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## Environmental Cooperation-Asia (ECO-Asia)

# Promoting Regional Cooperation in the Mekong River Basin



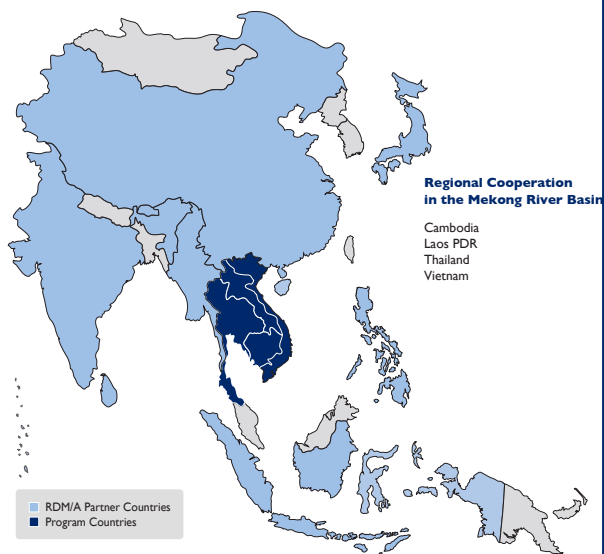
*Through ECO-Asia, USAID works in target watersheds to demonstrate innovative approaches addressing transboundary conflicts.*

**BACKGROUND** As the Mekong sub-region develops, riparian countries have been constructing dams, dikes and irrigation, and navigation waterways that significantly impact river livelihoods. A major challenge for Mekong River countries is the adoption and implementation of policies and practices that enable participatory and collaborative engagement for planning and development that support sustainable development that both protects vital ecosystems and promotes economic and social prosperity, while ensuring prevention, management and mitigation of conflict.

Established in 1995, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) fosters inter-governmental cooperation among the four lower Mekong countries of Cambodia, Lao, Thailand and Vietnam. The MRC and the National Mekong Committees (NMCs) have a mission to preserve the natural resources and environmental quality of the river basin while promoting the inter-dependent and economic growth of the Mekong region. The MRC's goal is to achieve this mission through participatory and collaborative decision-making within and among the Mekong countries.

The MRC Strategic Plan for 2006-2010 includes a goal for the MRC to enhance effective regional cooperation. One objective under this goal is “[t]o identify potential transboundary issues for negotiation, mediation and conflict prevention; and develop mediation and conflict management capacity.” To achieve this objective, the MRC is developing new mechanisms and institutional arrangements for addressing transboundary conflict in partnership with international and regional development partners.

**APPROACH** To support MRC in the implementation of this new goal, ECO-Asia collaborates with the MRC to promote the adoption of improved conflict management policies, plans and mechanisms at the regional and country levels. Through country and regional activities developed in partnership with MRC, ECO-Asia helps build the human and institutional capacity at the MRC and country levels to identify existing and potential conflicts and address mitigation techniques related to basin development planning, water utilization, environment, fisheries, navigation, hydropower, watershed management, and flood management.



Planned development projects in the Mekong River basin, including dams, irrigation systems and navigation waterways, will have significant transboundary impacts on the environment and river livelihoods, and may lead to regional conflict. A challenge for Mekong River countries is to adopt policies and practices that enable collaborative engagement and reduce conflict. ECO-Asia works with the Mekong River Commission and the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam to develop strategies and tools for addressing disputes in the watershed related to planned development activities.

ECO-Asia also assists the MRC in facilitating counterpart exchange and cooperation between riparian Mekong countries to promote sharing of best practices in conflict management in the development of specific tools and strategies for addressing actual conflicts. In particular, ECO-Asia will offer to replicate past efforts led by the U.S. EPA in Thailand to develop conflict prevention and resolution policies, practices and institutions in other Mekong countries.

Long-term project goals include assisting MRCS and NMCs in addressing disputes in the watershed, and facilitating strategic engagement with China related to planned development activities that would have significant potential downstream impacts. Coordination with other donors is central to the success of these efforts.

**MRC Institutional Strengthening** ECO-Asia works closely with MRCS to identify institutional arrangements that will enable the MRCS to address conflict prevention and management. ECO-Asia facilitates a series of consultation meetings to develop institutional strengthening strategy with inputs from experts and counterpart exchanges.

**Improved Policies, Plans and Mechanisms and Capacity Building** ECO-Asia will collaborate with the MRCS and NMCs to promote the adoption of improved conflict management policies, plans and mechanisms at the regional and country levels. Through country and regional activities developed in partnership with MRCS, ECO-Asia will develop specialized training initiatives to help build human and institutional capacity at the MRC and country levels to address transboundary conflicts that cut across all MRC programs, including environment, basin development planning, water utilization, fisheries, navigation,

hydropower, watershed management, and flood management.

**Regional and Counterpart Exchange** Over the life of the project, ECO-Asia will also facilitate counterpart exchange between riparian countries to promote sharing of best practices in conflict management. ECO-Asia will, for example, partner with Thailand's Environmental Dispute Prevention and Resolution Center to help share their experience in developing a national policy, creating a mediator roster and training more than 300 mediators.

**IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS** PADCO, The Asia Foundation, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Mekong River Commission



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