# Agriculture and Irrigation Programme

for Co-operation Towards Sustainable Development of the Lower Mekong Basin

Prepared by

Mekong River Commission Secretariat

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International consultants, Mr. Martin Smith from Food and Agriculture Organisation and Mr. D. J. Bandaragoda from International Water Management Institute, are invited for consultation to the 2nd draft programme and the 3rd Draft programme were prepared.

At the Expert Consultation on the 3rd Draft Programme held at Bangkok during 15-16 October 1998, Mr. Ian Makin of International Water Management Institute, Dr. S. P. Goyal of International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage and Dr. Klaus Siegert of Food and Agriculture Organisation, together with representatives from each riparian countries, provided valuable comments to the Program. The programme also received valuable contributions from following institutions and organisations through discussion and correspondence:

Cambodia National Mekong Committee
1. Introduction

1.1. Structure of the Document

This document presents a policy planning framework for the Agriculture and Irrigation Programme (AIP) of the Mekong River Commission (MRC). This introductory section briefly mentions the definitions of some operative terms used in the document reflecting some important concepts underlying the AIP and the context in which the MRC functions. The document then proceeds in its Section 2 to present an overview of agriculture in the Mekong River Basin (MRB). In Section 3, the document presents the rationale, objectives, proposed activity areas of the AIP, and the justification for the basin-wide application of a comprehensive sector plan contained in the AIP.

The document at this stage is a product of several deliberations and reviews conducted by in house and external professionals deployed by the MRC Secretariat, as well as the inputs provided by representatives of the participating countries. It will serve as a background document to a proposed Expert Consultation to be held shortly, after which a final draft will be presented to MRC Council meeting through Joint Committee for approval, and the final product will serve as a framework for developing more detailed projects and activities associated with agriculture and irrigation in the MRB.

1.2. Definitions and Concepts

1.2.1. Sustainable Agriculture

This document adopts a wider meaning of the term sustainability related to agriculture. Following the statements of the January 1992 International Conference on Water and Environment held in Dublin and the June 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, sustainable agricultural development can be defined as the agricultural efforts to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Since water is a limited and vulnerable resource, it needs to be managed in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner.

In a wider definition given by Food and Agriculture Organisation, sustainable agriculture and rural development means "the management and conservation of the natural resource base, and the orientation of
technological and institutional change in such a manner as to ensure the attainment and continued satisfaction of human needs for present and future generations”. This definition further clarifies that such sustainable development as in agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors conserves land, water, plant and animal genetic resources, and is environmentally non-degrading, technically appropriate, economically viable, and socially acceptable.

In this sense, agricultural pursuits need to avoid the degradation of the existing physical systems encompassing both land and water and should take into account a number of factors related to social, institutional, environmental, technical and financial sustainability related to developmental efforts in promoting improved agriculture.

Sustainability would also include the gains in enhancing the human and social capital of the present society in order to improve both the existing physical systems as well as the potential of future societies. Therefore, in developing and managing natural resources systems in a sustainable manner, there is a vital need to have a balance between these apparently competing needs of the present and the future generations. A further description of these multiple sustainability concerns related to agriculture and irrigation will be given in Section 3.

1.2.2. Agriculture and Irrigation

The theme of this document is on "Agriculture and Irrigation" rather than on the more popular notion of "Irrigated Agriculture". This emphasis in terminology warrants a broader perception in which irrigation is to be seen as an important input of agriculture. Therefore, the AIP includes a wider scope of agriculture transcending the limits of "irrigated agriculture".

Although the major sustainability concerns are usually related to irrigated agriculture, yet, there is a need to consider the relatively less serious but nevertheless important environmental implications of managing land and water for agriculture in general. Particularly, the concerns on the use of agricultural inputs, such as chemicals and fertiliser, which may adversely affect a commonly used resource base in the long term, should not be overlooked. In a basin-wide analysis, the various environmental effects of agricultural efforts can, in any case, converge on the vulnerability of water resources.

Since irrigation tends to accentuate the overall environmental degradation arising from agriculture, it is necessary that sustainability is ensured by proper planning, designing and implementing irrigation development and management strategies to achieve their long term benefits and related social equity. Wherever irrigated agriculture remains as the main development strategy for ensuring food security and economic development, the interventions in the area of irrigation development and management, including rehabilitation of existing physical infrastructure, should be seen as a need to develop and redefine the role of irrigation within the wider agricultural system.

The vulnerability of water resources requires that efficient water use and conservation practices should be the basis for all such interventions. As the Rio conference recommended in its Agenda 21, the interventions can focus on developing and applying water-saving technologies and introducing institutions and incentives for adopting new approaches in both rain-fed and irrigated agriculture.

1.2.3. Basin-wide Approach

There is a growing awareness on the need to think beyond the boundaries of irrigation systems, in the consideration of managing water resources required for sustainable agriculture. On the one hand, there is an important issue related to competing demands for water by other uses, such as for industrial and domestic purposes, which tends to make the concerns on "irrigation efficiency" within a system more important than ever before. On the other, a basin-wide analysis would lead to a conclusion that, even in irrigation applications, one subsystem's loss may be another subsystem's gain through re-use, and therefore there is a need to look at the broader aspect of water use efficiency within the basin as a whole (1).

An integrated water resources management approach covering a whole basin would also cater to a number of issues related to the management of its watershed, its aquifers, its drainage system and its physical and institutional capacity for flood control. It could also entail other economic endeavours, such as forestry management in the catchment area and fisheries management within the river system, and therefore, the AIP would have its essential linkages with the other Programmes of the MRC.

Strategies aimed at effectively and efficiently managing the total quantity of water resources available in a
basin are most likely to generate a synergy value when compared with individual national efforts. Given the overall shortage of good quality water and the need to use it in an environmentally and economically sustainable manner, a basin-wide approach should be a more productive way of resource use.

A wider perception of the natural resources management within the basin would help the policy makers and the managers to formulate a set of commonly applicable resource allocation rules and resource use procedures. This approach also would require a broader concept in project and programme development, and an institutional framework that encourages collective action and participatory modes of management. Even the national level planning processes to undertake various development projects within the basin area will benefit by a collective effort to fit them as much as possible into a cohesive and a well integrated Basin Development Plan.

1.3. The Mekong River Basin

1.3.1. Physical Features of the Basin

The Mekong River, the biggest river in Southeast Asia, originates in Tibet at an elevation of approximately 5,000 meters above mean sea level. It passes through the narrow elongated upper catchment to reach the Golden Triangle, the joint Laotian, Burmese and Thai border at an elevation of about 500m above m.s.l. The lower part of the catchment broadens as the river receives a large number of tributaries, some of them carrying substantial streamflow. Finally, after a total length of approximately 4,800 km, the Mekong reaches the South China Sea in the southern part of Vietnam.

By size of its catchment area of 795,000 km2, the Mekong ranks 21st in the world. By its length, its rank number is 12. Owing to its abundant flow following the rainy season (May-October), an annual average streamflow of 475.10 billion m3 ranks the Mekong as the eighth among the largest rivers in the world. Most of this streamflow volume is generated by runoff from the lower basin.

This area, covering approximately 609,000 km2, contributes about 82% to the total annual flow volume. In spite of the impressive annual average figure, the Mekong discharge is subject to strong seasonal fluctuations. Flood discharges may reach in Cambodia a magnitude of 60,000 m3/s while low season flows a magnitude of 1,000 m3/s. The seasonal unreliability might be further aggravated by inter-annual fluctuations. Rainfall is also unevenly distributed; the rainy season is normally between May through October, with rainfall varying from below 1,000 mm up to 4,000 mm a year.

Particular land forms, which can be distinguished within the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB), account for the uneven distribution of precipitation and surface water resources. They also influence land use for various economic activities. By and large the following major land form units can be distinguished downstream of the Golden Triangle:

- Northern Highlands in Thailand and Laos areas are characterised by mountains, erosion prone slopes and dissected relief;
- The Korat Plateau in Northeast Thailand is characterised by broad tributary valleys. This land form extends to the lower reaches of the left bank tributaries in Laos;
- The Eastern Highlands in Laos and Vietnam are an area of complex relief; and
- When leaving the Korat Plateau at the Khone Falls, the Mekong reaches the lowlands which can be subdivided into three sub-units: the lowlands between Khone Falls and the Mekong Tonle Sap conjunction at Phnom Penh, the basin of the Great Lake and the almost 50,000 km2 large delta downstream of Phnom Penh.

1.3.2. Socio-economic Context of the Basin

The Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) covers predominantly rural areas in the four riparian countries: virtually the whole of the Lao PDR and Cambodia; the dry Northeast Region of Thailand (plus a small area in upper Northern Thailand); and the Mekong River Delta (MRD) in Vietnam (and smaller mountainous areas in the Northwest of the Central Highlands). The total population of the basin area is about 50 million, of which some 70% are engaged in agriculture which supplies the basic staple food for the population. The average per
The apparently healthy overall annual economic growth rates which have been achieved until 1996 in the region seems to belie the marked differences in rural income levels. The differences in rural wage rates are causing internal labour migration which is likely to increase particularly from Northeast Thailand to urban centres and from neighbouring counties such as the Lao PDR and Cambodia into Thailand.

The economic crisis that the countries are experiencing at present since July 1997 will certainly decrease the growth rates which the region has enjoyed for the past decade. During the next few years inflation is likely to increase. With these sudden changes in the economy of the region the socio-political systems of the region are likely to look for appropriate changes in their planning concepts related to economic development.

1.4. The Mekong River Commission (MRC)

1.4.1. MRC Mandate

The Agreement on Co-operation for Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin (hereinafter referred to as the Agreement) on 5 April 1995, signed by the four Lower Mekong Basin riparian countries Cambodia,
Lao P.D.R., Thailand and Vietnam, established the Mekong River Commission (MRC). The MRC, which succeeds an earlier arrangement, the Committee for Co-ordination of the Lower Mekong Basin (the Mekong Committee), is an intergovernmental organisation with three levels: Council, Joint Committee and Secretariat.

The mandate of the MRC is to implement the 1995 Mekong Agreement which aims, as a whole, at promoting environmental conservation and sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin on a regional co-operative and equitable basis considering economic and social factors for the enhancement of the quality of life of the people in the Basin.

The Agreement, in fact, represents a strong political will of the riparian countries to co-operate in the spirit of Agenda 21 of 1992 Rio Conference. Principles like sustainability, avoidance of harmful effects, equitable use, territorial sovereignty, notification and prior consultation are well defined. Given the expressed will and the momentum of co-operation already extended, the MRC expects, with the assistance of the donor community, to undertake joint efforts to implement the Agreement such as the preparation of the Water Utilisation Programme (WUP) and the formulation of a Basin Development Plan (BDP). Through its annual Work Programme, the MRC can seek donors’ assistance to prepare and implement projects and programmes reflecting a more basin-wide character, rather than national, in accordance with the Agreement.

1.4.2. MRC Role in Basin-wide Development

As manifested in the Agreement, the area of co-operation for sustainable development in the framework of the MRC covers all fields of sustainable development, utilisation, management and conservation of the water and related resources of the Mekong River Basin.

For the utilisation of the Mekong water, which has been and continues to be the major interest and concern among the member countries in the context of regional co-operation for the sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin, basic principles have been agreed upon such as, among others, "Reasonable and Equitable Utilisation" (Article 5), and "Maintenance of Flows on the Mainstream" (Article 6). In this regard, the MRC has already started the preparation of the Water Utilisation Programme (WUP).

By considering the dynamic nature of the problem originating from both natural variations of physical and biological factors such as streamflow, vegetation cover, etc. and economic and population growth, all these efforts have to be made within a flexible framework foreseeing revision, monitoring, operational management and potentially changing objectives and preferences of the various stakeholders in the LMB. For this reason, the Basin Development Plan (BDP) is an important task of the MRC in its efforts to co-ordinate development projects and programmes in the basin. Given that most of MRC programmes and projects, though interdisciplinary in nature, are inherently linked with water resources in the basin, the overall BDP will have to take into consideration the demands of the agriculture and irrigation sector.

**Basin Development Plan (BDP)**

The Basin Development Plan (BDP) mentioned in Article 2 of the Agreement is of utmost importance to be formulated in the context of MRC mandate. The BDP is defined as the general planning tool and process that the Joint Committee would use as a blueprint to identify, categorise and prioritise the projects and programmes to seek assistance for and to implement at the basin level. The BDP will define strategies and priority programmes for integrated basin and corresponding sector development for socio-economic growth, together with environmental protection. In formulating the BDP, a strategic planning approach is adopted covering seven water-related sectors, namely, agriculture and irrigation, hydropower and energy, fisheries, forestry and watersheds, navigation and transport, tourism and recreation, urban and industrial uses, and two cross-cutting themes of environment and human resources development. This crucial endeavour is one of the major integrated, interdisciplinary tasks the MRC is expected to execute. As the basin development focuses on water and water-related resource development, the AIP is closely linked with the BDP formulation.

**Water Utilisation Programme (WUP)**

The Joint Committee has created two subcommittees to address the issue of water utilisation rules, split along the lines of water quantity and water quality requirements. The recommendations of both subcommittees have to be brought together to the Joint Committee for its consideration. These two projects, which attracted considerable donor interest, are certainly pre-requisites and components of a broader WUP. The MRCS has recently secured the commitment of the World Bank to provide funds for a Project Preparation and Development Facility (PDF) which would enable the Secretariat to apply for Global Environmental Facility (GEF) funding to derive the WUP as its project objective. The MRC has commenced the preparatory stages of preparing the Mekong WUP which will deal with matters related to the Rules of Water Quantity as well as
Water Quality within the basin. The WUP will provide a set of mutually agreed rules and mechanisms for a better co-ordination of all ongoing and future activities related to water utilisation, and the future use of the Mekong water will be based on such rules by riparian countries. Through the WUP preparation the WUP projects will be formulated.

Other MRC Programmes

Apart from the above two planning activities, the MRC is endeavouring to expedite various other programmes and projects that are also closely related to the implementation of the Mekong Agreement. MRC intention is to concentrate its resources on basin-wide programmes and projects. The MRC has so far established the Environment Programme, Fisheries Programme, Human Resources Development Programme and Hydropower Programme. MRC is now proposing this Agriculture and Irrigation Programme which would provide the orientation of agriculture development with a basin-wide perspective, and a tool co-ordinated with the Basin Development Plan, placing emphasis on avoiding overlap and ensuring co-ordination with other national and regional initiatives on agriculture.

Strategic Plan

Consolidating the planning efforts outlined above, the MRC has recently prepared a strategic plan for 1999-2003. This fulfils a felt need for the organisation and provides an overall philosophy for the MRC. The Strategic Plan presents a vision for the Mekong River Basin that it should be “an economically prosperous and socially just and environmentally sound” river basin, and a vision for the MRC, that it should be “a world class, financially secure, international river basin organisation serving the Mekong countries to achieve the basin vision”. Based on these vision statements, the Strategic Plan stipulates a mission for the MRC which is “to promote and co-ordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries, mutual benefit and people’s well-being by implementing strategic programmes and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice”.

1.4.3. Structure and Functions of the MRC Secretariat

The mandate of the MRC Secretariat (MRCS) is defined by the Agreement as the technical, administrative support agency of the MRC. The new structure of the MRCS has five divisions under the direct supervision of the Chief Executive Officer. Each division is subdivided into three units.

The Agriculture Division is responsible for the formulation and execution of projects and programmes related to agriculture, irrigation, watershed and forestry, and fisheries. Agriculture, forestry and fisheries are not only the most relevant management tasks related to water-related resources with a tremendous impact on the conservation of water resources in the basin but they also target the improvement of living standards of rural populations, a key aspect of the MRC mandate.

The Agriculture and Irrigation Unit within the Agriculture Division has been handling technical assistance projects such as Mekong Irrigation Programme (MIP) and Sustainable Irrigated Agriculture Project (SIRAP), and also other activities which, over the years, have created models that contribute to the improvement of the institutional framework in the four countries. As desired, a close linkage exists between the Unit and the cross-sector Divisions such as: Water Resources, Human Resources Development and Environment, and Policy and Planning Division at the technical level; and the Finance and Administration Division at the level of financial management of projects and activities.

Strong Points of the MRCS

1. Through four decades of service to the LMB, the MRCS has accumulated considerable expertise and knowledge of the Mekong river and its basin. This knowledge base is the strongest asset of the MRCS and a heritage which the riparian countries would hardly be able to replace. It is imperative for the future efficiency of the MRCS and the future development of the basin area that this knowledge base is productively used.

2. The MRCS has a truly regional character with a very strong riparian component. Working relations among different nationalities are good. There seems to be a balanced mixture of riparian and seconded professional staff with a strong representation of riparian staff members in high level functions. The fusion that has been taking place among collaborating riparian staff over the years is a unique
experience and an excellent regional asset.

3. The MRCS concentrates next to the specific knowledge of the LMB - on technical services related to the environment and monitoring (forecasting, database management, mathematical modelling, remote sensing, project management, etc.), resources development (water resources and hydropower, agriculture and irrigation, watershed management and forestry, fisheries, river works and transport, etc.) as well as human resources development. These services are at the disposal of the riparian countries, especially those that might not be able to mobilise such resources internally at present.

4. The MRCS has an active role in training and knowledge dissemination such as regional training courses, set-up of national centres, etc.. It has the capability to assist the introduction of advanced technologies.

5. The MRCS takes a lead in many basin-wide issues such as legal studies, environmental programme, WUP, BDP and Agriculture and Irrigation Programme (AIP) which is currently under preparation.

6. The MRCS is an able and accepted partner of the representatives of the donor agencies and countries. It could also represent the LMB in international endeavours of co-operation especially with the specialised agencies of the UN.

1.5. Why an Agriculture and Irrigation Programme?

Initially, two important issues may arise. First, the question could be raised as to why a composite AIP valid for the whole basin would be needed. A closely related question would be regarding the role that the MRC could or should play in implementing the AIP.

The MRC intends to establish an Agriculture and Irrigation Programme (AIP) to promote agricultural and irrigation development within the Lower Mekong River Basin in a sustainable and co-ordinated manner. The AIP addresses the problems and issues related to the sector's development in the Lower Mekong Basin by involving the perspectives of all related stakeholders. It aims to serve as a strategic tool to the MRC and to the riparian countries in order to improve the quality of decision-making and managerial performance in the planning, formulation and implementation of ongoing and future agricultural and irrigation activities.

The AIP, based on the framework and guidelines it would provide and as a result of the importance of the agriculture and irrigation sector in the basin, will assist the riparian countries to seek donor support based on well-formulated project proposals aimed at sustainable development.

A number of projects including macro-studies have already been implemented in the area of agriculture and irrigation by the MRC. These have given the Secretariat an insight into the current problems that generally characterise the agriculture sector in the basin, namely: institutional constraints; lack of knowledge and organisational framework among farmers; limited farmers participation in planning and management of their irrigation systems and agricultural activities; limited crop diversification; poor irrigation infrastructure and low water use efficiency; inadequate O&M; and environmental concerns.

The Mekong Agreement has given priority to agriculture and irrigation as one field of sustainable development of water and related resources of the LMB. In addition, national development plans have also put high priority on agricultural development due to the predominantly rural population and their low living standards compared to other sectors of the economy.

The role of the MRC will primarily rest on the value of having to co-ordinate the activities such as planning, project identification and environmental assessments for the whole basin. It will also include capacity building, technical assistance and conducting pilot projects to test various models, both technical and institutional. The MRC has the requisite legal authority and responsibility to undertake the task of co-ordination for the Mekong basin.

Based on the accumulated past and on-going experience in agricultural development and project management in the region, the role of the MRC will continue to be focus on technical assistance elements of common interest of the riparian countries. The elements include institutional development including farmer organisation strengthening and the application of successful models of Irrigation Management Transfer and Community Development along with intensification of ride production, promotion of crop diversification and
improved use of land water resources. One related issues is that some projects under the agriculture and irrigation sector are country specific projects which do not attract adequate donor support under the MRC framework. In line with recent decisions by the MRC Council and Joint Committee, the Work Programme will be revised and the basin-wide approach will be better reflected. In this changing emphasis, the AIP will provide the framework within which the current projects in agriculture and irrigation in the Work Programme could be reviewed and new ones formulated before seeking donors assistance for their implementation.

The stakeholders associated with the MRC recognise the need for a basin-wide programme for sustainable agricultural development. Associated with the national development plans, the AIP will seek to increase production, raise farm incomes, and improve the institutional framework without resulting in environmental degradation. Such a programme would provide guidelines for agriculture-related items in MRC annual Work Programme and for project implementation in co-operation with national initiatives.

Recent experience shows a tremendous paradox in which, in spite of the great importance of the agriculture and irrigation sector in the social and economic sustainable development process as well as the environmental implication of improved land and water use within the Mekong River Basin, donor communities are reluctant and show little interest in becoming engaged with agriculture and irrigation interventions. The AIP will be useful in the identification of a set of appropriate projects and activities within the criteria of sustainable agriculture development which is a binding commitment of the MRC. It will assist in conveying to potential donors a clear vision of the MRC and seeking their support and financial assistance for future projects and activities. The AIP will also enable an effective co-ordination with other institutions and funding agencies. For all these to be fruitful, a key factor will be that the AIP is coherent with the strategies and priorities and of the riparian countries and is implemented in close collaboration with national institutions to ensure sustainability of the results.