



Strengthening Solidarity Towards Sustainable Agri-Food Systems in the GMS

By Ms. Maria Theresa S. Medialdia

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) is endowed with rich and diverse natural resources, hence it is considered one of Asia's most important food baskets. Countries in the GMS dominate the global export market of key commodities such as coffee, rice, and cashews. Trade in high-value crops, especially fruits and vegetables, are also growing, such as lychees from Vietnam, durians from Thailand, and mangoes from Cambodia. Lao PDR and Vietnam are also increasing the production of organic vegetables and fruits.

Agriculture supports more than 60 percent of its population and agri-food remains a catalyst for economic development and regional integration. Yet millions are still food insecure and vulnerable to disruptions in the food chain due to unsafe food, pest and disease outbreaks, loss of agrobiodiversity, degradation of soil quality, and climate-induced natural disasters.

Through the years, as countries in the region accelerate economic growth to integrate into the global value chain, food systems and consumption patterns face transformations driven by infrastructure, urbanization, changing dietary demands, and international trade. Climate change and major disruptions such as outbreaks of animal and plant diseases continue to impose a heavy burden on the lives and the livelihood of small-scale farmers and agri-food processors who make up the majority of the agri-food sector in the region. They have limited access to technical knowledge, best practices, affordable financing, and social protection to strengthen their resilience against impending and future shocks to food systems and supply chains.



Mekong Institute (MI), as the advocate of regional cooperation and integration of the GMS, has been continuously working with GMS countries, organizations, and institutions to support and strengthen collaboration in the region by initiating dialogues, generating knowledge-based solutions, and capacitating actors on agricultural development and commercialization, trade investment and facilitation, and sustainable energy and environment.

With its Strategic Plan 2021-2025, MI will continue to bridge more partnerships among GMS governments, academic institutions, and other stakeholders to strengthen the agri-food sector's climate resilience. Specifically, MI will continue to support sustainable agri-food systems through capacity development, and advocacy that champions agricultural productivity, promotes better nutrition and safer food, enhances value-chain development, makes more efficient the uses of natural resources, and expands market access for safer food from the GMS.

MI's strategic action areas are focused on:

- Food safety and market access
- Climate-smart agriculture
- Value-chain development
- Sustainable food systems (SFS)
- Postharvest management

MI's current initiatives which are in line with the needs of agri-food stakeholders in the region and wider Southeast Asia are:

- establishing market linkages for agri-food MSMEs
- broadening consumer awareness on food safety and standards
- mainstreaming agrobiodiversity for sustainable food systems
- providing implementation support for SFS in the GMS
- enhancing crop insurance as part of Climate Risk Financing
- strengthening capacity building on organic agriculture standard
- establishing a crop (rice) pest early warning system
- harmonizing sustainable crop standards such as rice

The GMS region has become a hub for many cooperation mechanisms, many of which have prioritized agriculture development and commercialization to lift people out of poverty and for regional economic integration.

Given that the current pandemic has set-back decades of development gains, it is more important than ever to build solidarity, complement interventions, and streamline efforts towards a sustainable, resilient, and inclusive food system in the GMS.

MI has always been an important implementing partner of regional cooperation mechanisms for over 25 years and will remain as such for decades to come, to ensure that the region continues to be an essential part of global food security solutions. ■



Ms. Maria Theresa S. Medialdia is the Program Director of MI's Agricultural Development and Commercialization Department. Beginning in 2016, she has led a dedicated team of five who are working to promote food safety practices and management for increased market competitiveness and protection of public health in the CLMV. For more PROSAFE information, visit cutt.ly/4njcpDc.

