

USAID role in fostering regional cooperation on the Mekong, Rebecca Root, Devex, 20 Sep 2024

Mekong challenges and hope

The Mekong River is a lifeline for 40 million people across six Southeast Asian countries, but [managing it can be tricky with so many competing priorities](#).

“The biggest challenge is just cooperation,” says Steven Olive, a former [USAID](#) mission director for Asia, referring to the delicate balance between Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Climate change and disruptions like dams are making things even harder. With rising temperatures and unpredictable rainfall, fish stocks and biodiversity are at risk, as is the livelihood of communities along the river, writes Rebecca Root for Devex.

“We’re seeing more extreme events, longer droughts, and sometimes heavier rains than before that communities have to adapt to,” says Olive, adding that hydropower dams that disrupt water flow add to the challenges communities are facing. **USAID is trying to facilitate civil society collaboration** and data to support partnerships.

Data offers some hope. Now, communities have days or even weeks to prepare for floods, Olive says, a huge improvement from the past when warnings were scarce.

Regional cooperation is slowly improving, too, but it’s a work in progress. Different countries have different goals, making collaboration a challenge. But Olive shares a positive anecdote of how civil society groups worked together to halt a plan to dredge the river by providing key data that influenced officials.

USAID supports efforts by building networks and sharing information. With partnerships like the “sister river” exchange between the Mississippi and Mekong, the region is navigating the geographical and political complexities of one of the world’s most important rivers.