Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
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Swiss Cooperation Office and Consular Agency in Laos

Date: 09 June 2026

STRATEGIC NOTE

Switzerland's Strategic Engagement in Mekong Water Governance

2026–2030

1. Context and Rationale

Context

The Mekong River is one of the world's most biologically diverse and economically vital river systems — and one of its most geopolitically sensitive. Flowing nearly 4,900 kilometres from the Tibetan Plateau through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, it sits at the crossroads of shared national interests, where rules-based transboundary governance fosters regional stability and peaceful cooperation. Economically, it sustains nearly 70 million people through agriculture and fisheries that produce around 25% of global rice exports and supply up to 80% of dietary protein for local populations, while hydropower development along its course generates significant energy and economic opportunities for the region. Home to ethnic groups, the river is inseparable from the identity of the peoples along its banks, whose farming calendars, spiritual practices, and ways of life have been shaped by its seasonal rhythms for generations. Environmentally, the basin is a global biodiversity hotspot, harbouring thousands of fish species and remarkable ecosystems, including critically endangered species such as the Irrawaddy dolphin and Mekong giant catfish, as well as globally significant migratory fish populations now in steep decline. One in five Mekong fish species is currently at risk of extinction.

This lifeline is under acute and accelerating pressure from four converging forces:

- **Energy demand is the primary driver.** Around 745 dams — including 209 hydropower projects — have already transformed the Mekong from a free-flowing river into a heavily engineered system, with more planned. Every riparian country prioritises hydropower to fuel economic growth, but their combined strategies amplify basin-wide harm while externalising costs onto the most vulnerable. China operates the basin's largest dam cascade with limited transparency and cooperation. Laos has staked its economic development on hydropower exports. Thailand locks in demand through long-term power purchase agreements with Lao producers. Vietnam invests in hydropower domestically and in Laos, even as sediment loss and saltwater intrusion threaten its own Mekong Delta. Cambodia advances tributary dams at significant cost to its fisheries. Demand pressures are intensifying further as Singapore and other economies seek large-scale electricity imports to power booming data centre industries.
- **Urbanisation and sand extraction compound the damage.** Sand mining — often illegal, monopoly-controlled, and embedded in patronage networks — destabilises riverbeds, erodes banks, and starves deltas of essential sediment. Vietnam's Mekong Delta is shrinking by an estimated 500 hectares annually. Across the region, illegal extraction is not an aberration but a structural feature of weak governance and elite capture.
- **Extractive and industrial activities inflict an additional layer of harm.** Intensified mineral and rare earth mining — particularly in Myanmar and in Northern Laos — releases toxic runoff and heavy metals into river systems at a scale now documented as transboundary and escalating. Industrial expansion along the riverbanks adds further pollution loads through inadequately treated effluents. Heavy metal bioaccumulation in fish tissue and sediment contamination can persist for decades, with long term consequences for biodiversity, fisheries, and food security

that current governance frameworks are ill-equipped to address. Affected communities bear the costs with little means of redress.

- **Navigation and infrastructure development add further pressure.** Competing visions for the river's commercial future — including large-scale canal projects and upstream dredging to facilitate regional trade — alter flow dynamics, accelerate erosion, and cause cross-border arguments between Mekong countries. Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal illustrates the pattern: an infrastructure project conceived nationally whose hydrological and political consequences extend across borders.
- **Climate change** acts as a threat multiplier across the basin. Rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, and more intense floods are disrupting the Mekong's hydrological cycles and compounding the impacts of dam development and ecosystem degradation. Climate change intensifies dry season water shortages, saltwater intrusion in the Mekong Delta, and risks to agriculture, fisheries, and food security. At the same time, vulnerable communities dependent on river-based livelihoods face growing economic insecurity and reduced resilience to climate shocks.

Resource capture: Across the basin, the allocation of water and energy resources reflects entrenched economic interests — with concessions, licenses, and power agreements frequently serving private gain at the expense of environmental and social safeguards.

Governance has not kept pace with the pressures on the river. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) — the only treaty-based body for the basin— has made real progress on flood forecasting, environmental assessment, and data sharing. But its procedures are not binding and lack transparency, national uptake is slow, coordination of dam operation is still weak, and real-time data integration across the river network remains inadequate. Monitoring of water quality from different pollution sources across the basin is fragmented and underdeveloped. Basin-wide management, including cooperation with China, requires further strengthening and improvement.

Civic space across the Mekong is under increasing pressure. Civil society organisations play a critical role in monitoring river conditions, amplifying community voices, and holding decision-makers accountable across borders — functions that no intergovernmental body can fully replace. When these organisations face restrictions or cannot operate, transboundary water governance loses independent oversight, local knowledge, and public trust, and becomes less likely to work well over time.

Why engage

The pressures on the Mekong are growing faster than the governance systems set up to manage them. The Mekong region is at a turning point as the MRC and its member states try to strengthen the institution and find lasting solutions to shared water challenges. The MRC's Strategic Plan 2026–2030 coincides with a critical transition toward financial self-sufficiency, which will test of whether nationally owned governance can sustain the technical functions the basin depends on. At the same time, water security is moving up the regional political agenda. The ASEAN-MRC Water Security Dialogue is becoming a significant mechanism for broader cooperation in Southeast Asia, even though most shared water resources in the region are still managed bilaterally and often lack adequate legal frameworks. But the case for engagement goes beyond institutions. Addressing the four converging forces reshaping the basin — energy demand, sand extraction, industrial pollution, and infrastructure proliferation — require concrete technical solutions where development partner can add value through expertise and resources. Switzerland also plays an active role at the global level, including as co-chair of Interactive Dialogue A at the UN Water Conference 2026, creating an opportunity to link Mekong experience with global priorities, particularly on water quality and pollution, as well as on transboundary water cooperation.

For Switzerland, engagement in transboundary water governance is firmly strategic. ASEAN is an important economic partner. Regional stability, climate and environmental risk mitigation, and the preservation of global public goods are direct Swiss interests. A degraded Mekong basin — with

collapsing fisheries, insecure energy production, toxic waterways, and weakened governance — generates systemic risks that extend well beyond the subregion. Supporting rules-based transboundary water governance is therefore a priority of Switzerland's strategy in Southeast Asia, serving its long-term economic, environmental, and geopolitical interests in one of Asia's most important river systems.

Switzerland's Unique Value Proposition

Switzerland has been engaged in the Mekong region for many years, and its role is especially relevant now. Its sustained presence, political neutrality, and specialised technical expertise give it credibility as a trusted partner and honest broker. As the MRC navigates its transition to financial self-sufficiency, Switzerland can contribute to the basket fund and, together with other development partners, help shape MRC's strategic direction and reform agenda. It can deploy targeted expertise precisely where institutional gaps are most acute and Swiss added value is greatest: flood forecasting and early warning, sediment management, cascade dam modelling, dam safety, and - critically given accelerating pollution threats - water quality monitoring and pollution control. Its track record in transboundary water governance, water diplomacy, and multi-stakeholder dialogue also allows Switzerland to support constructive engagement on politically sensitive issues, where neutrality and trust are as important as technical knowledge. In a changing governance landscape, Switzerland's comparative advantage lies less in the size of its funding than in the trust it commands and the depth of its technical expertise.

2. Vision, Objectives and Strategic Approach

VISION

A Mekong River Basin that is economically prosperous, socially just, environmentally sound, and climate resilient.

Three Pillars of Change

Switzerland structures its engagement around three mutually reinforcing pillars, each with a defined set of objectives:

Institutions that Work *Strengthen capacity, authority, and sustainability of governance institutions*	**Policies that Hold** *Strengthen coherence and enforcement of standards; align investment with climate and disaster risks*	**People that Matter** *Strengthen inclusive, accountable water governance responsive to communities bearing the greatest costs*
• Support MRC strategic transformation toward financial sustainability and stronger procedural authority • Modernise core monitoring network and modelling for basin-wide	• Support national uptake and promote coherent application of basin-wide rules, standards, and data sharing • Strengthen dam safety regulatory frameworks, with Laos as replicable model	• Support a harmonised basin-wide stakeholder platform for inclusive dialogue • Strengthen civil society capacity through inclusive water governance and climate resilience programmes

forecasting and data dissemination • Strengthen regional flood and drought early warning systems • Build institutional capacity for climate adaptation and integrated water management • Establish dam safety frameworks and systems (incl. Lao Dam Safety Law, LDMS) • • Deploy Swiss expertise in data and modelling	• Expand and enforce water quality standards covering sediment, nutrients, salinity and pollution. • Promote water stewardship standards in industrial parks and special economic zones along the Mekong, engaging the private sector in responsible effluent management • Inform energy and water investment planning toward sustainable approaches • Ensure sediment and flow data systematically inform policy decisions • Promote human rights and responsible investment standards • Strengthen dam coordination • Advance coordinated basin-wide water governance	• Build community resilience to floods and drought through preparedness and early response • Ensure women, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalised groups have a voice • Strengthen accountability of water users, including the private sector

Implementation Approach

Switzerland's engagement is organised around 3 mutually reinforcing elements.

A portfolio of complementary programmes

A strategically focused portfolio (see annex 3) covers the full spectrum of basin governance challenges — from dam safety and flood resilience to inclusive water governance and water stewardship — designed so that each programme reinforces the others.

Good governance compact

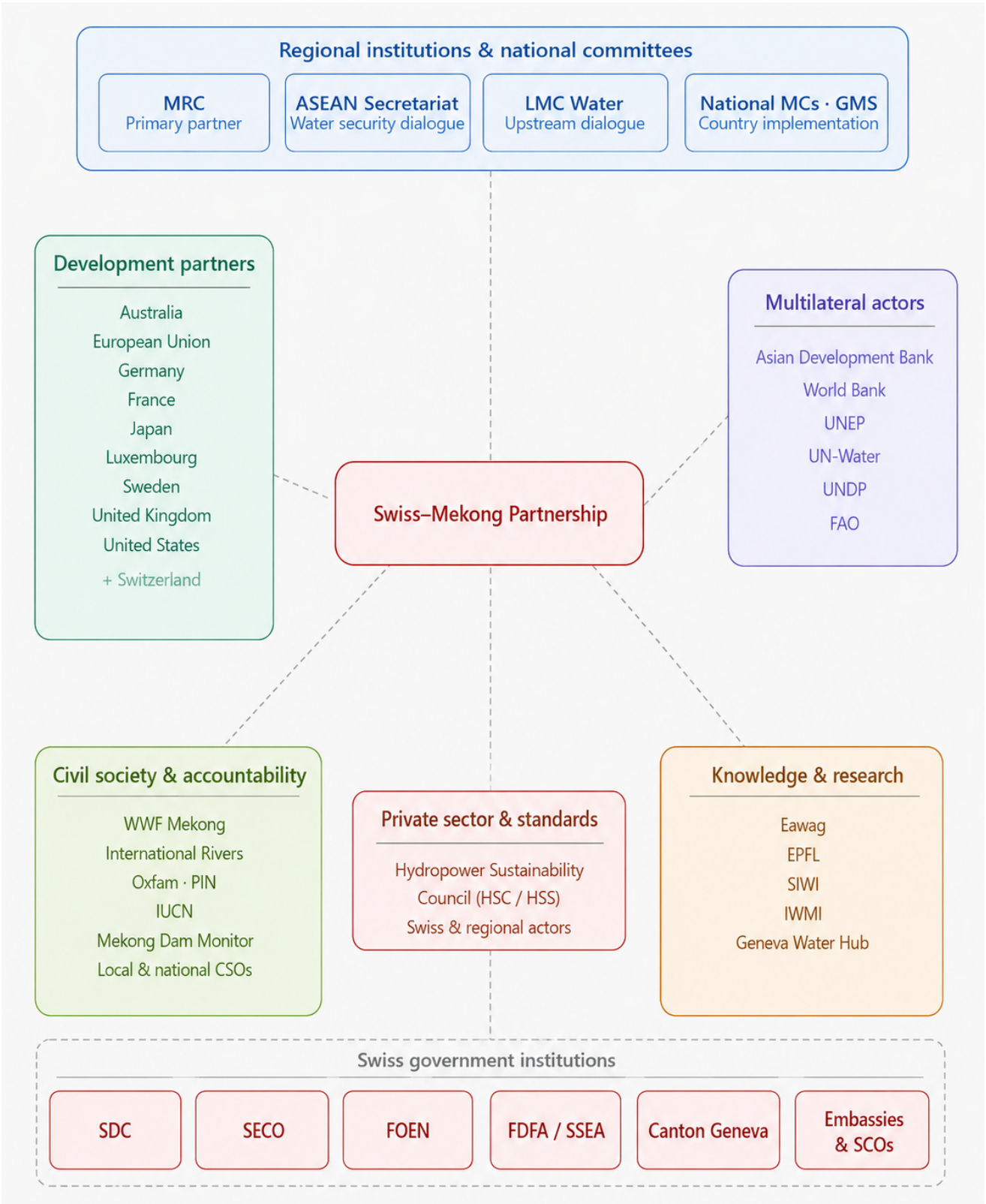
Every initiative uses technical cooperation as a lever to improve the quality, inclusiveness, and durability of governance systems — not to deliver technical outputs in isolation.
Switzerland deliberately links field-level implementation with national policy processes and regional frameworks. Evidence from the ground feeds upward into policy dialogue.

Team Switzerland

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Switzerland mobilises an ecosystem of partners (see Annex 1) — universities, research institutions, NGOs, and private sector actors — bringing targeted technical expertise to the basin's most pressing governance challenges. This technical reach is deliberately connected to a coordinated network of Swiss public institutions — FDFA (State Secretariat and SDC), SECO, and FOEN — that align positions and engage as a single coherent voice in policy dialogue at country, sub-regional, and regional levels, translating field evidence into institutional influence where decisions are made.
Switzerland's embassies and cooperation offices across the Mekong countries maintain active policy dialogue with line ministries, and sectoral agencies — positioning Switzerland as a credible partner at the national level and creating direct access to policy processes where basin governance decisions are made. Representations coordinate their positions across countries, ensuring that evidence gathered at field and national level reaches the regional table as a coherent, unified voice. This alignment feeds directly into Switzerland's engagement with the MRC — through seconded experts and the donor troika — closing the loop between local implementation and regional governance dialogue.

Annex 1 — Partner Ecosystem



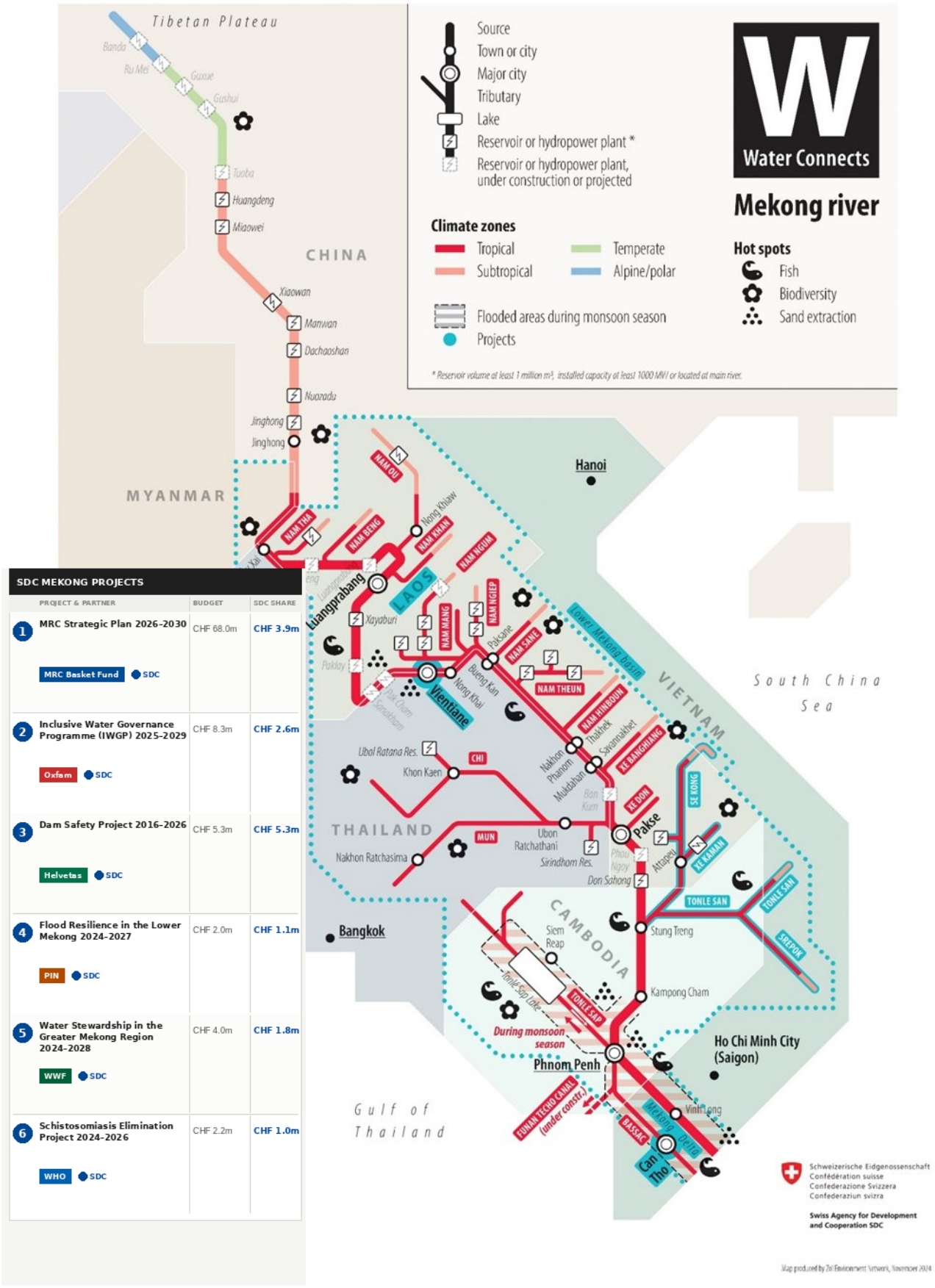
Annex 2 — Why the Mekong Matters

Why the Mekong Matters Scroll: https://mekong-matters.webflow.io/

Annex 3 — Portfolio

#	Project Title & Partner	Partner	Total Budget	SDC Share
1	MRC Strategic Plan 2026–2030 (Mekong River Commission)	MRC Basket Fund	CHF 68.0m	CHF 3.9m
2	Inclusive Water Governance Programme (IWGP) 2025–2029 (Oxfam)	Oxfam	CHF 8.3m	CHF 2.6m
3	Dam Safety Project 2016–2026 (Helvetas)	Helvetas	CHF 5.3m	CHF 5.3m
4	Flood Resilience in the Lower Mekong 2024–2027 (PIN)	PIN	CHF 2.0m	CHF 1.1m
5	Water Stewardship in the Greater Mekong Region 2024–2028 (WWF)	WWF	CHF 4.0m	CHF 1.8m
6	Schistosomiasis Elimination Project 2024–2026 (WHO)	WHO	CHF 2.2m	CHF 1.0m

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SDC MEKONG PROJECTS

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1	MRC Strategic Plan 2026-2030 MRC Basket Fund ● SDC	CHF 68.0m	CHF 3.9m
2	Inclusive Water Governance Programme (IWGP) 2025-2029 Oxfam ● SDC	CHF 8.3m	CHF 2.6m
3	Dam Safety Project 2016-2026 Helvetas ● SDC	CHF 5.3m	CHF 5.3m
4	Flood Resilience in the Lower Mekong 2024-2027 PIN ● SDC	CHF 2.0m	CHF 1.1m
5	Water Stewardship in the Greater Mekong Region 2024-2028 WWF ● SDC	CHF 4.0m	CHF 1.8m
6	Schistosomiasis Elimination Project 2024-2026 WHO ● SDC	CHF 2.2m	CHF 1.0m

Map produced by Zoi Environment Network, November 2024