



Mekong₂Rio:
International Conference on Transboundary River Basin Management
1-3 May 2012, Phuket, Thailand



Mekong₂Rio Message

BACKGROUND

With an expected addition of two billion people on the planet by 2040, and the added challenges from climate change and rapid urbanization, the pressure on water, energy and food is growing, and the world faces increasing challenges to resource availability, management and sustainability. When these resources cross international and state boundaries, their management becomes more complex, calling for greater cooperation and involving a wider range of actors.

Set to be a contribution on the road to Rio +20, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, to be held in June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, and beyond, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) convened the “Mekong₂Rio - International Conference on Transboundary River Basin Management” in Phuket, Thailand, 1-3 May 2012, hosted by the Royal Thai Government. The objective of the Conference was to address “the transboundary dimension of the water, energy and food security nexus, with particular emphasis on the challenges that rapid human-made developments and environmental change pose to the sustainable management of transboundary river basins”. In addressing this objective the Conference recognized and built on the outcome of the Bonn2011 Nexus Conference, highlighting the interconnectivity of the decisions taken in one sector on another.

A wide range of stakeholders from local, national and international settings world-wide were represented among the more than 350 participants, including 14 transboundary river basins from six continents of the World¹, two regional economic communities, and 16 international organisations who contributed to the Conference as Sponsoring Partners².

MESSAGES

In many areas of the world increased water demands may outstrip supply, and the traditionally dominant agricultural water use will need to become more efficient due to the growing demand from other sectors, as e.g. energy, and at the same time meeting the requirements of environmental flows to sustain ecosystems functions and livelihoods. This calls for innovative solutions through a nexus approach. The resultant need for increased productivity poses major challenges, not least in river basins and aquifers shared between states. Transboundary cooperation can enhance a broader set of benefits and opportunities than individual country approaches.

The nexus approach is not entirely new, but the recent systematic focus on it brings it to the attention of senior policy makers in the three sectors, helps identify the linkages between sectors in a transboundary setting, and assists in the analysis and identification of necessary trade-offs and possible win-win solutions.

¹ The transboundary basins represented were Columbia, Mississippi, Amazon, Itaipu/La Plata, Danube, Niger, Congo, Nile, Aral Sea, Indus, Ganges, Yellow River, Murray-Darling and the Mekong, along with the UN-ECE and Espoo Conventions and GWP Southern Africa.

² The Conference was convened in collaboration with the following sponsoring partners: Asian Development Bank (ADB), Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF), Danish International Development Agency (Danida), German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) on behalf of the German Government, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), International Water Management Institute (IWMI), Mekong Program on Water Environment and Resilience (M-POWER), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI), Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Bank, the DHI Group, the Mississippi River Commission and Global Water Partnership (GWP)

The nexus approach, building on Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), highlights the need for dialogue and real engagement between sectors on water, food and energy security issues at all levels, from local to transboundary levels.

Some key messages from the Conference were:

1. Water, food and energy are key strategic resources for the individual riparian countries that adopt policies and make decisions at the national level. This may on the one hand create barriers to cooperation, but on the other hand a nexus approach can contribute to regional stability if countries can agree to cooperate.
2. In addressing the nexus it is recognized that water management needs to respect the basin and aquifer as the basic unit, from the smallest catchment to the major transboundary basins. Hence the opportunities and trade-offs of the nexus need to be addressed at the basin level, and transboundary river basin and aquifer management entities should be empowered to play their role in influencing national decisions.
3. Solutions to food, water and energy security issues are being found by the three sectors working together, as shown in many transboundary basins throughout the world.
4. The predominant paradigm in many countries on economic development needs to change towards a more balanced nexus approach which recognizes the importance of investment in and protection of natural capital and the need to maintain ecosystems functions and livelihoods, and move towards greener economies.
5. Operationalizing the nexus in a transboundary setting calls for sharing of data and information between countries, not only on water, but also on food and energy production.
6. Nexus thinking needs to be based on scientific evidence of the gains to be made, and hence an added focus on research and development, including in decision support systems, along with the dissemination of results through a stronger transboundary science-policy dialogue
7. A multi-purpose approach for dams may increasingly be used to provide solutions to food security issues by increased irrigation, and at the same time provide water supply, energy, flood protection, jobs and economic development illustrating the water, food and energy linkages. However, sustainability challenges still remain, as do the challenge to implement benefit sharing.
8. The rural poor in many countries depend on water-related food production such as rice and fish, and they are very vulnerable to any changes in access to water for their basic livelihoods. Infrastructure development for large-scale energy and food production in transboundary basins need to address this nexus issue through thorough analysis and stakeholder dialogue, including mitigation considerations.
9. In anticipating the influence of climate change on nexus considerations, there needs to be policy coherence between regional basin-wide analysis and national adaptation strategies.

Any action to consider the transboundary dimension of the nexus, through decisions at national level, depend entirely on the awareness by decision-makers in the concerned sectors, and the political will to engage in dialogue across sectors and across boundaries.

TO RIO AND BEYOND

It is hoped that this message will receive attention among the participants and negotiators assembled at Rio+20 in June 2012.

In order to further disseminate and promote the outcome of this conference in addressing future challenges a Mekong₂Rio publication will be produced by MRC, and the international Sponsoring Partner organizations to convey the messages from the conference to relevant stakeholders world-wide. This paper will be launched at the Stockholm World Water Week in August 2012.

Phuket, 2 May 2012