

REVISTA DA FACULDADE DE DIREITO 239

450

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REGIONAL COOPERATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA A CASE STUDY OF THE LOWER MEKONG BASIN DEVELOPMENT

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«I regard the Mekong River Project as one of the most important and one of the most significant activities ever undertaken by the United Nations. . . .»

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INTRODUCTION

Asia, under the legacy of «divide and rule» policy of the colonial past, has not yet realized the immense scope for socio-economic development which the Asians could achieve through closer regional cooperation. That part of the world lags behind other continents (Europe, Africa and Latin America) in the exploitation of opportunities that exist for such cooperation.

Although **ad hoc** measures have been taken by a limited number of countries in Southeast Asia, little or no progress has been made toward a comprehensive regional or even sub-regional agreement. However, there exists an increasingly growing opinion among economic theoreticians and political leaders that partial integration, that is bilateral or multilateral cooperative arrangement on a project or commodity basis, has a very important role to play at the present juncture of the region's economic deve-

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lopment. In the wake of the cessation of hostilities, the need for reconstruction and development is becoming more evident.

The Lower Mekong basin development project is an excellent example of sub-regional cooperation in Southeast Asia on a continuing basis. By its activities, the Mekong Committee has proved that countries with different political outlook and varying degrees of economic development can do promising work for a common objective within the framework of an international organization under the auspices of the United Nations. Apart from reducing conflicts and fostering cooperation in water resources development, the Committee adds a new dimension to its work. It provides a machinery for large scale economic cooperation among the basin states. Joint cooperation might lead of mineral and forest resources, transport and agricultural development. If development activities go forward in the Mekong project as smoothly and efficiently as they have gone till now, a real economic revolution has already begun in that part of Asia.

BACKGROUND OF THE MEKONG RIVER BASIN

Historically, to a large number of people, the Mekong is nothing but a river of sorrow because many a great civilization was retarded by its formidable floods. To few others, the Mekong is a sleeping giant because it is a source of tremendous potentialities for generation of electric power, irrigation, navigation, recreation, fisheries and preservation of wildlife, but a source virtually unutilized.

The Mekong river bears to Southeast Asia much the same relationship which the great Mississippi bears to the central states of North America La Plata to the southern countries in the Latin America, the Indus to the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, and not to mention many other great rivers of the world, it is to the interior of Southeast Asia what the Danube is to the east of Europe. It is the eighth longest river in the world having a length of 4,200 kilometers and a drainage area of 795,000 square kilometers. The Mekong rises in Tibet, flows generally in a southerly direction along the mountain ranges in China and then forms the boundary

between Burma and Laos as well as between Thailand and Laos. It again continues its southerly direction, flows through Cambodia and South Vietnam and finally discharges into the South China sea near Saigon.

The Lower Mekong flows through or separates the territories of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and the Republic of South Vietnam. This is a region where nationalism is intense and revolution pervasive. Until very recently, people of the outside world knew very little of these countries. Before World War II, these tropical-equatorial lands, with the exception of Thailand which had been able to maintain its nominal independence, were forgotten colonial backwaters. They were thought of almost exclusively as overseas extensions of the French Republic who controlled their destinies. They had little political identity or significance apart from their colonial connections. Problems of the Lower Mekong, if any, were mainly the concern of only two Governments, those in Paris and those in Bangkok.

Since the establishment of the communist regime in the Chinese mainland in 1949 the affairs of Southeast Asia — Southeast Asia is a position of vital strategic importance to the free world dictated by the imperatives of the classic Leninist thesis that «the road to global communism is through Peiping and Calcutta» and later is a major roadblock to communist hegemony in Asia. Five years Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam attained full independence. The long years of colonial rule and the gradual decay of indigenous institutions and allegiance combined to produce unrest and instability in the area long before 1954. When Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam emerged as fully independent states following the Geneva Agreement in 1954, the new Governments, in addition, inherited the wreckage caused by the Indochinese war and the vacuum created by the hasty withdrawal of the French civil service. A feeling of national identity and allegiance to the national Government was yet to become solidified. The factual situation has not yet altered significantly since then. It is still an alarming area of disquiet and uncertainty.

The four basin countries have a total population of 60 million inhabitants. Practically all of Cambodia and Laos, less than half

of South Vietnam and a third of Thailand are located in the lower Mekong drainage basin. The basin development is therefore extremely important to Cambodia and Laos as it affects the entire population of these two countries. This does not mean to suggest that the development problems are of minor significance to Thailand and the Republic of Vietnam.

Among the people, there is a wide degree of variation as to ethnic composition, religions affiliation, cultural heritage, and linguistic usage. Ethnically, the basic population is Austronesian or Indonesian. Chinese and Indians also form a substantial minority. Despite their long period of colonial rule, the number of Frenchmen is rather insignificant.

Religion profoundly affects the affairs of the basin people and pervades their outlook on life. The predominant religion in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand is Buddhism of the Hinayana type. Hindus, Mahommedans and Christians are also found in small numbers. The religion of most of the Vietnamese is a mixture of Taoism and Malayana Buddhism both from China while animistic practices, such as reverence for village guardians, are also prevalent among many of the backward peoples of the countryside.

As religions vary, so do the languages of the area. The Vietnamese, Cambodian and their languages are completely different one from another. The Thais and Laotians can, with some difficulty, communicate with each other despite differences.

Like most of the other Asian countries, the percentage of literacy, let alone scientific and technological knowledge, is very low in the basin countries. In Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, literacy is around 20 per cent while in Thailand the percentage is about fifty. In regard to vocational education and training, Thailand and Vietnam have sufficient facilities while in the other two countries vocational training facilities are inadequate to satisfy their needs for manpower in the professional technical and skilled categories.

All of the four countries are economically under developed; most of the people live close to the marginal level of subsistence. Per capita income is extremely low, varying 56 dollars in Laos to 104 in Cambodia.

USE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF MEKONG BASIN DEVELOPMENT

The Lower Mekong basin has vast and impressive potentialities for multipurpose development of navigation, hydroelectric power, irrigation, flood control and drainage, minerals, forestry and fisheries. Wise conservation and prudent utilization of these resources will contribute more towards improving economic and social well being of the people of the region than any other undertaking.

The poor transport system and extremely high transportation costs are major barriers to economic growth of the basin countries. Roads and railways are rather poor and often put out of commission in the rainy season. No railways run parallel to the Mekong river anywhere in the area. Due to lack of adequate transport, trade movements are slow and confined to a few essential commodities. Economically developed navigable waterway is frequently the cheapest mode of transportation of bulk raw materials and heavy commodities such as minerals, cement, timber, oil products, rice and similar goods which are basic to agricultural and industrial production.

The hydrology of the basin is favourable to develop the Mekong waterways as a good access route into the interior. Improvement of inland navigation, as revealed from the technical studies, would bring about great sophisticated surface communication in these countries which are at present more or less inaccessible, and permit the development of natural resources which would otherwise not be possible due to the high cost of rail or road transportation over long distances.

With its immense volume of flow, the Lower Mekong is potentially one of the greatest power producing rivers in Asia. Nonetheless, hydroelectric power has not been so far developed anywhere within the basin states.

At present electric power is obtained almost exclusively from thermal and diesel plants. Importation of fuel for these plants is a constant drain on foreign exchange credits. Further, the power plants are small and the output is very low and inadequate

for normal development needs. The high cost of power constitutes a serious restriction on its use. This handicap is most common in Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam.

An electric supply, with adequate generating and distributing capacity, is a basic factor in industrialization and in the welfare of the rural community. Electric power is now used exclusively for domestic purposes and its consumption by machine is negligible. As a result of this, the area has not been economically or industrially developed.

Apart from the possible sites on the main river, the high mountain ranges along the Annam Cordillera and the heavy rainfall intercepted by these ranges during the southwest monsoon offer excellent opportunities for power development in Laos. In Cambodia also, there are favourable sites for generation of power on the tributaries located on the east bank. It is assessed that development of these and other sites would generate electric power totalling 32 billion kilowatt hours of firm energy per year. The average cost of electricity thus produced would be 0.33 US cent per kilowatt hour as against the present rate ranging from 3.3 cents in Thailand to 33 cents in Laos. A cheap supply of electricity would help the development of a number of industries such as aluminium, fertilizers, paper pulp, iron ore, sugar and many others for which raw materials are available in plenty in the region.

The basin countries have a long tradition of agriculture and their principal source of revenue is from rice cultivation. The classical image of Indochina has come to be represented as a pole balanced by two baskets of rice (The pole stands for Annamite Range and the baskets of rice represent the two great deltas formed by the Red and Mekong rivers).

Rice is a water-loving semi-aquatic plant. An assured and timely supply of water in proper amount is necessary for its optimum growth and yield. Although the total annual rainfall of the region is sufficient for normal farming, it is irregular and unevenly distributed throughout the year. During the monsoon season, ranging from mid-May to mid-October, the region has intense rainfall; for the remainder of the year, there is a general deficiency amounting practically to drought. A change-over from

rain-dependent farming to irrigation-controlled farming would no doubt foster increased production and diversification of agricultural crops by cultivation of vegetables and other cash crops. It would improve and stabilize the agricultural economy and economy of related service industries.

Irrigation is now being practised on a very limited scale on the region. For instance, the total area of irrigated land in Laos is only 850 hectares. Of the 5.7 million hectares of land under cultivation in the basin countries, only an area of 200,000 hectares is under irrigation. Stated otherwise, only about three per cent of the cultivated area is under irrigation. Uncontrolled irrigation causes many kinds of damage such as increasing drainage difficulty, reducing soil fertility, wasting water, and interrupting diversified agriculture.

There is a vast potential for the development of irrigation. Water might be supplied from the tributaries or from the main river. Without even touching the low-water discharge of the river, which may be maintained for the purpose of navigation and power, it is estimated that the net run-off would provide irrigation water for an area of about 9 million hectares.

Flood Control: In the present hydrological pattern, certain lowlying areas near the river and its tributaries, especially in Cambodia and South Vietnam, are flooded annually. Floods inundate several thousands hectares of arable land. Normal floods are not of serious consequence, but extraordinary floods, occurring one in every nine years on the average, cause devastating damage. They result in loss of life, damage to crops, dwellings and other properties, contamination of water supplies, spreading water-borne diseases, and disruption of orderly social and economic processes of life. Out of the slender national resources, so badly needed for development work, large amounts have to be spent every year to provide flood relief and to repair public property. An analysis of flood occurrences indicates that the average annual damage would affect 110,000 hectares or approximately 3.6 per cent of the total cultivated area if there are no further provisions for flood control.

Complete prevention of floods is a physical impossibility; but flood protection, to the extent technically and economically feasible, is a vital necessity. For example, a flood warning system can eliminate loss of life and damage to certain types of property such as machinery, households and the like. In the absence of an adequate irrigation and drainage system — which are not technically feasible without control of floods — vast areas of land, especially in the delta, have not been exploited and those that are exploited have not been significantly developed.

Minerals: The basin is endowed with large deposits of iron, manganese, tin, coal, salt, gypsum, phosphates and limestone. Occurrences of copper, lead and zinc, molybdenum, antimony, pyrites and gold have also been observed, but their respective quality and quantity remain to be ascertained. With the exception of bauxite, all the minerals required by steel, iron, tin, cement and electro-chemical industries exist in sufficient quantities in the basin.

At present prospecting of minerals is limited to only a small part of the basin. Also the production is very low. The bulk of ores extracted are intended for overseas market and exported as raw materials. Most of the exportable products are handicapped by high cost of freight.

With the development of industries in the region there will be a greater demand for mineral prospecting and exploration for domestic consumption. It will not only increase production but also improve the products. This may have a considerable impact on the social and economic well-being of the basin people.

Forestry: The Lower Mekong countries are abound with extensive tracts of forest. In Cambodia, there are 10 million hectares of wooded area which comes to about 65% of the national territory. Over 60% of the Laotian territory and 40% of northeastern part of Thailand which falls within the basin are covered by forests. In the South Vietnam, approximately 2 million hectares of land is surfeit with forest resources.

The exploitation of forests is poor and haphazard at the present time, and «slash and burn» cultivation is a cause for destruction and waste. Apart from the lack of equipment, the

problem of communication is the greatest obstacle to the efficient utilization of forests. The productivity from regular and rational exploitation would constitute an important element in the basin economy.

Fisheries: Despite their high nutritional value and relative abundance (the annual production is estimated 200,000 metric tons) fishery resources in the Lower Mekong countries remain underdeveloped. In most of the region, fisheries are handled by individual fishermen who usually own a small canoe and a few hooks and lines. They rarely earn their living for the whole year by fishing. In such conditions primitive fishing methods have continued to prevail and the introduction of modern equipment is prevented by the fishermen's limited purchasing power.

The need for increasing production of fish in the region is obvious. Improved utilization of fishery resources would increase food production and also raise the protein content of diet. It would create new industries and new means of improved livelihood for the population.

JOINT AND COORDINATED ACTION FOR DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE UNITED NATIONS

In the early periods of their colonial hegemony, the French had no special interest in undertaking exploratory studies of the Lower Mekong basin. Later, with the objective of promoting their trade activities, the French attempted to improve commercial steam navigation. Because of the turbulence of the river and the lack of concerted efforts, these attempts did not prove successful.

It was only after the establishment of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East known as «ECAFE» as one of the four regional economic commissions of the United Nations that a systematic study of the Mekong was undertaken. ECAFE undertook a reconnaissance study in the early fifties. In the meantime, in 1955, the United States came into the scene to seek control over the ECAFE research and plans to develop the Lower Mekong region. Realizing the tremendous significance of continental Southeast Asia in its global security programme, especially in the

wake of communist victory in the Chinese mainland, the United States won the agreement of the four riparian countries that the United States Bureau of Reclamation should conduct a preliminary survey of the river. When the survey was completed, Washington tried to induce the four Governments to formulate plans for development of the basin under the auspices of the United States. But Cambodia upset and blocked those efforts on the ground that agreement with the United States on this matter would involve her in America's cold war activities. The United States reluctantly retreated.

Cambodia urged Laos to accept ECAFE's leadership. Thailand and South Vietnam then joined Cambodia and Laos. The four Governments made a joint declaration at the thirteenth session of ECAFE in 1957 expressing their wish to continue the development activities «jointly by the four countries concerned». Emphasizing the importance of coordinated and cooperative action, the Vietnamese delegate stressed the following four principles which have since served as the basic guidelines of the basin development: (1) all the projects that could be undertaken on the basin should be interdependent; (2) joint surveys should be entrusted to a common authority; (3) development projects should be executed according to a general plan; and (4) priorities should be set up the various projects to be conceived and implemented on a rational basis.

Later, in September 1957, a Committee for Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin (Mekong Committee) was established by the four countries under the auspices of ECAFE. Despite deep political differences, the four countries have collaborated with one another in the development of the basin which is «for the benefit of all the people of the basin, without distinction as to nationality, religion or politics». In this endeavour, they have received material support and technical assistance from a large number of countries and from almost everyone of the United Nations specialized agencies.

The periodic reports of the Mekong Committee furnish a number of agreements on specific matters which have arisen out of the cooperation and coordinated efforts of the four riparian Governments. The basin states have acted jointly in (1) a massive

program of basic data collection and basin-wide surveys; (2) search of finance for development; (3) sharing local costs; and (4) exchange of power. One example of particular interest is the agreement concluded with respect to the construction of the hydroelectric project on the Nam Ngum river valley in Laos. The Nam Ngum is a tributary of the Mekong. The hydroelectric project was completed in 1972 at a cost of \$30 million as an integral component of the comprehensive development of the basin. Parties to the 1965 Convention for the Supply of Power generated by this project include the four states which are directly interested in the overall development of the basin. Participation of all the countries in the Convention creates a precedent stressing the principle of community of interests and joint cooperation among the four states.

Another important characteristic of the 1965 Convention is that the Mekong Committee has undertaken to supply, for the transmission of power, transmission lines crossing the Mekong. The transmission lines crossing the common border of the river will remain the property of the Mekong Committee and will be maintained by it. This is a unique example of international cooperation in the field of international water resources development in contrast to the existing individualistic practices of states in similar situations.

The present regime of the Lower Mekong does not record a single instance of absolute territorial sovereign right advocated by the riparian states. The basic principles adopted by the Mekong Committee relate to the concept that the water use or development facility in one portion of the river basin influences the amount and nature of the benefits that can be realized in other portions of the basin. To achieve the optimum benefits, an integrated programme of development is being planned and implemented. The integrated programme of development seeks the community interest in the water by virtue of which the riparian rights on the waters are either vested in the Committee or divided proportionately between the member states. The regime overrules all unilateral works on the river providing as it does that the basin states should previously consult with each other and agree

on any work of development. The principle of prior consultation has been accepted for undertaking any project, mainstream or tributary; in other words, at the planning stage the projects are carefully scrutinized and approved by the Committee. Not one single country has ever deviated from this rule.

FINANCING THE DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

No matter how strong the determination, perseverance of the basin states, and the effectiveness of the «Mekong spirit», any acceptable basin development programme requires millions of dollars and is far beyond the financial or the technical capabilities of the basin states themselves. Struggling in the backwater of their marginal subsistence economies, the Lower Mekong countries could not conceivably contribute anything substantial from their indigenous resources. They cannot even hope to produce all the raw materials and equipment needed for the development; these have to be imported. The foreign exchange can be obtained: (1) by restricting imports; (2) by increasing exports; (3) by repudiating foreign obligations and expropriating foreign enterprises; and (4) by obtaining external assistance. The first two ways are limited and insufficient and the third is not only limited but undesirable. International loans and grants must therefore be viewed as the main means of obtaining the necessary foreign exchange. Acting independently, the basin states do not have the creditworthiness to obtain the necessary long-term development finance on reasonable terms. On the other hand, acting jointly through a regional organization under the protective umbrella of ECAFE, their borrowing capacity is enormously strengthened.

The operational resources of the Mekong project up to the present amount to little more than \$200 millions. A unique feature of the resources which are largely composed of voluntary contributions is that they are not only in cash but also in commodities and services. The flexible policy of the Mekong Committee makes it possible for the cooperating countries to contribute their assistance and adverse trade balances of certain donors, the Committee has planned its projects in such a way that any available aid can be fitted into the overall work programme.

Of the financial outlay, 75 per cent is in grants and direct appropriations while only 25 per cent is in loans. In spite of their meagre national income, the riparian countries have contributed or pledged to the Committee 44 per cent of the finances and the remaining 56 per cent comes from external sources. The assistance from external sources include 26 countries outside the basin, 17 United Nations agencies, 4 foundations and a number of private organizations.

The fund raising potential of the Mekong Committee has made headway in three ways: (1) voluntary aid for pre-investment investigation; (2) investment resources including grants and loans for construction; and (3) resources provided by the basin states in matching contributions to outside aid. The Committee has mobilized bilateral and multilateral contributions. With a few exceptions, the aid is mostly bilateral within a multilateral framework, most of it being administered bilaterally even though given in the name of the Committee and pursuant to its request. Only a fraction is offered directly to the Committee. The Committee, however, balances the requirement of all the projects by exploring new resources. The annual sessions of ECAFE have proved to be the best «rendezvous» for the Committee to solicit assistance and to suggest to the prospective donors which project or part of it they could best aid.

In a region of politically sensitive sovereign states, multilateral aid through the United Nations has several advantages over bilateral. For example, states or agencies that contribute through the United Nations are not allowed to attach political strings as a condition for granting aid. Second, the recipient countries have to assume equal responsibility by covering the local costs and providing counterpart contributions. Third, the experts and advisers provided by the United Nations are international civil servants with the characteristics of independence, impartiality and objectivity in action. Fourth, it is entirely left to the countries concerned to accept or reject a particular expert or adviser. Fifth, the United Nations insists on an assurance that each project be efficiently executed or operated. Sixth, the United Nations is in a much better position to suggest appropriate reorganizations of

the existing institutional framework or the establishment of new ones in the recipient countries. Finally, the institutional procedures formulated by the United Nations, on the one hand, for cooperation among the basin states and, on the other hand, for cooperation between the basin states and the United Nations and its executing agencies is extremely useful in paving the way for regional solidarity.

The United Nations is, however, severely limited by its meagre resources. A large part of the assistance in the Mekong has therefore necessarily been bilateral. It may, however, be pointed out that neither the Soviet Union nor any of its allies who have been generous in aid-giving programmes to other Asian countries have so far contributed anything to the Mekong project.

INSTITUTIONAL ASPECTS

The Mekong Committee is composed of the four basin states, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and the Republic of South Vietnam. It is closely linked with ECAFE in its work programme of promoting, supervising, and controlling the planning and investigation of the development of the basin. The Executive Secretary of ECAFE submits proposals to the Committee and sends his recommendations to the states concerned. He takes initiative acting as a prompter and a creator of opinions. Though he is not one of its members, he can call a meeting of the Committee whenever special conditions warrant, or routine business requires it. The Statute and Rules of Procedure of the Committee require the maintenance of close cooperation between the Committee and ECAFE in the development programme. In addition to its formal powers and directives, the ECAFE secretariat functions as a pressure group in relation to the Committee and the basin states concerned.

In the Mekong Committee, decisions are taken on the rule of unanimity. The rule of unanimity means that no Government is bound to take action to which it does not expressly agree. The corollary is that every member has a veto and, even when this veto is not exercised, the speed of the fleet is the speed of the slowest

ship. Happily, the Committee's decisions have generally reflected a ready consensus or willing compromise and have until now met the difficult test of unanimity.

Of course, there had been some tense tests in the past in the matter of cooperation, particularly between Cambodia and Thailand. Their ambassadors were reciprocally recalled and air services connecting the two countries were suspended in 1958 over the disputed location of the temple of **Preah Vihear**. Three years later, in 1961 diplomatic relations were finally cut off. Nevertheless, members of the Mekong Committee continued to work together.

In 1960 when Laos was torn by armed conflict, Laos and Thailand concluded a special agreement to provide armed protection to an Australian survey team at the Pa Mong dam site. In 1970 when there was an imminent threat of civil war in Laos, a neutral zone was created in the Nam Ngum project area by the help of the United Nations and with cooperation of the parties concerned. Although the project is in one of the critical areas of local disturbances, work is not only progressing but is ahead of schedule. Such is the Mekong spirit of solidarity, cooperation and mutual help in the Committee that has enabled its members to rise above ideological and political disputes.

The chief administrative officer of the Mekong project is the Executive Agent appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations and his services are made available under the Technical Assistance Programme. The Executive Agent advises the Committee, and, through the Committee as might be appropriate, the Governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and the Republic of South Vietnam on administrative and technical coordination of data collection, project evaluation and formulation of plans for the overall development of the basin. He seeks funds for implementation of the programs.

Within the framework of his mandate, the Executive Agent exercises a significant degree of control over the Committee's activities. In case there are any differences between the members of the Committee, the Executive Agent plays an important part in trying to bridge the gap or to find acceptable solutions.

It may be observed at this point that without the Executive Agent and his staff, little progress would have been achieved in the Mekong development project. River development is so complex that it would not be possible to formulate a policy without a competent administrative apparatus. In default of this, no amount of good intentions would have enabled policies representing the community interest to hold their own against national interest policies supported by the powerful bureaucratic inertia of member states.

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

In the Mekong, substantial progress has already been made in data collection, navigation improvement, basin and project planning, flood forecasting and control and in the construction of tributary projects. The annual reports of the Committee and the periodical progress reports of the Executive Agent supply a detailed and comprehensive account of the Committee's accomplishments under each of the above headings. The Nam Ngum project which was completed in 1972 in Laos is one of the largest multi-purpose enterprise. It has a generating capacity of about 150,000 kilowatt and will furnish water to irrigate 80,000 acres of land. The project is linked with agricultural experimentation and demonstration farms in the Vientiane plane. It is also coordinated with the development of the Nam Pong project in Thailand particularly in terms of sharing the hydroelectric power generated by both projects.

The accomplishments of the Mekong Committee are indeed impressive when it is remembered that the points of view of four sovereign states with different if not hostile traditions, history and culture must be obtained and that decisions must be reached unanimously. The search for the common interest as a basis for undertaking development projects has been the cardinal feature of the Committee. It has provided a unifying influence and a sense of cohesiveness essential to the integrated and comprehensive development of the basin.

The Mekong Committee has belied the notion that the development of projects solely depends upon the financial and technical capabilities of the basin states alone. The fact that much of the

development action must come from Governments and organizations outside the basin has not proved an insurmountable obstacle either. On the contrary, this circumstance has proved to be a fortunate necessity of joint consultation, planning and action.

The Mekong Committee has shown its complete detachment in dealing with questions which have special political meaning or significance. Because of this, the Committee has been able to convene the meetings in all the four basin states in spite of serious difficulties, including all kinds of political vicissitudes and even major military threats besetting their relations.

According to former President Macapagal of the Philippines, the Mekong Committee «is neither committed to rigid formulas nor bound by preconceived systems, but is pragmatic and experimental, adopting those methods best suited to each country's situation and environment and discarding those which do not fit». It is by this flexible, step-by-step and cooperative approach, that the Committee has manifested its usefulness as an effective organization capable of meeting the problems it confronts. It was in recognition of its purposeful cooperative effort towards harnessing the water resources and setting aside divisive national interests in deference to regional opportunities that the 1966 Ramon Magsaysay Award was bestowed upon the Committee.

Be that as it may, it should not be understood that the Mekong development is free from problems. Perhaps the most intractable problem is the securing of necessary finances. As always, finance can make or break the best laid plans. A foretaste of the seriousness of the problem has already been experienced in connection with the implementation of the Pa Mong mainstream project.

As the operation and maintenance stage is being approached, the Lower Mekong also poses problems as to legal and administrative organizational machinery. The organization should be conducive to continuous and expeditious decision-making, enforcement of decisions, and settlement of disputes. It should also be capable of coordinating many kinds of basin undertakings within the riparian states themselves and in cooperation with their institutional counterparts.

The development programs that is emerging is dual in character mainstream projects and tributary projects. As the latter are primarily national, their responsibility rests with national agencies of the individual basin states. On the other hand, as the mainstream projects are designed to meet the common needs of the basin states, an international agency consisting of representatives of member states, possibly with the participation of donor countries and the United Nations, may have to be created. Proposals are being discussed in this regard suggesting surrender of a small portion of state's sovereign rights to this agency. The real test of the value of such an agency is whether it will help to accelerate the process of development.

The active participation of United Nations in the new agency seems to be very important because this might enable to build up stability and cooperation among the basin states. This is needed not only to permit an ordered reliance on the availability of water resources but also to attract the financial investment needed to exploit it. The United Nations may help to break down mutual suspicion and distrust, thus making recourse to both law and diplomacy easier and more fruitful. In brief, breeds institutional confidence.

The participation of United Nations may reduce the nationalistic tendency which is conspicuous in ordinary negotiations. At both planning and operating stages, the basin state's representatives should not be allowed to become infatuated with their own blueprints. A third party scrutiny and professional criticism can be a healthy factor in harmonizing conflicts of views among the basin states and in achieving the specialization necessary for effective action. The gradual realization of such an agency may pave the way for integrated control administration, where emphasis is placed on partnership and not on competition.

In the present day world, many international rivers have been the subject of disputes because one of the riparians has acted without consideration of the effects of its actions on other riparians. Against this background, the Mekong project is one of the most vivid illustrations of the vital role which mutual cooperation can play in the development of resources. The Mekong Committee has proved that countries with different political philosophies and eco-

nomic structures can do promising work for a common objective within the framework of a regional organization. In an area where nationalism is intense and revolution pervasive, the Mekong experiment establishes the necessity of a third party participation to act as a stabilizing factor, and to provide facilities through which sensitive sovereign States may obtain external assistance, both financial and technical. The growing functional federalism of the Mekong Committee may help the basin states to emerge from an ancient era of incongruous foreign policy based on internecine rivalry to a new era dominated by the concept of conscious economic solidarity. With all caution, it may be said that this is the beginning of a socio-economic revolution in that part of the world and heralds the much more ambitious development programmes through wider participation by countries in the region.