

MEKONG REGION

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)



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MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION (MRC)

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2025



Ethnic Cham people in Cambodia's Kampong Cham live in the boats and depend their livelihoods on the river. Photo © Phearith Phan/MRC

The Mekong River Commission is the only treaty-based intergovernmental organisation for the Mekong River Basin with a mandate for integrated water resources management, procedures and tools to support equitable use of water and address transboundary issues. Switzerland with its experience in water diplomacy and integrated water resources management contributes to the implementation of the Basin Development Strategy (BDS 2021-2030) and MRC's Strategic Plan (MRC SP 2021-2025) through the multi-donor Basket Fund.

BACKGROUND

Over recent decades, rapid development of hydropower projects, economic gains and increasing urbanisation have contributed to socio-economic development, including greater access to electricity. However, gains have not been equally distributed, creating substantial challenges to the sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin.

The hydrology of the Mekong is changing, pressure on the environment is increasing and a sense of urgency is growing among stakeholders on the need to move basin development towards more sustainable opportunities that address long-term needs, including water, food, and energy security,

while avoiding and mitigating potential negative impacts on society and the environment. While alternative renewable energy mixes is increasingly recognised as a promising approach in the region, the further development of water resources and hydropower projects remains a priority for some riparian countries to support socio-economic development.

To manage the aspirations of the Mekong countries, it will require a more proactive regional planning approach. In particular, when it comes to addressing long-term needs of water, together with the more frequent and more extreme floods and droughts due to climate change and other development variables. As the only Mekong Basin intergovernmental body, the MRC continues to play a key role in coordinating with and in providing technical support to riparian countries and other stakeholders.

OUTCOME

An equitable water resource governance and proactive regional planning are of critical importance to the future of the Mekong River and is a key factor in achieving the objectives of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) community and of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The BDS 2021-2030 is guided by the Basin Vision towards 2040: An economically prosperous, socially just, environmental sound and climate resilient Mekong River Basin. The BDS aims to put actions in place to improve the overall state of the Mekong River Basin.

The five Strategic Priorities of the BDS, reflected in the MRC SP, are:

1. Environment: Maintain the ecological function of the Mekong River Basin.
2. Social: Enable inclusive access and utilisation of the basin's water and related resources.
3. Economic: Enhance optimal and sustainable development of water and related sectors.
4. Climate change: Strengthen resilience against climate risks, extreme floods and droughts.
5. Cooperation: Strengthen cooperation among all basin countries and stakeholders.

These five thematic priorities are identified to direct the realisation of 12 outcomes and a series of outputs by 2030.

PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

Project Title:

Mekong River Commission (MRC) Implementation of the Strategic Plan 2021-2025

Partners:

Mekong River Commission Secretariat (MRCS)

The SDC Budget:

(2021-2025) CHF 5,235,000.
The total budget for the implementation of MRC SP is USD 60,506,392

Project Funding:

Australia, Belgium, European Union, France, Germany, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, United States, UNOSSC, UNEP.

Project Member Countries:

Lower Mekong Region (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam and Thailand).

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STRATEGY

The BDS Vision and priorities are coherent with the overall goal of the Swiss Cooperation Programme in the Mekong Region (2022-2025), which is to “enable people, in particular young people, women and disadvantaged groups in Cambodia, Laos and the Mekong region to be more prosperous, resilient and better included in development processes”.

The BDS 2021–2030 is guided by the Siem Reap Declaration of the Third MRC Summit ‘One Mekong One Spirit’ on 5 April 2018, as well as Heads of Governments Declarations of other Mekong cooperation frameworks such as the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation, the Greater Mekong Subregion cooperation (GMS), and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS).

The Strategy integrates the SDGs relevant to water resources management and internalises a ‘gender and vulnerability’ approach to account for intersectional inequity and the different dimensions of vulnerability.

APPROACH

The effective implementation of the BDS 2021-2030 and the SP 2021-2025 will require an ambitious strategic shift, beyond water resource planning to encompass operational management, including transboundary coordination of operations of dams and other water infrastructures. Such a shift to coordinated operations will require a more proactive regional planning approach and higher levels of transboundary cooperation and regional integration. The MRC will support enhanced data sharing and advance cooperation between MRC Member Countries and between MRC and the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation.

The BDS provides the rationale for broader and deeper engagement with partners and other stakeholders in sustainable water resources development and management throughout the basin. The BDS approach for enhanced stakeholder engagement is mainstreamed in the MRC Multi-year work plans through dedicated tasks.

A key focal area that is managed during the implementation is the continuing and gradual transition of MRC towards a leaner ‘expert’ organisation fully funded by the Member Countries by 2030.

This transition process includes the enhancement of the MRC expert groups and the steadily increasing contributions from Member Countries through the multi-donor Basket Funds.

Switzerland’s support to the MRC for the period 2021-25 includes financial contribution through the basket fund, chairing the Development Partners Consultative Group in 2022-23 and providing technical support to the secretariat through a Swiss Hydrologist Expert for 2022-24.

RESULTS PHASE I

Key results of the MRC Strategic Plan 2016-2020 include the successful transition to become a leaner expert organization; increased commitment and funding of the Member Countries to MRC procedures and activities; MRC facilitation of the Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA) for Xayabury dam, Don Sahong dam, Pak Beng, Pak Lay, Luangprabang and Sanakham dam projects; and enhanced stakeholder engagement through different channels including regional and national forums.

EXPECTATIONS

The achievements of the BDS and SP Outcomes and outputs shall specifically/particularly benefit poor and vulnerable communities relying on the Mekong River and tributaries for their livelihood and income. To achieve this long-term aspiration, MRC’s role and procedures should continue to be strengthened and further used by the Member Countries government’s; and the broader stakeholders, including CSOs and communities more effectively and meaningfully engaged in the MRC prior consultation processes for the development of hydropower projects.



A fisherman in Khon Phapheng Falls of Lao PDR risk his life to catch fish. Photo © Anouphon Phomhacsar/MRC