st</sup> century; one which strives for economic development together with social justice and environmental conservation.

### MRC PROGRAMS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

To implement its Strategic Plan, the MRC is moving from a project-focussed to a program-focussed approach, and from a sectoral to a cross-functional form of organizational structure, to enable the organization to respond more effectively to the complexities of Basin-wide ecosystem management and sustainable development. Although sector programs still have an important role, the MRC intends to shift towards a monitoring and management role in the MRB.

#### MRC Purpose

The Mekong River Basin and the related natural resources and environment are natural assets of immense value to all the riparian countries for the economic and social well-being and living standards of their peoples.

#### MRC Role

Reaffirming the determination to continue to co-operate and promote in a constructive and mutually beneficial manner the sustainable development, utilization, management, and conservation of the water and related resources for navigational and non-navigational purposes, recreation, and tourism, and for the social and economic development and wellbeing of all riparian states, consistent with the need to protect, preserve, enhance, and manage the environment and aquatic conditions, and maintenance of the ecological balance exceptional to this river basin.

#### MRC Mission Statement

To promote and co-ordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries' mutual benefit and the peoples' well-being by implementing strategic Programmes and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice.

With these goals in mind, the MRC has established the following categories of programs:

- Core Programs
  - Basin Development Plan
  - Water Utilization Program
  - Environment Program
- Sector Programs
  - Fisheries
  - Agriculture, Irrigation, and Forestry
  - Water Resources and Hydrology
  - Navigation
  - Tourism
  - Human Resources Development.

### ***Basin Development Plan (BDP)***

The goals of the BDP are to:

- Institutionalise planning for responsible management and sustainable development of MRB resources
- Balance socio-economic development and environmental concerns
- Create a development framework based on technical knowledge and input from 'concerned parties'
- Foster cooperation between stakeholders.

### ***Water Utilization Program (WUP)***

The goals of the WUP are to:

- Support sustainable management of water resources in the lower MRB
- Ensure mutually beneficial water utilization

- Maintain ecological balance
- Develop an integrated knowledge base and hydrological modelling
- Create rules governing water use in the MRB
- Enhance institutional capacity of the MRC and National Mekong Committees (NMCs).

### ***Environmental Program (EP)***

For the EP, the focus is on people with the goals of:

- Balancing economic development with environmental conservation for the benefit of MRB inhabitants.
- Establishing systems to:
  - monitor the environmental health of the MRB
  - improve environmental policy and legislation
  - improve riparian country cooperation
  - increase public environmental awareness.

The EP has set a series of objectives at the levels of overall development, immediate, and detailed objectives. Detailed objectives for the EP are:

1. Improve capacity for monitoring and assessing the environmental state of the MRB; develop better policies and management practices for sustainable development.
2. Increase knowledge base of environmental issues in the MRB; assist government policy formulation; focus on links between people, development, and the environment.

3. Develop improved systems for environmental information exchange and communication; share information regionally for optimal results.
4. Improve environmental policies and legislation related to management of water and related resources, taking gender, ethnic, and socio-economic aspects into consideration; facilitate formulation of policies, regulations, and guidelines, while ensuring compatibility with national priorities; establish SEA and regional EIA processes.
5. Improve awareness and capacity to address environmental issues; enhance staff understanding of Basin-wide issues, and capacity to implement necessary actions.
6. Improve coordination of development in the Basin; MRC will provide an information gateway and forum for dialogue among funding agencies and implementers to improve co-ordination of developments that have potential environmental impacts.

### ***Fisheries Program***

The goals of the Fisheries Program are to:

- Achieve the full economic and nutritional potential of fisheries in MRB
- Promote responsible management of aquatic ecosystems
- Establish sustainable management of capture fisheries
- Diversify and maximise fish production through aquaculture techniques and reservoir fisheries.

### ***Agriculture, Irrigation, and Forestry Program***

The goals of this program are to:

- Promote sustainable management of water and land resources, including sustainable forestry
- Maximise the economic potential of resources
- Modernize irrigation systems
- Promote effective and efficient water use
- Plan agriculture and forestry activities in cross-border areas and fragile watersheds.

### ***Water Resources and Hydrology Program***

The goals of this program are:

- The sustainable use of water resources.
- To address hydropower and flood control management and mitigation.

### ***Tourism Program***

The goal of the Tourism Program is to develop tourism while protecting the environment.

### ***Navigation Program***

The goals of the Navigation Program are to:

- Create opportunities for employment and income by development of international trade through navigation
- Assist alleviation of poverty through improved access to remote areas
- Promote freedom of navigation

- Establish a framework for safe, coordinated, and effective waterborne transport
- Undertake river works to remove physical barriers to navigation.

### ***Human Resources Development (HRD) Program***

The HRD program goals are to:

- Develop appropriate skills and competencies to implement the Strategic Plan
- Focus on Basin-wide water resources management
- Strengthen administration, leadership, teamwork, and organizational culture at all levels in MRC, NMC, and associated government agencies in riparian countries
- Incorporate gender-related concerns.

### **OVERVIEW OF MRC PROGRAMS**

It can be seen from the objectives of the various programs that the MRC is now focussing on the principles and practices of sustainable development on a Basin-wide scale in water resources management and water utilization, environment, forestry, fisheries, agriculture, navigation, travel, and human resources development. People are the principle focus, and gender equality and poverty are targetted as problems that must be addressed. In the previous lessons of this course each of these areas have been shown to be essential to development in a sustainable manner.

The MRC is positioning itself to be a catalyst and a leader on the journey of riparian countries and their people to an economically prosperous, socially just, and environmentally sound MRB.

### **SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS**

- The MRC has defined its role in the promotion of sustainable development in the MRB through the achievement of core and sector program objectives.
- Programs emphasise people-focussed development through cooperative planning of river basin activities, environmental awareness, and recognition of the interdependence of all sectors in the MRB.
- Goals are to balance socio-economic and environmental concerns, and achieve mutually sustainable benefits for riparian countries.