



Public Participation

in the Lower Mekong Basin



Working together for a better future



A **Vision** for the Mekong River Basin

An economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin.



A **Vision** for the Mekong River Commission

A world class, financially secure, international river basin organisation serving the Mekong countries to achieve the basin vision.



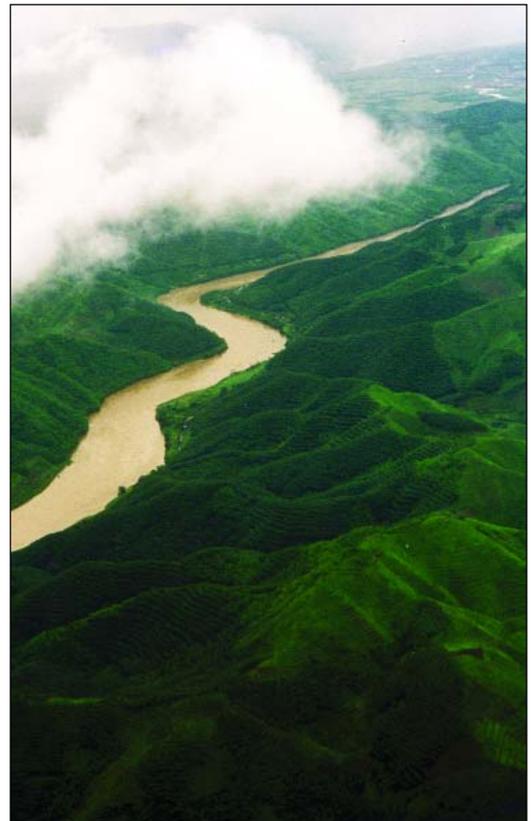
The **Mission** of the Mekong River Commission

To promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries' mutual benefit and the people's wellbeing by implementing strategic programmes and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice.

This booklet was produced with financial assistance from AusAID.
Published in Vientiane, Lao PDR in January 2005 by the Mekong River Commission

Our Public Participation objectives

- Raise the awareness of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and its role to promote regional cooperation for sustainable development, through comprehensive participation of internal and external stakeholders.
- Expand the opportunities for participatory collaboration among MRC, National Mekong Committee and riparian government personnel.
- Encourage greater participation of external stakeholders and those in civil society who share the MRC's strategic objectives for sustainable development in the Mekong River Basin.
- Build institutional capacity within the MRC and the National Mekong Committees to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate stakeholder involvement in MRC activities.
- Adopt a continuous learning and improvement approach to the MRC public participation process.



Public Participation and the Mekong River Commission

The Mekong River Commission is an intergovernmental body created in 1995 by an agreement between the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. Promoting regional cooperation for sustainable development plays a key role in the operations of the MRC, but this can only be achieved if those involved in this development have a voice in the decision-making process.



The MRC is aware that stakeholder involvement in decision-making is fundamental to achieving feasible, equitable and lasting solutions and that the quality of decisions can be improved by the inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders who can bring important local knowledge and relevant perspectives to the process. Since its inception in 1995, the MRC has adopted a participatory approach in the work of all its core programmes and sector programmes and is envisaging ways to expand the opportunities for collaboration with both internal and external stakeholders.

Internal stakeholders are defined as government bodies in MRC structures such as the MRC Council, Joint Committee, the MRC Secretariat, the National Mekong Committees and their Secretariats, and the principal line agencies in each member country. External stakeholders are non-state bodies such as NGOs, implementing partners, civil society organisations, policy advocates, research institutions, individuals, the media and other groups who have interests or stakes to lose or gain. They are the ones who can contribute information, views and their perspectives in discussion in development planning.

For public participation to be genuine, MRC emphasises that all relevant stakeholders should have the opportunity to directly or indirectly influence project design, implementation and effects. It is also important to include the involvement of those groups who may not easily or readily participate, such as women, elderly and young people and minority groups.

Public participation is an ongoing process, with each step in the process increasing capacity, building trust and adding value. We are committed to working with the people of the Mekong Basin in order to achieve a better future for all.

Our operation

The operations of the MRC are conducted under a number of programmes:

- The Basin Development Plan
- Water Utilisation Programme
- Environment Programme
- Flood Management and Mitigation Programme
- Fisheries Programme
- Navigation Programme
- Agriculture, Irrigation and Forestry Programme
- Hydropower Programme

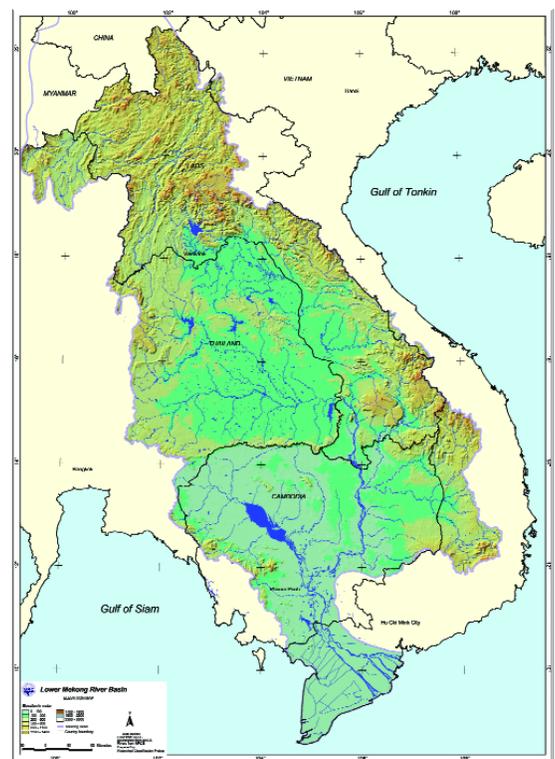
An Integrated Capacity Building Programme oversees the Junior Riparian training scheme as well as projects dealing with gender issues. The Junior Riparians provide the link to governments and line agencies.

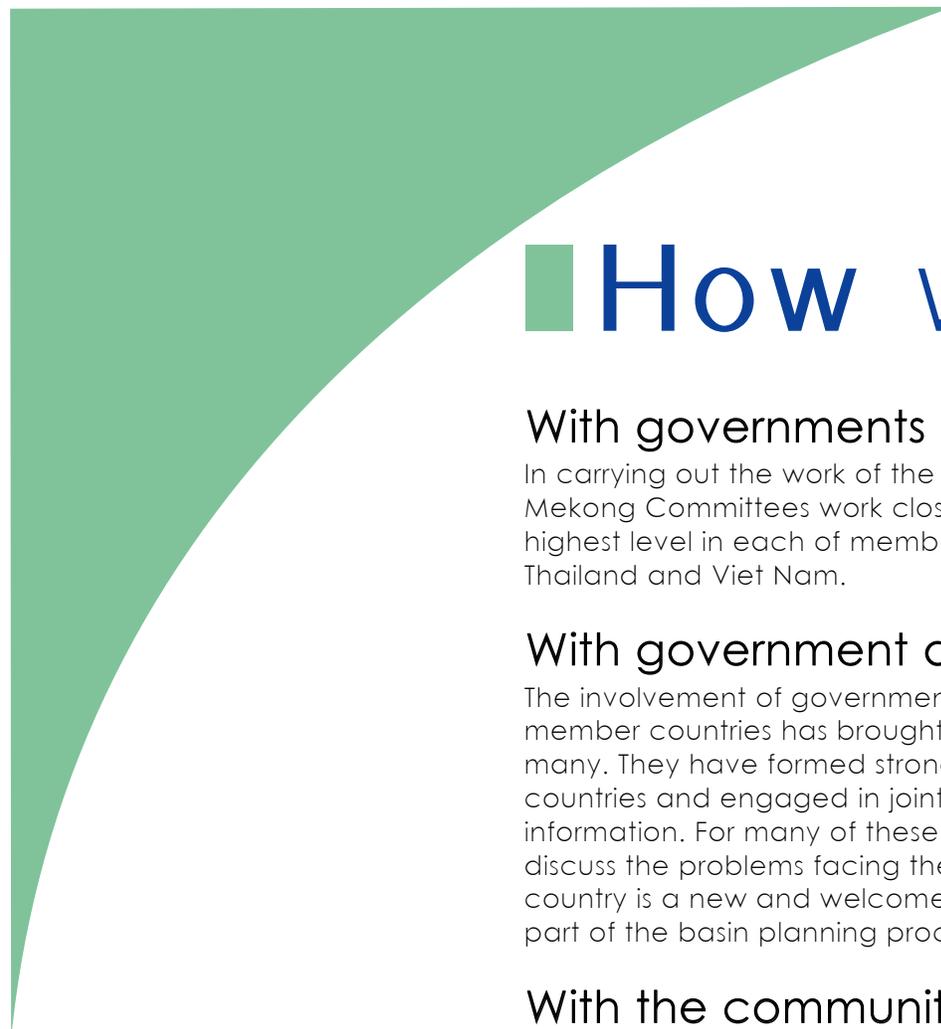
A Tourism Programme is also under development

Through its programmes, the MRC conducts projects ranging in scale from local to regional and undertakes situation-specific public participation, engaging with different stakeholders in different ways, depending on the context of each programme and project.

Approaches to public participation are adapted to the needs of a particular programme or project. By involving all those concerned with a project it is possible to understand problems, barriers and necessities or needs in relation to natural resource management.

Through mutual exchanges of information and consideration and discussion of information and knowledge, public participation can provide the capacity for dissolving or mitigating problems and potentially undesirable impacts of projects affecting natural resources, even before they arise.





■ How we work

With governments

In carrying out the work of the MRC, the Secretariat and the National Mekong Committees work closely with government ministers at the highest level in each of member countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam.

With government agencies

The involvement of government and line agencies in each of the four member countries has brought about a new realm of knowledge for many. They have formed strong links with their counterparts in other countries and engaged in joint decision-making and exchange of information. For many of these officials the opportunity to meet and discuss the problems facing the basin with their peers from another country is a new and welcome experience. They are now an integral part of the basin planning process.

With the community

Getting the community involved in projects is one proven way to ensure that the project is both successful and has an enduring life. In MRC programmes direct involvement with members of particular communities has resulted in the people who have a main stake in a project taking up prominent roles in planning and decision making as well as appraisal of the needs and objectives at the community level.

With partners

The MRC has formed many successful partnerships with NGOs and other civil society organisations. Sharing common goals is, increasingly, becoming a part of the donor community's strategy to reduce costs and increase efficiencies by engaging in joint projects with those who have expertise in the region. In order to enhance this cooperation, special observer status at MRC Joint Committee and Council meetings has been extended to the ADB, ASEAN, IUCN, UNDP, UNESCAP, the World Bank and WWF, together with our Dialogue Partners China and Myanmar. Forums such as the Donor Consultative Group and the Informal Donor Meetings extend the level of participation in the work of the MRC.

Public Participation in action

The Basin Development Plan

The needs of the people of the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) are at the heart of the Basin Development Plan (BDP). In fact it could not exist without a high degree of public participation in identifying these needs.

It is essential for the success of the BDP that relevant information from various levels of society is collected in order to create development scenarios which, in turn, will be used to determine the water requirements of each part of the basin.

The BDP involves stakeholders at different stages of the planning process, but the main thrust is through civil participation in a series of public forums, which are held at BDP Sub-Area, national and basin levels during the planning process.

A Sub-Area is a spatial planning unit in the LMB reflecting the main watersheds or tributaries of the Mekong River. In future these Sub-Areas may serve as geographical references for existing or new river basin organisations.

The BDP has identified 10 of these Sub-Areas which are used as a base for its studies. In its guidelines for public participation, The BDP suggests that each Sub-Area holds two public forums, brings all concerned stakeholders together to understand the



BDP, brainstorms ideas about the current and potential situations and assesses their needs.

The first forum is used:

- To verify that the data already collected about the resources in the Sub-Area is correct
- To gather additional information
- To identify the key assets in a Sub-Area that need to be protected
- To identify significant issues of local concern and priorities regarding development.



The second forum is expected to conclude with agreement on development objectives, priorities and strategies for a Sub-Area.

The outcome of these local forums will be taken to national and basin level, where the results will be collated and interpreted to provide an overview of local issues and priorities. This can help national planning, policy development and setting of priorities.

A special variation of public and civil society participation in the BDP planning process are the national working groups where different national institutions meet to discuss water-related issues for the LMB from a cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary point of view. The transboundary meetings are particularly important as they provide an avenue for national institutions from different countries jointly to analyse and prioritise strengths and explore opportunities for transboundary collaboration.

Some lessons learned

With any participatory approach there are lessons to be learned. Just giving local people a chance to speak is not always enough. They also need to be well prepared to be able to voice their opinions and in some cases helped to make themselves heard. BDP planners found it was important to:

- *Brief all participants about the subjects for debate before public meetings*
- *Ensure everyone understands the questions*
- *Give everyone enough time to absorb information*
- *Use a neutral, professional facilitator to help discussion, by asking a lot of questions and giving examples to encourage more dialogue.*

The Water Utilisation Programme

The Water Utilisation Programme (WUP) is assisting the MRC to improve water management in the Basin by promoting equitable water utilisation and enhancing environmental sustainability.

These objectives are to be achieved through the development of agreed procedures for water use, quality and quantity, and for water use monitoring information exchange, notification, consultation and agreement.

The WUP differs from most other MRC programmes, in that much of the public participation required to date has been through MRC stakeholders such as the National Mekong Committees (NMCs) and member country line agencies.

The programme has adopted a deliberate, structured approach to participation that ensures all participants are involved in forming and guiding the development of the procedures and technical rules.

The WUP has also supported the development of a basin-wide computer modelling tool which is capable of predicting the impacts of future development on the river flow as well as social and environmental impacts. This is the first time that the development of such a modelling tool has been undertaken in full consultation with the NMCs in the four member countries. The tool has been accepted for use by all member countries at the level of the Joint Committee and agreement has been reached that its outcomes will be used in further work by the MRC.



The Flood Mitigation and Management Programme

The Flood Mitigation and Management Programme (FMMP) commenced full-scale implementation in 2004. The primary objective of the Programme is to prevent, minimise or mitigate suffering and economic losses from flooding, whilst preserving the environmental benefits of floods.

The FMMP was developed through an extensive consultation process and through discussions with governments, donors and civil society.

Public participation will play a big role in the success of this programme as it involves many transboundary issues in the strengthening of flood emergency management and implementation of guidelines for flood proofing measures. Dialogue and cooperation with upstream partners forms part of the programme.

The programme is in its early stages, but there are some people already at work on the ground.



CASE STUDY

Communities join hands to cope with floods

Living on the flood plains of the Mekong, Cambodian villagers are wary when the wet season approaches, some leave their homes while others stock up on essentials and wait. But in 2003 some of these villages got a chance to take a different approach through their involvement in a flood early warning project.

As part of an early warning project conducted by the MRC and USAID Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), Cambodian Red Cross (CRC) volunteers spent the dry season setting up flood marks planted in a strategic selection of sites. The water readings taken from these gauges were then linked with, or "referenced", to flood levels on the mainstream of the Mekong.

The mainstream readings come from a network of hydrological monitoring equipment installed on the Mekong all the way from Chiang Saen in Thailand in the north to Chau Doc in the delta of Viet Nam.

These readings, together with weather and other information, are used by the MRC to develop flood forecasts up to five days ahead. Their limitation in the past was that the forecasts only applied to the situation on the mainstream. Land features, built structures and proximity to lakes and backwaters, can mean a rather different flood situation in areas not located directly on the mainstream.



With the help of the new village-based readings, over time, a reliable picture can be built up of village flooding in relation to the mainstream forecasts. It means that the daily warnings broadcast by the Mekong River Commission on the secretariat website have increased relevance.

With the referencing activities supported at the community level by OFDA, flood forecasts for the mainstream can also predict the situation in those particular villages, based on a simple correlation formula.

During the flood season, daily flood warnings for the mainstream stations are sent out from the MRC Secretariat by email to the Red Cross and other agencies. Warnings are also posted on the MRC website. In 2003, with the help of a spreadsheet containing the correlation formula for villages in six pilot areas, CRC workers at their headquarters in Phnom Penh were able to check the forecasts for specific villages.

The CRC transmitted warnings of possible flooding by two-way radio or mobile phone to village volunteers in the project areas. Red Cross volunteers in the villages then wrote up the forecasts on notice boards at prominent village locations and also passed on explanations through word-of-mouth. In this way the flood warnings were delivered to the grassroots level.

In 2004 the FMMP, with continued assistance from OFDA, the CRC, the American Red Cross and Action Against Hunger expanded the flood early warning system to 34 more villages in five flood-prone provinces of Cambodia.

The Provision of Flood Early Warning to Flood Vulnerable Communities in the Lower Mekong River Basin project has now been expanded to Lao PDR.



The Environment Programme

The Environment Programme aims to keep the Basin healthy by minimising the negative impacts of development and improving environmental and socio-economic knowledge. It works closely with a range of scientists, researchers, communities and government agencies.

Public participation is considered an essential element of good environmental governance and the development of a revised Environment Programme was itself a product of an inclusive participatory process.

As a result of the extensive participatory approach used in its development, the new programme reflects the views of the four participating lower riparian governments on regional environmental issues and their proposed approaches. It promotes the holistic environmental strategy of the MRC and identifies the issues that need to be addressed over the next decades in order to ensure a balance between economic development and environmental concerns.

The drafting also involved consultation with potential partners such as the Asian Development Bank, IUCN (the World Conservation Union) and the UN Environment Program.

The result is a programme that clearly reflects the national views of the participating governments, in terms of both regional environmental issues and possible means to scope and address them.



The Fisheries Programme

The Fisheries Programme puts a great emphasis on public participation in all of its work involved in management of river and reservoir fisheries in the Mekong Basin.

In particular it focuses on instituting co-management of projects and the active involvement of directly and indirectly affected people. This means that all those involved have to reach an agreement on the shared power and responsibility for the management of fisheries resources.

Important strategies also include stakeholder involvement in project formulation, including participatory appraisal of the needs and objectives at the community level.

Effective co-management results in local people feeling they that a different role, are accepted as players and have a say in management of the fishery.



CASE STUDY

Mobile hatcheries: Bringing fish to the people

You may have the water, but, as many communities discover, if you don't have the fish it has little use as a new source of income. It may not be possible to obtain stock from existing government hatcheries as they may be too far away, plus their fingerlings cost money. However, for a group of would-be fish farmers in Lao PDR the solution to their problem came in the form of a mobile fish hatchery.

Mobile hatcheries run by community members, with the assistance of district fisheries officers, provide opportunities to enhance fish resources and to raise productivity, and thus contribute to sustainable fisheries. But in order for the scheme to succeed, the community had to work together with the authorities.

In April 2004, a mobile hatchery was set up at Huey Siet by the local Fisheries Cooperative, with the help of district staff from both Lao PDR and the Department of Fisheries office in the neighbouring Thai province of Nakhon Phanom.

The establishment and operation of the mobile hatchery required a lot of consultation involving all relevant stakeholders. While the mobile hatchery itself was an important "hardware" item, the necessary "software", that is, a detailed work plan specifying who does what and when, was formulated together by users and local government staff, and is now being implemented.



After exchanges of experiences made by fishers at different sites, as well as fisheries officers both in Lao PDR and Thailand, and the formulation of detailed action plans at a joint workshop held in 2003, fishers at two reservoirs in Lao PDR (Huey Siet and Pak Beung) initiated the implementation of their action plans.

The necessary technical and organisational skills for all participants are being jointly developed in a learning-by-doing approach. Hatching of fry has been successful, and juveniles were nursed to fingerling size by community members, for stocking into the two reservoirs of Huey Siet and Pak Beung on the occasion of a 'Stocking Day' in early July 2004.

This is the first time that stocking has been done in a planned and systematic way, and in direct and conscious response to a need identified and objectives formulated by fisheries co-managers at a water body.

There is no doubt that the involvement of local level stakeholders, both users and government staff, in the plan formulation was a key element in the success of the hatchery project.

This success is evidenced by the fact that mobile hatcheries are now being used by community fisheries groups in Thailand and Cambodia.

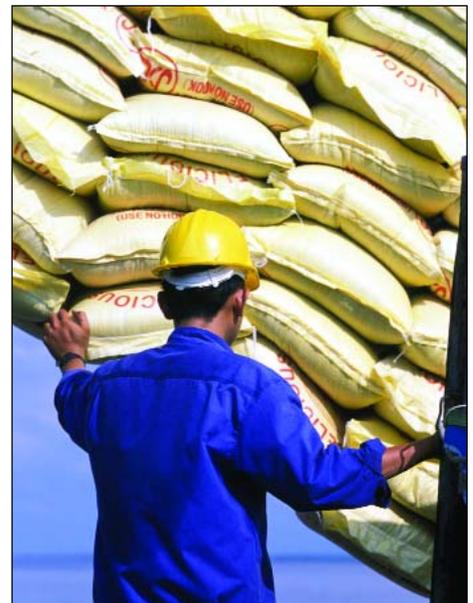


The Navigation Programme

Public participation forms the hub of the Navigation Programme as both the strategy and programme were formulated with full cooperation of all the countries involved (including China and Myanmar), the private sector, donors, UN organisations, development banks and NGOs who assisted and took part in national and regional workshops. They assisted either by providing direct input or by representing community interests.

All this input was taken into account at national and regional workshops where participants were asked to prioritise activities and consider institutional and coordination related issues such as cooperation with upstream countries and proposals for institutional structures on regional cooperation, coordination and joint implementation of the programme.

The Navigation Programme will develop a framework for public-private partnerships. In fact the private sector will be the driving force behind navigation development and different Port and Fleet Associations will be established in the member countries under this framework. These associations will form part of the implementing working groups of the Navigation Programme.

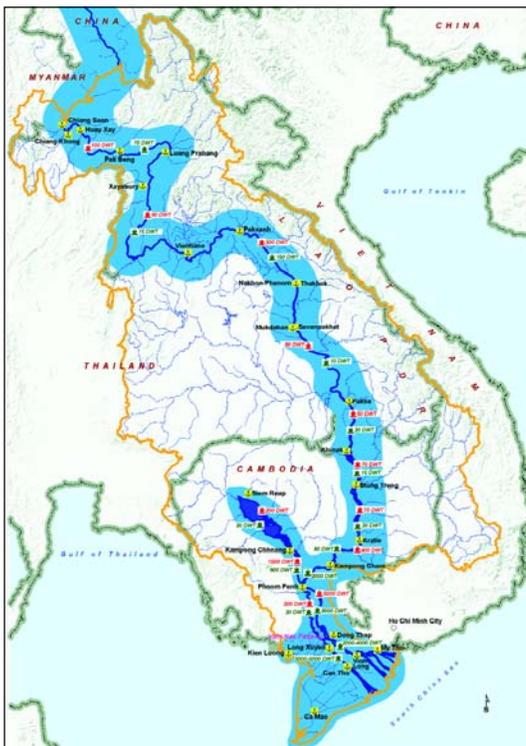




Navigation projects can have significant impact on the local population and are sometimes perceived in negative terms. This is often due to inadequate feelings of ownership and for that reason the Navigation Programme has developed guidelines for the environmental assessment of navigation projects which provide an ideal forum for ensuring that those affected have been adequately consulted and their views taken into account in project preparation

The programme is also developing guidelines to describe how the public and close stakeholders should be involved in navigation programme activities through all stages of different projects.

One of the tasks of the programme is to work with governments, donors, national planning agencies and administrations and civil society partners to raise awareness and better understanding of the importance of waterborne transport and navigation development.



The Agriculture, Irrigation and Forestry Programme

The Agriculture, Irrigation and Forestry Programme focuses on the sustainable use of the natural resources of the Mekong Basin, to meet the evolving needs of local communities. It promotes and supports a community-based approach to resource use and management and employs a collaborative learning approach to achieve its objectives.

The Programme has two components: Watershed Management and Water Use Efficiency. The Watershed Management Component (WMC) has a strong focus on information exchange and sharing of natural resource management experiences throughout the region.

It has established national working groups for watershed management in the four riparian countries as well as for research into community forestry management approaches in the region. WMC provides the concept and process while the member countries implement the watershed management activities including the involvement of stakeholders at all levels.

The WMC has established a series of Policy Dialogue meetings (conducted in cooperation with German International Cooperation Agency INWENT) that enable representatives from the four countries to discuss problems, make suggestions and reach shared resolutions on priorities.

The Water Use Efficiency Component is in its early stages and is concentrating on data collection for its project to evaluate and demonstrate the multi-functionality of paddy fields.



The Hydropower Programme

By its nature, hydropower development in the Basin calls for effective public participation in its planning and implementation. There is thus a compelling case for any hydropower development strategy in the LMB to identify and consult with relevant representatives of likely stakeholder groups and to draw them into the decision-making framework

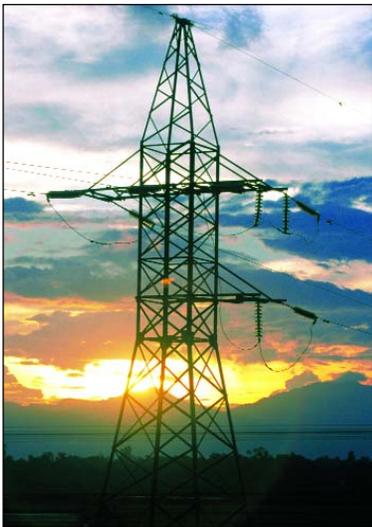
Consequently, MRC's hydropower development strategy advocates active stakeholder representation at all levels of planning and decision making, extending beyond the consultation stage.

MRC as a regional entity aims to play a very important part as the central point for information collection and as the link between key stakeholders. Effective planning at the river basin level depends on international co-operation and allied to this will be public participation at a national and trans-national level.

MRC member countries already have a good spirit of cooperation and understanding and the MRC is in a unique position to be able to foster the process of public participation in hydropower development in the LMB by bringing together technical experts and high-level decision makers and linking this to a public participation process.

MRC also aims to provide technical support and advice on the public participation process, underpinning the strategic planning level if required.

Public participation in strategic and project planning is not only desirable from the point-of-view of fostering the rights of the individual, it can also deliver better results in terms of the realisation of economic and social development goals within the context of sustainable development.





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