

Mekong and Sekong Fisheries Issues

Collaboration between
Cambodia and Lao PDR



MEKONG-SEKONG PROJECT AT A GLANCE

The Mekong and Sekong Rivers Fisheries Management Project is one of the MRC's five bilateral initiatives to address issues in transboundary water resources planning and management through cooperation. Funded by the World Bank, it promotes coordinated actions that follow the principles of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), a universal concept aiming to balance the needs for social and economic development as well as environmental protection along riverine communities. The project will equip both countries with the capacity and the tools to continue their joint activities beyond its lifespan.

The Mekong and Sekong rivers host more than 800 fish species that provide income and food to the people living in the bordering provinces of Stung Treng and Kratie in Cambodia, and Champassak and Attapeu in Lao PDR. Yet, both rivers face threats such as unsustainable fishing practices, accelerated infrastructure development and climate change, which lead to deterioration in fish habitats.

To tackle these problems and protect the environment and people's livelihoods, Cambodia and Lao PDR seek to improve fisheries management in the bordering provinces through a bilateral project supported by the Mekong River Commission.

They have conducted studies and identified seven priority issues in transboundary fisheries management of the Mekong-Sekong basins, through consultation with various stakeholders and extended field surveys.

Priority Transboundary Water Management Issues

Details of the seven issues are compiled in the joint technical paper, *Transboundary Fisheries Management in the Mekong and Sekong Rivers of Cambodia and Lao PDR*, published in September 2017.



1 Exploitative fishing: As population growth demands more fish for food and income, fishers are pressured to engage in exploitative fishing. New fishing gear technology encourages them to catch larger volumes of fish, and the frequent use of more exploitative gear has increased their activities to deal with greater competition and market demand. As a result, the fish stock has been depleted in terms of variety and size. Providing alternative sources of income (e.g. aquaculture, livestock raising, and ecotourism) may help fishers support their families in other ways, thus reducing overfishing.

COUNTRIES

Cambodia and Lao PDR

BUDGET

US\$535,200

DURATION

July 2014–2018



Illegal fishing gear use: Many fishers in both countries use illegal fishing gear such as traps with small mesh openings, dynamite and electrocution devices. The use of these devices has reduced fish populations and diversity, and affected the safety of the local people. Effective law enforcement and income diversification would counter this problem.



Habitat degradation: Water infrastructural development threatens fish habitat as well as food security and livelihoods in the riverine communities. Logging, blasting and dredging of rapids, sand mining, and dam construction have caused deforestation, soil erosion, pollution from mercury and other environmental hazards, leading to a reduction in fish population and production. Measures to mitigate these effects are necessary.



Changes in fish catch: Due to infrastructural development activities, unsustainable fishing and climate change, Cambodian and Laotian fishers have reported a decline in their catch, which is now dominated by small fish. This can negatively affect the poor. The two governments need to develop measures to protect fish habitats to minimise further changes in fish catch.



Transboundary fisheries management mechanisms: Although Cambodia and Lao PDR set up a joint mechanism in 2006 to address exploitative fishing practices and other common issues in the bordering provinces, it died out due to limited funding and lack of involvement of provincial authorities. A new collaboration mechanism is needed to enhance communication at the provincial level, with ministerial support.



Limited fisheries data and information sharing: Knowledge of fish species diversity is poor, including the understanding of long distance migratory species, and information on fish consumption and other aquatic animals. Both countries need to collect fisheries data and share it with those involved in the sector to create awareness for better management.



Capacity and resources for fisheries management: Both governments have insufficient staff with adequate skills in fisheries science and management, especially at the provincial and district levels. This requires staff training in developing a fisheries management plan, fish catch monitoring, project management, and on-the-job training in specific field research and communications to support their ongoing dialogue.

Bilateral Actions

Cambodia and Lao PDR have agreed to take several steps to address their priority transboundary issues through the bilateral project:

1. Set up a joint fish monitoring programme to monitor five long-distance migratory white fish species found in the border area, to understand the status and trends of capture fisheries, and assess the effects of water management more effectively.
2. Establish joint coordination mechanisms at national and local levels between Cambodia and Lao PDR to improve information sharing on fisheries data and coordinate efforts to address some of the priority challenges.
3. Develop a joint action plan to implement the coordination mechanisms

Once the project is completed, the two countries are expected to continue bilateral dialogue to set up a joint fisheries management body to carry out the action plan. These long-term efforts will help improve the livelihoods of local communities and increase their food security.



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