



CONCEPT NOTE

MRC REGIONAL STAKEHOLDER FORUM

“The Study on Sustainable Development and Management of the Mekong River, including the Impacts of Mainstream Hydropower Projects”

and

The Update of Preliminary Design Guidance, and Sustainable Hydropower Development Strategy in the Lower Mekong Basin

Background

The rapid development in the Mekong River region has been increasingly putting pressure on the Mekong Basin’s water and related resources. In line with the 1995 Mekong agreement, the Member Countries (MCs) strive to cooperate in the sustainable development of the basin’s resources in order to achieve the basin Vision of an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin.

In the past 20 years, several interventions have been implemented and framework and guidance provided for the MRC involvement in hydropower activities in the Basin. Starting with the five MRC hydropower principles from 1998, the 2001 MRC Sustainable Hydropower Development Strategy (HDS2001) and the Preliminary Design Guidance for Proposed Mainstream Dams in the Lower Mekong Basin (PDG) in 2009.

Although there have been many efforts, the knowledge of how different water uses will impact the river basin still has many gaps and the predictions made using models and other tools does, in many subjects, still have a large uncertainty. This causes uncertainty in the planning framework and in the cooperation for sustainable development.

In order to facilitate the cooperation within the MRC framework, there is an urgent need to close the most important knowledge gaps and improve the certainty of predictions of impact from major developments in the Mekong River Basin. Building on the substantial knowledge base of the MRC and other initiative in the region addressing water and related resources use and its related issues, the MRC Secretariat has initiated and coordinated a broad Study to fill the knowledge gaps and minimize the uncertainty in the predictions of impact caused by different major water and related resources uses in the Mekong River Basin. In this connection, the Council Study has been initiated on 8 December 2011, at the 18th Meeting of the MRC Council, as a follow-up on the verbal discussion by the Member Countries’ Prime Ministers at the 3rd Mekong-Japan Summit in Bali in November 2011.

The Council Study will provide reliable scientific environmental, social, and economic impacts of water resources development in the Mekong River encompassing cross-cutting

sectors and impacts, in the short, medium and long term.

The **objectives of the study** are threefold:

- To close knowledge gaps in the context of the impact of major water use sectors on key areas of the basin's social, environmental and economic systems
- To feed directly into the knowledge base used for updates and developments of the MRC Basin Development Strategy
- To address the need for capacity development in the Member Countries with respect to scientific studies

In other wordings, the Council Study will enhance the ability of MRC to advise MCs on the potential benefits and impacts of water resource development of the basin based on sound scientific evidence; optimise the Basin Development process; and ultimately contribute to sound decision making by the MCs in the development of the Mekong basin.

Nowadays, the concept of the “nexus between water, food and energy” has become commonly debated emphasizing the need for integrated water planning as per the MRC mandate. Studies and researches recommend that basin-wide cooperation, integrated development planning is essential to achieve basin scale sustainable development for the Mekong Basin. In response to the need to move basin development towards more “optimal” and sustainable outcomes that can address long-term needs, including environmental protection as well as ensuring water, food and energy security, the updating of the MRC Sustainable Hydropower Development Strategy (SHDS) is essential. At the same time, during reviews of the submitted documentation for PNPCA prior consultation process, there are certain gaps in the PDG that may need to be filled and areas of ambiguity that need to be clarified, in addition to applicability to significant tributary projects in terms of transboundary impacts.

To address the necessity to review and update the Sustainable Hydropower Development strategy as well as the PDG, as stated in the MRC Basin Development Strategy and the Strategic Plan 2016-2020, the updating process has started since October 2017 and will last through 2018.

The objective of updating SHDS is “*optimal and sustainable hydropower development pathway alternatives are explored, proposed and discussed – taking into account opportunities to enhance benefits beyond national borders and at the same time to avoid and minimize adverse transboundary impacts, while supporting water, food and energy security*”. The Strategy will concentrate its hydropower activities on the mainstream and tributary hydropower, it will support improvement of national sector planning and contributes to the overall Basin Development Strategy.

While maintaining the same Purpose and principles of the current PDG during its formulation in 2009, the updated process is to enhance the PDG by taking into account of: (1) the lessons learnt from the PNPCA process made for the review of three mainstream projects, and (2) the additional technical guidance in the form of Manuals on Mitigation and regionally relevant case studies as a separate supporting set of documents that can provide a wealth of information and reference material to assist effectively the enhancement of the PDG.

Objectives of the forum

The MRC has regular institutionalized mechanisms to engage broader stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations, private sector, academia and the media, in its key work and activities. Engagement with stakeholders also has a purpose in managing the expectations from different groups. Regional Stakeholder Forum is one of approaches. The Forum will serve as a platform for the MRC Member Countries and other relevant stakeholders to discuss, provide and exchange views on reasonable and equitable use of the Mekong River System. The knowledge and perspectives of all interested stakeholders are valuable to a better coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits. The process aims to support decision-making.

For the Council Study, stakeholder engagement has been carried out in the design of the study and throughout the conduct of the study to ensure transparency and ownership of major groups interested in the results and conclusions. As a result, a number of events are planned where a broader group of stakeholders are invited to participate:

- During the design of the Study: scoping meeting to get feedback from concerned parties including NGOs, CBOs, Development Partners, IOs, private sectors and other interested individuals
- Throughout the study period: regular briefings and results presentations
- The expert working groups are also expected to hold more targeted workshops with stakeholders focusing more on approaches and methodologies as to ensure credibility and sound technical approaches
- Regional stakeholder forums: to present results and findings after some study's milestones for discussion and comment by a wider group of interested parties

This is the 2nd time a regional stakeholder forum organized for the Council Study. Towards the final stage of the implementation, this forum aims to engage with broad stakeholders on the expected outcomes and deliverables of the Study as well as its way forward. The forum's objectives are:

1. To disseminate the preliminary key results and findings of the study and deliverables.
2. To jointly review and obtain feedbacks and observations on key results and key messages from the council study for further uptake into regional and national development plans
3. To inform stakeholders about next steps

Following the discussion and information sharing at the Sustainable Hydropower Practice Forum #4 "*Dialogue with Hydropower Developers*" in August 2017, this regional stakeholder forum will engage the broad stakeholders on the update of Preliminary Design Guidance (DG2018) and the Sustainable Hydropower Development Strategy (SHDS2018) with the following objectives:

1. Inform the stakeholders about the intended *scope*, *approach* and *timeline* of the PDG and SHDS review and update
2. Seek advices for further strengthening the Concept Note on the review and update of PDG and SHDS with the aim to ensure the successful completion of the two exercises.

The forum focuses on three MRC activities relating to hydropower development: Council Study, PDG and SHDS. They all aim to fill the gaps towards sustainable development in the Mekong. Moreover, the results of the Council Study are expected to contribute to the update of the Sustainable Hydropower Development Strategy.

Expected outcomes

The following outcomes are expected from the forum:

1. Constructive comments on improving the quality of all reports from the Council Study and concepts of updating the Preliminary Design Guidance (DG2018) and Sustainable Hydropower Development Strategy (SHDS2018)
2. Suggestions on how emerging results and findings and recommendations of the Council Study could be used for regional and national planning and project implementation
3. Plans by stakeholders and organizations to further review, build on and applied the results of the CS