

The Citizens' Green Mekong Initiative (C-GMI) [draft]

The Mekong's Future, Our Future~Toward a Strengthened East Asian Citizens
Network for Discussing Development of the Mekong Basin

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In the basin of the Mekong River, an international river, which flows through southeastern China, Burma/Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam, about 60 million people make their living as they always have, dependent on the natural resources from the river and its forests. At this time, however, the water of the entire Mekong River System with its mainstream and tributaries is changing dramatically in terms of both volume and quality, its aquatic and forest resources are decreasing, and arable land is disappearing along its banks and at its mouth. Degradation of the natural environment and resources has a direct impact on the people's lives and means of livelihood, shakes their food security and can fundamentally threaten the existence of the socially vulnerable such as indigenous or minority peoples, women, children and the economically impoverished. Causes of the degradation of the natural environment and resources include regional integration and large-scale development in which economic considerations are given priority; urbanization; industrialization; and mass consumption, with climate change as another factor bringing more and more complexity; but above all, the biggest problem is the construction of large-scale hydroelectric facilities, which is accelerating throughout the entire basin.¹

The following problems form the context to progress on large-scale hydroelectric power construction in the Mekong basin.

- 1) Insufficient awareness, on the part of governments and companies promoting planning and construction, of the value of lifestyles dependent on natural resources and the effect on the lives of the basin's local communities of the success or failure at managing natural resources.
- 2) The influx of large amounts of development funding, not only from industrialized nations as before, but also from emerging powers both within and outside the basin.
- 3) Limited opportunities for participation by the basin's local communities and citizens in decision-making regarding development.²

We the local communities and citizens, both within and outside the Mekong basin, have

been striving to conserve and manage the natural environment and resources of the basin, but now there is a pressing need for action through a continuous and closer network, which can cover a broader range. In order to deal with the problems of influx of funds from emerging powers and the cross-border environmental and societal impacts, the citizens of the countries involved must share their awareness and work together. Valuing the lifestyles and knowledge fostered by the people who make their living in the Mekong basin, we must promote a dialog with representatives of governments and the private sector and work towards shaping the future of the basin.

It was in November 2009 that as part of continuation of developmental aid to countries of the Mekong basin (excluding China), the Japanese government announced the ten-year “Green Mekong Initiative (GMI).”³ While the GMI stresses the importance of maintaining the natural environment, biodiversity and aquatic resources, it cannot be said to comprehensively capture the economic, social, cultural and spiritual benefits that the Mekong River’s natural environment and resources offer to people living in the basin. Moreover, it does not provide a framework for participation by local communities and citizens within and outside of the Mekong basin in decision making with regard to development.⁴ If left as it is, the future outcome of the GMI, in particular, the course of development of “Actions and measures for investigation with regard to sustainable management and development of the Mekong River, including the influences of hydroelectric power projects on the Mekong River basin, within the framework of the Mekong River Committee,” as stated in “Tokyo Strategies for Japan-Mekong Cooperation” (October 2012) is in doubt.⁵ Therefore, on the basis of our talks thus far, we make the following recommendations under the name of the Citizens’ Green Mekong Initiative (CGMI). We request that these issues be discussed in earnest in conversations with governments, corporations and other people involved in the development of the Mekong basin:

- 1) The livelihoods, means of support, and life itself of the people living in the Mekong basin are deeply dependent upon natural resources provided by rivers, forests and the land. The Mekong River has economic, societal, cultural and spiritual value in supporting tens of millions of people. This should lie at the foundation of discussions regarding the future of the Mekong basin.
- 2) The actual condition and value of the natural environment and resources of the Mekong River have not yet been fully elucidated. Areas in which knowledge and information are insufficient should be proactively investigated, and support should be

provided, particularly for independent investigations by the local communities.

3) Large-scale development, particularly construction of hydroelectric facilities, destroys the natural environment and resources, and threatens the existence of the basin's inhabitants, particularly indigenous and minority peoples, women, children and the economically impoverished. Such cases have already occurred in the basin, the Pak Mun Dam in northeastern Thailand, for one. Lessons should be learned from such cases.

4) As is also stated in a recommendation in the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) commissioned by the Mekong River Committee (MRC) that decisions on dams of the mainstream should be deferred for ten years,⁶ construction of hydroelectric facilities on the Mekong River mainstream should be postponed until comprehensive investigations can be implemented.

5) Trans-boundary environmental and social impacts bring enormous harm to the basin's inhabitants, and measures to mitigate these effects are extremely difficult to create, agree on and enforce. In environmental impact assessments (EIA) for hydroelectric facilities, evaluation of the long-term and cumulative effects should be required along with assessment of cross-border effects on the environment and society, and mitigating measures should be provided in case damage manifests.

6) In the countries of the Mekong basin, democratic systems and procedures that are essential for decision-making on development are lacking; particularly, disclosure of information, freedom of expression, citizen participation and government and corporate accountability have not been sufficiently established. Sufficient information should be disclosed in a timely manner using appropriate methods, and systems and procedures should be provided so that substantive citizen participation can be achieved and so that human rights violations such as threats or suppression of inhabitants and citizens who express various opinions do not occur.

7) The upstream countries of China and Burma are not official members of the MRC, and the consultation procedures⁷ are also insufficient in many ways. In the planning for the Xayaburi Dam, voices from the governments of Cambodia and Vietnam, both member nations, expressing concerns or opposition could not be reflected, let alone the opinions of the local communities and citizens. The MRC should not be discussing plans for further hydroelectric dams until the current problems in the consultation procedures are reviewed and the member nations agree to improvements.

8) Decision-making on development should be conducted on the basis of a proper analysis of currently existing information and knowledge such as the inhabitants' traditional knowledge and everyday experiences and surveys by experts.

9) Demand for electricity—the grounds for constructing hydroelectric powers, can be predicted using procedures that are highly open and transparent to provide a basis for creating more realistic plans for electric power development rather than serving the profits or intentions of particular groups of people. At the same time, plans and policies for electric power development should be drawn up based on de-centralized and renewable energy sources and demand-side management.

10) The concept of “transparent and sustainable” hydroelectric power and techniques such as fish ladders are not yet clearly defined, and their effectiveness has not been sufficiently verified. Regarding fish ladders, in particular, it has become clear that at the current level of the technology they cannot preserve the Mekong River’s rich aquatic resources. In developing the Mekong River, care should be taken to avoid using it as a test site for concepts and technologies of dubious effectiveness.

In order to bring the above proposals to fruition, we local communities and citizens both within and outside of the basin will proceed with the following activities:

- 1) Elucidate methods and strategies for making future use of the knowledge and wisdom of the people using and managing the natural environment and resources of the Mekong basin sustainably.
- 2) Use every opportunity to seek the understanding of representatives from governments and the private sector and citizens in general, both within and outside of the basin, regarding the close connection between the natural environment and resources and the people’s livelihoods and existence and the value of that connection, and on the contrary, the economic, social, cultural and spiritual damage that would occur through degradation of the environment and resources.
- 3) Strengthen the network in East Asian countries for discussing and examining development problems in the Mekong basin, so as to deal with complex issues of environmental and societal preservation, while making best use of the inhabitants’ and citizens’ experience, knowledge and imaginative powers.

¹ Recently, disputes over land have become a big problem. These are being caused by land use changes resulting from the operation of large-scale plantations, monocropping and contract farming through private investment and economic land concessions, as well as absolute and relative shortages of land. Land disputes have also been brought about by inundation of large land areas and massive relocation of inhabitants due to construction of large-scale hydroelectric dams. In cities, air, water and soil pollution as a result of industrialization has become more severe, causing harm to people over extensive areas, and in the Mekong region, there are many local communities whose

lives are dependent on the natural environment and resources derived from other large rivers, including the Chaophraya, Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) and Salween (Thanlwin) rivers. While there is a need to work jointly with the people tackling these issues, there are many points within the recommendations raised herein that can be applied to many of these issues.

² Recently, there have been prominent cases in which environmentalists and human rights defenders were threatened, suppressed or assassinated, and it can be said that chances for citizens' participation are becoming even narrower.

³ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan (2009a) 第1回日本・メコン地域諸国首脳会議東京宣言（仮訳）—共通の繁栄する未来のための新たなパートナーシップの確立—（Declaration of the First Japan-Mekong Region Summit in Tokyo (provisional translation) -Establishing a New Partnership for Joint Prosperity in the Future→) (http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/j_mekong_k/s_kaigi/j_mekong09_ts_ka.html)

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan (2009b) 「日メコン行動計画 63（仮訳）」(Japan-Mekong Action Plan 63 (provisional translation)) (http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/j_mekong_k/s_kaigi/j_mekong09_63_ka.html) mentions “cooperation for promoting aquatic resource management of the Mekong River” and “management and mitigation of flooding and water shortages of the Mekong River.” Also, the action plan for the “Ten Years for a Green Mekong” initiative by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan (2010) (http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/j_mekong_k/s_kaigi02/gm10_iap_jp.html) mentions “aid for executing projects related to flood and drought countermeasures by the Mekong River Committee (MRC),” “Mekong River Irrawaddy dolphin protection as part of preserving the biodiversity of the Mekong River” and “promotion of an integrated water resources management (IWRM) approach via the Mekong River Committee.”

⁵ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan (2012) 「日メコン協力のための東京戦略 2012（仮訳）」(Tokyo Strategy for Japan-Mekong Cooperation (provisional translation)) (http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/j_mekong_k/s_kaigi04/joint_statement_jp2.html).

⁶ The original text reads, “Decisions on mainstream dams should be deferred for a period of ten years...with reviews every three years to ensure that essential deferment - period activities are being conducted effectively.” (International Centre for Environmental Management 2010. *Strategic Environmental Assessment of Hydropower on the Mekong Mainstream: Final Report*, Mekong River Commission, 24 pp., http://www.cdri.org.kh/shdmekong/9.Strategic%20Environmental%20Assessment%20Final%20Report_MRC.pdf)

⁷ The consultation procedures, known as “Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement = PNPCA,” are procedural duties incumbent on the member states on the basis of Article 5 of the Mekong Agreement of 1995. The member states hold joint investigations and consultations to form agreements on the execution of development projects on the Mekong River mainstream, or conditions for their execution, upon notifying the MRC of those projects. For further details, see MRC *Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement* (<http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/Procedures-Notification-Prior-Consultation-Agreement.pdf>)