

# Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio

## International Conference on Transboundary River Basin Management

### Conference Brief

*This Conference Brief, together with the attached Programme, provides a summary of the background and the objectives of MRC's Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio Conference. It outlines the key topic and issues, focal areas and interests of the conference, as well as desired outputs, aiming at guiding speakers and panelists, as well as the process of producing the Conference Statement and the Conference Publication.*

#### The Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio Conference

The sustainable development and management of water resources is the key to people's lives and development of society, including production of the food and energy on which we depend, and the maintenance of our ecosystems. With an expected two more billion people on our planet by 2040, and the added challenges from climate change and rapid urbanization, the pressure on water, energy and food is growing, and we face 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.

Situated in a region facing rapid economic growth, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) is one of the world's leading transboundary river basin organizations facing these challenges. The MRC is playing a key role in ensuring that the joint development and management of shared resources within the Mekong Basin will be made in the most sustainable and efficient manner.

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, the MRC will host the "**Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio - International Conference on Transboundary River Basin Management**" to be held in Phuket, Thailand, 1-3 May 2012, as an international gathering of key players, with special focus on international river basin organizations, aiming to share their experience in transboundary water resources management.

This Conference will be the first in a series of biennial conferences of its kind convened by MRC. In the face of the aforementioned growing challenges, it will be a 2½-day platform for discussion on how existing river basin organizations develop and manage their shared resources, and how to strengthen their institutional frameworks governance structures, stakeholder dialogue processes and management practices. The conference will gather some 250 participants, including chief and senior representatives from some 15 transboundary river basin organizations in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, leading representatives of some 15 international and regional organizations, many of which will support the Conference as Sponsoring Partners, and a wide range of stakeholders from the Mekong region and beyond. On the third day, the Ministers of the four riparian countries of the Lower Mekong Basin will attend.

## Rio+20 and the Water, Energy and Food Security Nexus

Water has been a concern in international environmental governance discussions, especially since the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and its follow-up 10 years later in 2002 (“Rio + 10”) at the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. The latter called upon all countries to address Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), a call which has been followed by most developing countries and major transboundary basins, including in the Mekong region in which IWRM plans at national and basin levels are now starting to be implemented. Today, shortly before “Rio+20”, the challenge of water will be addressed with focus on the imperative to achieve water, energy and food security for all, particularly the poorest segments of the world population, while achieving sustainable development and growth in approaches fully consistent with solutions for a Green Economy. The Bonn 2011 Conference in November 2011, as a preparatory step for Rio+20, addressed this challenge in the context of what is called the “the Water-Energy-Food Security Nexus” – see box below.

### ***The Water, Energy and Food Security Nexus, as expressed in Bonn:***

*Water, energy, and food sectors are connected in important ways, and actions in one sector have the potential to either help or harm the other two. For example, the way water is sourced, treated, priced, and distributed can reduce or increase energy requirements; dietary choices can affect water and energy demands; and decisions taken on which way to generate energy can significantly influence water demand or, in the case of biofuels, displace food production. Disconnected approaches and silo thinking are more likely to make matters worse. The real world is characterized by an intricate web of interactions – the nexus.*

*Based on a better understanding of the inter-dependencies across water, energy and food challenges, the nexus approach provides a more comprehensive base for allocating scarce resources. It helps to identify mutually beneficial responses and provides an informed and transparent framework for determining and resolving trade-offs to meet increasing demand without compromising sustainability.*

*The nexus approach will enable us to:*

- *Achieve access to water, sanitation, energy and food*
- *Create more with less by reducing waste and limiting over-use*
- *Sustain ecosystems and biodiversity*
- *Strengthen resilience to disasters and accelerate recovery*
- *Mobilize consumer and public influence*

*For more information, including the Policy Recommendations issued 13 February 2012:*

<http://www.water-energy-food.org/en/conference.html>

In the key messages from Bonn the continued focus on integrated water resources management, particularly in terms of horizontal and cross-sectoral integration, is stressed, and it is emphasized that “a true nexus approach can only be achieved through close collaboration of all actors from all sectors”. However, the prominence of water resources management transcending the boundaries of nation-states, does remain limited within the Rio+20 process. A continuous and strengthened international focus on transboundary water resources development and management is therefore urgently needed.

Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio will be an important contribution to the transboundary water resources management dimension to Rio+20. Applying the nexus perspective, while still adhering to IWRM principles as the basic approach to achieve it, helps river basin planners and managers, as well as other involved stakeholders, to exploit synergies and mitigate trade-offs between different development opportunities while maintaining the overall sustainability in a shared basin. While serving as an important dialogue platform between the world's leading transboundary river basin organizations, Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio thus aims at continuing to the development of policy recommendations within the Rio+20 process, and at contributing to specific activities and initiatives that help strengthening the water, energy and food security nexus. Hence, like the Bonn Conference, the Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio with its special focus in the transboundary dimension will attempt to propose concrete solutions to move from rhetoric to practice in operationalizing the nexus perspectives.

## Key topics and issues to be addressed

Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio focuses on the transboundary water resources management dimension of sustainable development from a nexus perspective. Specifically, it addresses the key topic:

***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 topic the Conference will address the following issues:

- Integrated and inter-disciplinary *management, adaptation and mitigation options* for ensuring the sustainable development of transboundary river basin to the benefit of the people, the economy and the environment
- *International institutions* and their role in ensuring the joint, cooperative and sustainable management of shared natural resources, with a particular emphasis on strengthening the role of river basin organizations in the management of shared river basins
- The *involvement of a broad variety of stakeholders* contributing to the management of internationally shared river basins, and the development of a joint approach to integrated water resources management (IWRM) with the help of, and for the well-being of, all concerned stakeholders

All these topics will be addressed from an integrated, cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary perspective. Conference participants are therefore asked to assess, analyze and discuss the different topics of the conference within the nexus framework.

## Expected outcomes of the Conference

Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio will address the aforementioned water resources management challenges. It will aim at generating the following three outputs:

- **Key messages**, including recommendations for action, on the role of transboundary river basins for the overall nexus discussion and the international sustainable development agenda
- A “**Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio Message**” to be sent to the Rio Conference, emphasizing the importance of transboundary water resources management and the role of institutionalized cooperation for ensuring its sustainability
- A “**Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio Publication**”, prepared in an internally peer reviewed process by MRC and Sponsoring Partners, to be launched at the Stockholm Water Week in August 2012

## Approach of the Conference

Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio will be a two-day high-level Technical Conference, followed by ½ day Ministerial Segment.

- On **Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> May**, nexus challenges for and approaches to transboundary river management in the sectors of water, food and energy are discussed along thematic lines, nonetheless highlighting the interdependencies between these sectors. The discussions will feed into the Panel discussion at the end of day of how to address the challenges of integration across the nexus.
- On **Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> May**, the conference moves on to address the integrated perspective of IWRM and the nexus by applying a cross-cutting approach, addressing the environmental, climate change, poverty, policy and governance, techno-economic and stakeholder involvement aspects
- On **Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> May** MRC ministerial representatives will review and discuss the outcome of the technical sessions of the first two days from a political perspective

An **exhibition** featuring MRC and the Sponsoring Partners of the Conference will be a place for display and interaction throughout the three days. During the first two days one hour is allocated each afternoon for participants to study displays and discuss with MRC and its partners in the exhibition area.

## Brief program and session description – the flow of the Conference

### Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> May

The Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio will be opened in **Plenary 1** by the Royal Thai Government and the Mekong River Commission, and proceed with three stage setting keynote addresses on the water/environment, food and energy aspects of the Nexus. Starting with experiences from the Mekong River Basin (**Parallel Session 1**), a basin facing important water resources development opportunities as well as challenges, different aspects of water, energy and food security are discussed. Presenters from the MRC and other institutions and stakeholders from the region, inspired by some international basins such as the Ganges, will provide a comprehensive view in light of the nexus of how the Mekong River Basin is dealing with challenges it faces– ranging from fisheries-related food security aspects to sustainable hydropower development, and from regional energy security to the mitigation of environmental impacts in the basin. The emphasis of these presentations will be on the role of the Mekong River Basin as an example for the application of IWRM and the nexus perspective as

solutions to the transboundary river basin challenges, contributing to the sustainable development of its riparian populations and states.

**Parallel sessions 2 and 3** will provide insights from various different transboundary watercourses around the world, including the Congo, the Danube, the Niger, the Nile, the Indus, the Itaipu/La Plata, the Columbia and the Yellow River Basins, and very different actors involved in their management – ranging from river basin organizations to research institutions, and from international organizations to civil society and the private sector.

**Parallel session 2** focuses on examples from these international basins, extending the lessons learned on the nexus from the Mekong River Basin to other international basins. It is structured along the three key aspects of the nexus – water/environment, food and energy – and will discuss how food and energy production in transboundary basins can be managed for mutual benefit sharing while addressing the social and environmental implications.

**Parallel session 3** then focuses on potential solutions to the challenges raised in Parallel Sessions 1 and 2 in the form of three issue-specific Panels. The aim of these water/environment, food and energy-specific Panels is to discuss potential solutions to the challenges related to these issues on the basis of an integrated, nexus-driven and sustainable approach that can be promoted internationally for the sustainable development and management of shared river basins.

The first day concludes with **Plenary 2**, debating the water, energy and food security nexus as it emerged from the parallel sessions, the trade-offs concerned and its particular relevance to transboundary river basins. The Panel, consisting of high-level experts on water resources management, will discuss the issues from previous parallel sessions and the potential for integrating the sector- and actor-specific approaches into the nexus-perspective. The aim of this Panel will be to show how to move from a sector to a nexus perspective, hence setting the scene for the following day.

## **Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> May**

The second day will start with **Plenary 3** in which the outcome of Day 1 will be summarized, and keynote addresses on the nexus and the green economy will set the stage for the day. The day will address the integrated perspective, bridging the divides between the different water uses and users, and address the interdependencies of the nexus from a transboundary perspective.

**Parallel session 4** focuses on environment, climate change and poverty related challenges that challenge the nexus. The *environment* session of this part of the conference addresses potential means for mitigating the environmental challenges of river basin development for ensuring water, energy and food security; the *climate change* part of the session investigates climate change adaptation options in light of the nexus; and the *poverty-focused* part discusses the link between poverty, energy and food security, and environmental governance for ensuring sustainable development and management of ecosystem livelihoods and biodiversity.

**Parallel session 5** approaches the nexus topic from an actor-centered perspective, inviting presenters from a *policy, science and stakeholder* background to discuss sustainable development approaches (including representatives of institutions as diverse as international organizations, MRC programmes, the World Bank, hydropower developers and environmental NGOs, along with the international river

basin organizations). This also contributes to engaging a very broad range of actors into the sustainable development process of internationally shared watercourses.

In the sessions of the second day examples and cases will be provided from transboundary basins such as the Mekong, Murray-Darling, the Aral Sea, the Mississippi, the Amazon and the Nile; and from a 'convention perspective' by the Espoo Convention, the transboundary Convention of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, and the SADC Water Protocol from Southern Africa.

The second day concludes with a high-level Panel discussion (**Plenary 4**), which will draw on the outcomes of the Parallel Sessions and will aim to arrive at conclusions and recommendations for actions on how to address the transboundary dimensions of the nexus. The draft "*Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio Message*" will be presented as the outcome of the first two days.

### **Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> May**

On the third day MRC Ministers and high-level ministerial representatives get together in the Final Plenary to discuss the lessons learned and the approaches developed during the previous two days of the Conference from a political perspective, and address how the region will take these lessons and recommendations forward under the framework of the Rio+20 process.

### **Additional information for speakers, panelists and participants**

The Mekong<sub>2</sub>Rio Conference is designed with focus on interaction and discussions, the latter mostly as Panel discussions during which a Panel of selected high-level participants interacts with the audience. In these sessions panelists will normally be given 5 minutes for introductory remarks in order to provide time for the audience to raise questions and views.

Each parallel session will consist of up to four presentations. Each presentation is limited to 15 minutes, and speakers are requested to focus their presentation on the topics and issues outlined above, with a view to identify a few key lessons and recommendations. The presentation section of each parallel session will be followed by Q&A as well as a broader discussion between speakers and the audience, aiming at situating the different presentations in the overall IWRM and nexus context and deriving lessons learned for other regions and actors. The different sessions will be facilitated by internationally well-renowned facilitators, working closely with the Sponsoring Partners and MRC programmes in each of the parallel sessions.