

***The 5<sup>th</sup> Regional Stakeholder Forum***  
***20-21 September 2018***  
***Vientiane, Lao PDR***

**Welcome Remarks**

by

**Dr. An Pich Hatda**

Officer-in-Charge, and Planning Division Director  
Mekong River Commission Secretariat

Good morning!

***Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,***

On behalf of the Mekong River Commission Secretariat, it is my singular honor to welcome you to our Fifth Regional Stakeholder Forum. I also would like to thank those who are following us on Facebook via the live stream.

The MRC's Vision for an *Economically Prosperous, Socially Just and Environmentally Sound Mekong River Basin* is mirrored in our slogan: ***Meeting the Needs, Keeping the Balance.***

But we cannot meet the needs without knowing what those needs are; nor can we keep the balance without understanding what underpins the balance between economic prosperity, social justice and environmental sustainability.

MRC believes that inclusion and consideration of diverse views and interests strengthens water cooperation in the basin and that lies at the heart of our efforts to achieve our Vision. I would, therefore, strongly encourage everyone to actively contribute to the discussions here and beyond. We cannot hear your voice unless you raise it. We cannot meet your needs without knowing and understanding what those needs are.

Stakeholder involvement is reflected in the MRC's Strategic Plan for 2015-2020; it is the seed of our Public Participation Strategy; it is implemented

through our regional stakeholder engagement mechanism. And we meet here today as part of this mechanism.

Our strategy sees public participation as a process through which stakeholders can take part in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all the MRC's activities, and, through that process, influence and enrich them.

We all share the same goal: *working together towards the sustainable development and management of the Mekong River Basin, for the benefit of all*. I believe that you wouldn't be here, or following us on Facebook, if you didn't care. We sincerely appreciate that interest and concerns, and for that we thank you.

### ***Ladies and Gentlemen,***

While the most visible and noticeable part of our engagements focuses on discussing and exchanging views on planned hydropower projects on the Mekong mainstream, the MRC also needs your participation in a range of other initiatives.

Over the next two days, we will be discussing several of these matters, including:

- *the Joint Action Plan (JAP) for the Pak Beng Hydropower Project,*
- *the review of the design changes for the Xayaburi Hydropower Project,*
- *the update of the Preliminary Design Guidance (PDG),*
- *the Sustainable Hydropower Development Strategy (SHDS),* to name just a few.

These initiatives have buy-in from the highest political levels in all four Member Countries through the recent Siem Reap Declaration. And more recently it has been observed in the Lao Prime Minister's remarks at the World Economic Forum.

He noted that hydropower development in Laos must be based on a well-studied and well-planned approach, that projects must comply with international standards, and that they must be based on scientific information and expert views.

Importantly, he also recognised that the MRC's engagement framework, involving regional and international stakeholders, is central to this process. The regional stakeholder forum for Pak Lay prior consultation and those other initiatives are deeply intertwined and discussing them at a single forum is essential. So, before we tap into Pak Lay, I wish to bring your attention to the following.

Firstly, we must understand the prior consultation process. By definition, it is neither a veto right, nor a right to unilaterally proceed without taking the other Member Countries' concerns into account. It is not an approval process, but rather a cooperative mechanism underpinned by the Member Countries' mutual trust, shared interests, and commitment to uphold the 1995 Mekong Agreement. It is about building confidence among all MRC Member Countries that their concerns are being identified, addressed and monitored wherever possible.

Secondly, the MRC is bound by the powers and functions conferred by its Member Countries through the 1995 Mekong Agreement. The Commission can only work within these powers and functions. These do not allow the MRC to instruct any of the Member Countries, but rather to facilitate and inform the prior consultation process by various forms, such as supporting stakeholder consultations; sharing scientific data and knowledge; providing a sound scientifically based review of the proposed project; and, where possible, advising on measures that will further avoid, minimize and mitigate possible transboundary negative impacts.

Thirdly, we should understand the role of stakeholder groups. The prior consultation process gives stakeholders – including non-government organizations, civil society groups, and technical experts – the opportunity to ask questions and raise their concerns. The active participation of these groups guides and informs but should not dictate the outcomes. There are differing views which need to be balanced.

However, our experience from past processes tell us that these exchanges add significant value by helping us understand these diverse views. We balance these views with rigorous inquiry, helping us to establish and maintain

transparency and accountability for all Parties. Contributions from you and other stakeholders, of course, have influenced ongoing projects and other initiatives.

For this very reason, I am very pleased to see a wide range of representatives from different interest groups in this forum. But, I am disappointed that others have decided not to come. They will miss the opportunity to create an impact, listen to others, and to present their views.

Fourthly, while we recognize the limits of the prior consultation process, it has been proven to establish practices and precedence that strengthen water diplomacy and cooperation. Without it, information on planned developments would not be publicly available, independent reviews would not get commissioned, monitoring regimes would not get established, and we would not have the opportunity to work together to achieve better projects.

***Ladies and Gentlemen,***

I hope that this forum will provide a meaningful and valuable opportunity for everyone to discuss, review, and debate the plans for the proposed Pak Lay hydropower project and ongoing initiatives to strengthen basin planning and environmental management.

Again, please remember that your opinion matters: The MRC listens to you, and so do the member countries.

Before I finish, I would like to thank the Government of Lao PDR for co-hosting this Regional Stakeholder Forum.

My special appreciation and sincere thanks go to H.E. Vice Minister of Natural Resources and Environment: Madame Bounkham VORACHIT for your participation and opening this Forum.

I wish to also thank our staff members from the MRC Secretariat for their hard work and dedication in making this event happen.

Thank you very much.