



This submission to the World Commission on Dams
was presented at the Commission's
East / South-East Asia Regional Consultation

Hanoi, Vietnam
26-27 February 2000

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(The views expressed herein are of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Mekong
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Abstract

Experience gained, achievements attained, lessons learnt and challenges facing the Mekong River Commission (MRC) to realize its mandate for sustainable development and management of the Mekong Basin water and related resources are the main focuses of this paper. It begins with a brief background about the Mekong and its basin, the history of the MRC and its predecessors, the Mekong Committee (MC, 1957-1975) and the Interim Mekong Committee (IMC, 1978-1995), as well as the MRC mandate in the 1995 Agreement. Progress towards implementing the 1995 Agreement and the process being undertaken with strong commitment by the member states and considerable support from the international community are also introduced.

Over the past four decades, the MRC and its predecessors have gained considerable experience in international cooperation for integrated water resources planning and development of a large and complex Mekong river system, one of the world's largest rivers and Asia's most substantial single natural resource. The "Mekong Spirit", the riparian countries' strong political will, the generous support from over 30 donors and the expertise available over the years at the MRC Secretariat rendering its technical and administrative services to the MRC are the main factors contributing to the results. Valuable databases of relevant basin characteristics and parameters related to geography, hydrology, environment, fisheries, etc. generated over decades have been used for basin planning and programme/project formulation and implementation by the MRC and for sharing with other national and international partners. Human resources and staff development activities have turned out a large number of experts working for the Mekong cause. The MRC has established a good working relationship with its supporters, through regular informal and formal consultation with the Donor Consultative Group (DCG), and a network with other international, regional and national institutions.

The MRC members have cooperated and strived to adapt dynamic changes in the basin's environment and in the riparian countries, from war to peace situations, differences in political systems and in levels of social and economic development. Some relevant lessons learnt include: settlement of disputes through discussion and negotiation; an effective permanent Secretariat; inclusion in the Strategic Plan of three basic and essential elements: social, economic and environmental dimensions; ownership of the MRC and participation of stakeholders in both planning and implementation stages; process to collect and update a long series of basinwide databases and information since 1957 for integrated water resources planning and sharing with other institutions, both nationally and internationally; sharing experience with twinning partners in river basin management; and the organization's short-comings in addressing socio-economic and environmental issues in the early years of its existence.

Considerable challenges lie ahead for the MRC to obtain sustainable development and management, from pressure on water resources development in satisfying the needs of a rapidly growing population in terms of clean and adequate water, food, and energy supplies, as well as economic development for poverty reduction, to the requirement for protecting the environment and ecological system for the benefit of the inhabitants living in the basin; reasonable sharing of available resources; transforming from a project to programme approach; and effective delivery of quality outputs. Greater efforts are required to achieve the Visions of the Mekong River Basin (MRB) and the MRC and its Mission, as well as to translate these into appropriate actions and realities. Priorities for implementation of the 1995 Agreement include preparation of the Basin Development Plan (BDP) and establishment of rules for Water Utilization and Inter-Basin Diversion under the Water Utilization Programme (WUP).

The MRC is considered by independent evaluators as a good model for developing countries to follow in international river basin management. It proves that the work of the MRC is useful not only for promoting effective cooperation at the regional level among the member states and efficient coordination with other international and regional actors in integrated basin management but also helpful in creating a friendly relationship and building mutual trust which in turn enhances peace and stability in the region.

The Mekong and its Basin

The Mekong River, one of the world's largest rivers, may be considered as Southeast Asia's most substantial single natural resource. The river, with a total length of 4,800 km, starts from the Tibetan plateau in Yunnan province of the Peoples' Republic of China, flows through six countries (PRC, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam) and empties into the sea, via two main branches, the Mekong and Bassac. The average yearly river flow is large, at 475,000 million cubic metres, and only a small portion is being used at present for water supply, irrigation and hydropower generation. River flow fluctuation is rather high, as the flood discharge is 30 times greater than that of the dry season flow. One of the three striking characteristics of the Mekong's hydrologic regime is the flow regulation function of the Great Lake in Cambodia, the largest permanent freshwater body in Southeast and East Asia. The lake acts as a natural reservoir in storing water in the wet season and increasing the low flow in the dry season. It is very rich in fisheries and other bio-diversity resources.

With its catchment area of over 795,000 square kilometres, the Mekong is inhabited by a population of over 60 million, of which 55 million is in the Lower Mekong Basin [about one third of the total population of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, or about one fourth of the population of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS)]. By comparison with other Asian river basins, the Mekong Basin is at present not densely populated and land and water resources are still relatively plentiful, as only a part of its potential has so far been developed for providing basic needs to the population. Such natural resources may be considered large in relation to the present demand of the population and for economic development. New figures produced under the MRC Fisheries Programme indicate that the fish catches in the Basin amount to not less than one million tonnes annually, corresponding to approx. US\$ 800 million at the rural retail markets. This production, which is based on an aquatic bio-diversity of more than 1,300 species, makes fish the single most important source of animal protein for the people of the Lower Mekong Basin. Fish forms, together with rice, the basis of the food security in the rural areas. Most of the economically important fish species are highly migratory and respond to the changes between

flood and dry periods every year with long migrations, often up to a thousand kilometres or more, between different habitats used for spawning or feeding, respectively. In this way, habitat destruction and constraints to migrations may have serious consequences for the fisheries resource. Besides other rich resources, food production in some countries has not only kept pace with the rapidly increasing population, but has also provided an exportable surplus for regions outside the basin.

The MRC riparian countries, except Thailand as a middle-income country, are classified as low-income nations with a GDP slightly over US\$ 200 per capita. The growth rate before the recent economic crisis was high, ranging from 5 to 8 per cent, compared with 1 to 4 per cent during the crisis. Signs of recovery are now emerging and with rapidly increasing population pressure, the requirements for water, food and energy are going to increase. However, to satisfy the Basin's needs, certain obstacles need to be overcome and critical issues in the Basin must be fully addressed to achieve sustainable development as stipulated in the MRC 1995 Agreement. These include natural disasters and phenomenon, such as floods and droughts, soil salinization and salinity intrusion by sea water, acid sulphate soils, etc., as well as man-made activities affecting the Basin's environment, water and population. New development that creates harmful effects and severe consequences, especially on transboundary issues, are to be avoided.

The Mekong River Commission

The MRC is an inter-governmental organization established by the Governments of Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam in April 1995. The Commission is the successor of the Mekong Committee and the Interim Mekong Committee, which were in operation during the periods 1957-1975 and 1978-1995, respectively. In 1957, in order to harness the immense potential of the Mekong and its tributaries, the Committee for Coordination and Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin (Mekong Committee) was established by four riparian countries. Its mandate was ***“to promote, coordinate, supervise and control the planning and investigation of water resources development projects in the basin”***. In January 1978, an Interim Mekong Committee was formed by the Governments of the Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam, pending resumption of the participation of Cambodia. As stipulated in the 1995 Agreement, the mandate of the MRC has been changed: ***“to cooperate in all fields of sustainable development, utilization, management and conservation of the water and related resources of the Mekong River Basin, including, but not limited to irrigation, hydro-power, navigation, flood control, fisheries, timber floating, recreation and tourism, in a manner to optimize the multiple-use and mutual benefits of all riparians and to minimize the harmful effects that might result from natural and man-made activities”***.

The MRC consists of three permanent bodies: (i) the Council consisting of one member at the ministerial and cabinet level from each country for making policies and decisions; (ii) the Joint Committee (JC) comprising also one member at no less than head of department from each country for implementing policies and decisions; and (iii) the Secretariat (MRCS) for rendering technical and administrative services. The Council meets at least once and the JC twice a year to discuss and approve the Annual Work Programme and Annual Report, as well as other relevant matters, and give directives for implementation by the MRCS. Coordination of the MRC activities at the national level is the role of the National Mekong Committees (NMCs) established in each of the riparian countries with the participation of relevant ministries and line agencies. The chairmanship

of the Council and JC for a one-year term is rotated annually by the alphabetical and reversed alphabetical orders of the listing of the countries, respectively.

Priorities for implementation of the 1995 Agreement include preparation of the BDP and establishment of rules for Water Utilization and Inter-Basin Diversion under the WUP. The BDP is defined in the Agreement as “the general planning tool and process that the JC would use as a blueprint to identify, categorize and prioritize the projects and programmes to seek assistance for and to implement the plan at the basin level.”

Implementation of the MRC 1995 Agreement

Protection of the environment and ecological balance, reasonable and equitable water utilization, maintenance of flow on the mainstream and prevention and cessation of harmful effects are the key articles in the 1995 Agreement. In 1998, a Strategic Plan was formulated with defined Visions* for both the Mekong River Basin (MRB) and the MRC, a mission statement, and goals and strategies, based on which the MRC 1999 and 2000 Work Programmes were developed. The main functions of the MRC are described in its Mission Statement, ***“To promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries’ mutual benefit and the people’s well-being by implementing strategic programmes and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice.”*** The Strategic Plan has set up the objectives and activities for four key result areas: (i) Natural Resources Planning and Development; (ii) Environmental Management and Social Considerations; (iii) Databases and Information Systems; and (iv) Organization Management and Cooperation. The five short-term goals are: (i) to establish and implement the rules for water utilization and inter-basin diversion; (ii) to formulate the BDP to provide an effective general planning tool and process for sustainable management and development; (iii) to establish and implement the MRC environmental management policies and guidelines for the use and conservation of water and related resources and to integrate socio-economic considerations into all MRC development activities; (iv) to complete and evaluate the currently funded, on-going programme and projects, and progressively initiate new development activities in accordance with the Strategic Plan; and (v) to improve the capacity of the MRC to implement its mission, to play a leading role in coordinating the Basin’s water related activities and meet stakeholders’ expectations.

The member countries are fully committed and call for donors’ support to implement the Agreement and achieve its objective of sustainable development. The following important programmes are being and will be implemented in the coming years: (i) the UNDP support programme to the MRC for capacity building over 3 years (1999-2002) with a budget of over US\$ 2 million; (ii) the WUP (2000-2006) with financial support of over US\$ 10 million from the Global Environment Fund (GEF) through the World Bank (WB), France, Japan and Finland; (iii) the BDP for an initial 3 years, with possible extension of another 3 years, estimating at some US\$ 8 million and will start after a final appraisal in 2000 by Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland; (iv) fisheries, environment and other important programmes, which are being supported by major donors, with a total budget of over US\$ 20 million covering a period of 3 to 6 years. For the WUP, a Unit has been set up at the MRCS, together with similar arrangements at the four NMCs, to ensure effective and efficient implementation, in a participatory manner, of this important programme. The WUP is composed of three main components: basin modelling and knowledge

* MRB Vision: An economically and socially prosperous, environmentally sound Mekong River Basin;
MRC Vision: A world-class river basin organization, financially secure, serving the riparian countries to achieve the MRB Vision.

base, environmental and socio-economic analysis, and rules on water utilization. The MRC Fisheries Programme, which was started in 1995 as a rolling five-year undertaking, addresses priority areas for fisheries management, conservation and development. The Programme is planned and revised together with the four riparian line agencies at the Annual Meeting and implemented through the institutions of the same line agencies.

With a strong political will and commitment from the MRC members, the satisfactory relocation of the MRC Headquarters from Bangkok to Phnom Penh and the ongoing efforts in restructuring the MRCS, most donors' concerns about the MRC are being removed. Their recent active involvement in and support of the MRC activities are clear indications in this direction. In the meantime, the MRCS is committed to implement the three priority policies: (i) financial security; (ii) better governance and full transparency; and (iii) timely delivery of quality outputs.

Experience, Achievements and Lessons Learnt

Over the past four decades, the MRC and its predecessors have gained considerable experience in international cooperation for planning and development of a large and complex international river system. The cooperation among the four member countries is considered very well established with the "Mekong spirit" prevailing and with their strong political will and commitment, although there were difficult times due to various reasons, such as the Indochina war, differences in political regimes and economic development levels, etc. Trust among the member states is a proven success of the Mekong cooperation. The Governments have been committed to the Mekong cooperation as they give the MRC the mandate to manage this international river basin, which covers a large part of their territories, and provide considerable support to the MRC and its work in terms of finance, administration and personnel contributions. During certain critical times with tensions between some members, the organization has played a useful role in convincing the related Governments to honour their obligations in facilitating the MRC work, including timely project implementation.

The MRC has evolved to cope with political, economic and social, as well as physical changes in the basin. The MRC has achieved results, such as collection and establishment of essential databases and an information system generated over the past four decades, conducting investigations / researches / studies / planning on various aspects of the river basin. The MRC has developed its planning expertise over time, from its first Indicative Basin Plan for water resources development in the early 1970s to a holistic approach and an adaptive planning process in the formulation of the BDP. The MRC established a monitoring system in the Basin to continuously observe important hydrologic and environmental parameters of the Mekong and its major tributaries. Human resources development is another success story of the MRC. The staff development programme, training of riparian officials through formal education, on-the-job training and other opportunities such as workshops / seminars, international / regional / national conferences, etc., have, over the years, turned out a large number of experts working for the Mekong cause at the MRCS, NMCs and line agencies in the riparian countries.

In addition to the efforts by the member countries, the MRC has mobilized technical and financial support from the donor community for implementing its projects and programmes. The MRC holds formal and informal Donor Consultative Group meetings where donors can coordinate their support and exchange their views with the MRC. For the coordination of common activities with a view to avoid possible duplication of work and better utilize the assistance funds to benefit the

Mekong inhabitants, the MRC is presently working to improve its network with various international, regional and national organizations. The network comprises the WB, Asian Development Bank (ADB), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Murray Darling River Basin Commission (MDBRC), as a twinning partner, the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), the World Conservation Union (IUCN), as well as with the NMCs and line agencies in the member countries and other institutions.

The MRC has established a regular dialogue since 1996 with the countries in the Upper Mekong, China and Myanmar, with a view to exchanging views and information of mutual interest.

The need for adapting to the dynamic changes in the Basin's environment and in the member countries is one of the major lessons learnt by the MRC. The members recognized that differences in political regimes and in economic and social development, as well as divergent views on certain issues, should not be considered as obstacles in their relationship, but rather they have helped them to re-define more realistic objectives and targets for cooperation. When Cambodia applied to rejoin the MC in 1991, the four countries found that this was a good occasion for them to discuss their future cooperation and, subsequently, after two years of negotiation, reached the 1995 Agreement, which promotes sustainable development and protection of the environment. Some other relevant lessons learnt by the MRC include: (i) settlement of differences and disputes through discussion and negotiation at the Committee and higher levels (establishment of the Council under the 1995 Agreement aims at facilitating this process); (ii) an effective permanent Secretariat is essential in providing necessary and timely support to the JC and Council and to cooperate with donors, the NMCs and line agencies; (iii) three basic and essential elements: social, economic and environment dimensions need to be fully integrated in strategic planning for the Basin; (iv) ownership of the MRC and participation of stakeholders at various levels and at different stages are the new domains that will ensure sustainability; (v) basinwide data collection and analysis since 1957 and integrated water resources planning for the Lower Mekong Basin have proven effective in promoting cooperation among the MRC members and with the international organizations; (v) the importance of sharing experience with twinning partners in river basin management through technical discussions at international conferences, workshops and exchanges of visits; and (vi) the organization has failed to address socio-economic and environmental issues in the early years of its inception.

Challenges Ahead

Considerable challenges lie ahead for the MRC to obtain sustainable development. These include: greater pressure on water resources development to meet a growing population's needs in terms of clean and adequate water, food and energy supplies, as well as the demand for social and economic development in the member countries, without causing damage to the environment and ecological system; sharing of available resources to satisfy the requirement of the riparian countries in a reasonable manner; use financial assistance effectively in a well coordinated manner to implement the funded programmes; and transformation from a project to programme approach. Greater efforts by all parties concerned are being made and more will be required to realize the MRB Vision as "*an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin*", and the MRC Vision, "*a world-class, financially secure, international river basin organization serving the Mekong countries to achieve the basin vision*".

In the next 3 to 6 years, rules on water utilization, together with the BDP process, will be drafted for consideration by the member countries. Mutual understanding and trust among the riparian countries are essential in consulting, approving and ratifying these important documents.

To make the organization financially secure and to maintain the MRC's core functions such as data collection, consolidation and analysis, basin planning and human resources development, increased contributions from the member countries will be required. Implementation of projects and programmes can be continued, on a self-reliant basis, by conducting investigations and studies, which in turn provide useful inputs for planning.

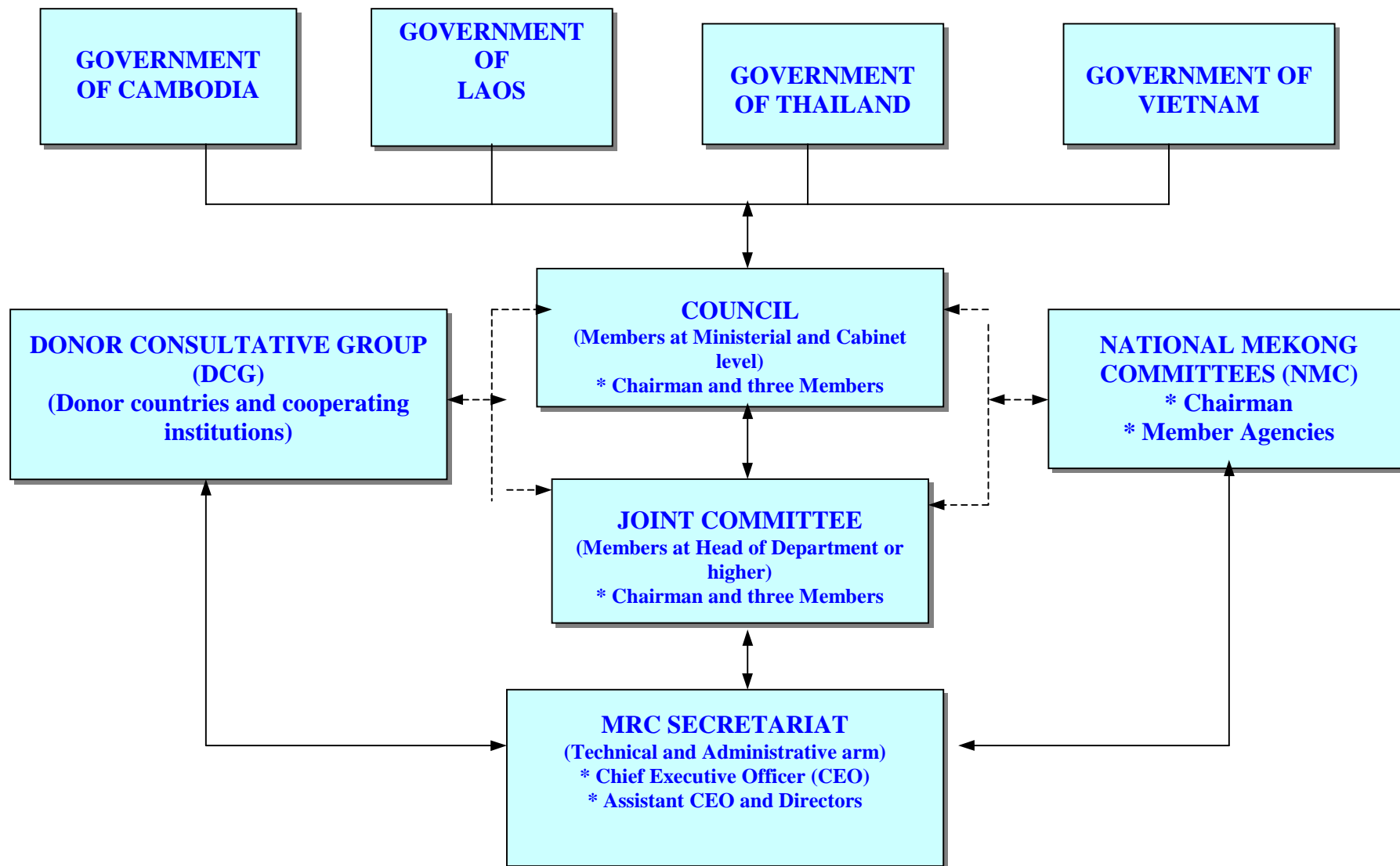
Conclusion

The MRC and its predecessors have demonstrated that the so-called "Mekong Spirit" in the Mekong regional cooperation has helped the member countries overcome surmounting difficulties and obstacles and achieved results, which are appreciated by the international community as ratified through their continued support to the Mekong cause. That the organization has survived over forty years speaks for itself. Some donors have observed that "*If the MRC had not been in existence, then we have to create it.*" The report of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) River Basins–Institutional Framework and Management Options" has made the following evaluation: "*It is fair to say that, after a slow start, MRC is now emerging as a good model for developing countries to follow in IRBM (International River Basin Management). Perhaps it should be used as a case study in any guidelines prepared by WCD.*"

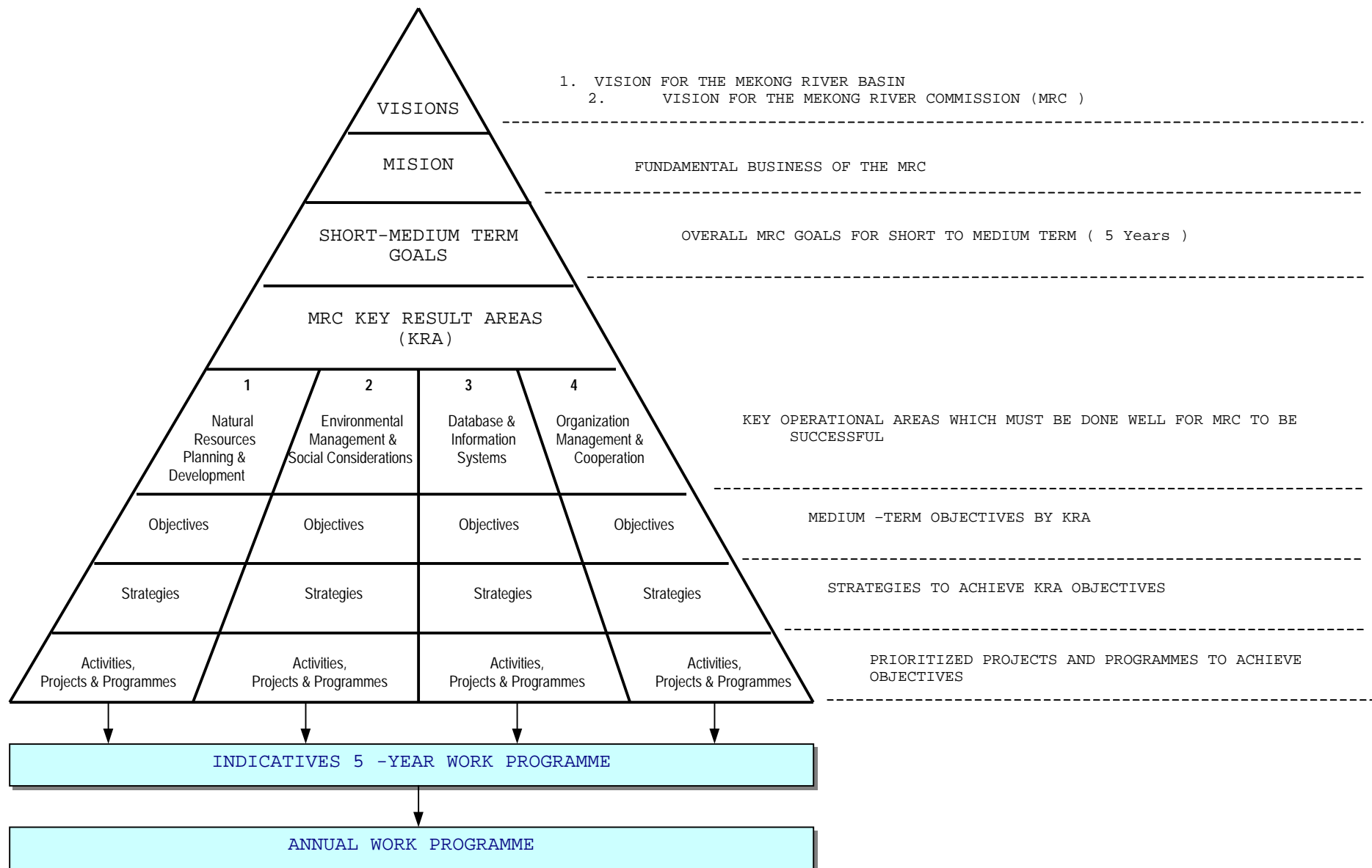
Improvements are being made and greater efforts are being exercising and one day, in the not-so-distant future, the MRC will achieve its Vision as anticipated in the MRC Strategic Plan.

MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION (MRC)

(Organogram)



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THE MRC STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS: 1999 to 2003

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