



Mekong Connection

Newsletter of the Mekong Institute

ISBN : 0859-7006 Vol. 9 No. 2 Khon Kaen, Thailand

July - September 2005

The Mekong Institute (MI) held its mid-year Council Meeting on 11th July in Khon Kaen. H.E. Mr Tej Bunnag, Advisor to the Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary, chaired the Council Meeting as representative of Thailand.

MI was established in June 2003 through a common charter signed by ministers of the six GMS nations: Cambodia, Yunnan Province in China, Laos PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and the SR of Vietnam. The Council is the most senior governing body of MI, made up of senior representatives from each of the six Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries, plus representatives of development partners, academics and the GMS business sector.

The international status of MI was a major item on the agenda at this time, as it was to lend financial and administrative benefits to MI's operations and staff in the near future. The finalization of international status of MI will also facilitate financial and political support from GMS governments and international development partners.

The meeting chairman Tej Bunnag emphasized that he will "make every effort to ensure that MI attains international organization status as soon as possible. MI serves as a GMS institute, not only for Thailand, but also the GMS member countries in this sub-region."

The chairmanship of the Council rotates on an alphabetic basis, with Thailand holding the chair presently pending the Thai Government's final processing of the international status of MI. Once MI has achieved international status, the chairmanship will move to Vietnam.

The Council, together with MI management and invitees reviewed the developments of the first half of 2005, and plans forecast for the remainder of 2005 and throughout

MI Council Meeting held on 11th July 2005 in Khon Kaen

The Mekong Institute (MI) held its mid-year Council Meeting at MI Building



H.E. Mr Tej Bunnag, center, Advisor to the Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary, chairs the Council Meeting as representative of Thailand. With him here, are Dr Narongchai Akrasanee, chairman of the MI Steering Committee, seated left, and Dr Anake Topark-ngarm, MI director, seated right.

2006. Planning and prioritization was discussed, as well as funding needs and possibilities. The consensus was that, although the GMS countries and development partners needed an ambitious plan of academic and research activities, the first and most urgent priority for MI is to build the human resource and operational capacity of the institution.

At the meeting, The Council members were also informed about the progress of funding programs supported by various development partners, with NZAID under the New Zealand government providing some 90 scholarships to the six GMS countries for 2004-2005 to participate in the Professional Development Series (PDS) course at MI.

In addition, three custom courses run at MI from January to June 2005 were funded by Thailand International for Cooperation Agency (TICA), Colombo Plan Secretariat and Asian Development Bank (ADB).

NZAID and Rockefeller Foundation

have also supported MI in its research capacity building. NZAID's support has emphasized initiation of MI research programs and information gathering to support the GMS PDS, while that of Rockefeller Foundation has aimed for a series of GMS Social Policy Formulation Meetings.

Research in those two programs will strengthen all MI's learning programs substantially.

The possibility of more funding from GMS countries and other development partners was also discussed. This year, the Thai government, through the TICA, allocated 10 million baht to MI to support operating expenses, and some initiative capacity building activities. This level of generous support is also committed for the next two years (2006- 2007), providing the satisfactory performance of the institution.

The next MI Council meeting will be held later this year in Vietnam.

Messages from the MI Steering Committee members and Partner Agency

Dr Narongchai Akrasanee, Chairman of the MI Steering Committee (SC):

Mekong Institute (MI) has been established for ten years now. At the beginning it was a joint undertaking between the Thai and New Zealand governments. Now it has become a regional institution, including participation from the six Greater Mekong sub-region countries.



Dr Narongchai

MI has been providing training and seminars, consultation, discussions and so on about our development: economic development, social development – how to introduce, how to achieve a number of so-called development objectives in the member economies.

So far the MI has provided training for more than 1,700 people, with 68 learning courses and these people have gone back to their countries. They have different responsibilities, mostly in their governments. They have become friends among themselves. They have learned valuable new techniques and new issues, new problems and how to handle – how to solve – many problems.

“So far, we have seen good co-operation among member countries, among the people who have come to the institute. We have seen progress also in the GMS member countries. We believe that part of this progress has been due to the contribution from people who have come to the Mekong Institute. Therefore we are very proud that we have had something to do with development in these GMS countries,” Dr Narongchai concluded.

Mr Latsamy Keomany, a SC member from Laos PDR:

“You are giving me the opportunity to speak about the importance and also the role to be played by MI,” he says at the beginning.

Laos is one of the six countries in the GMS sub-region and we are considering MI to be a training centre for our human development. The courses now conducted at MI, like the resource professional development series, the custom courses and also the research projects fit very

well to the Laos social economic development. It is in line with our strategies and strategic plans from now up to 2005, and also for the coming five-year plan – 2006 to 2010.

“We are focusing on poverty reduction and regional intervention. Therefore the MI courses can help us in developing our needs in order to commit to these two main challenges – poverty reduction and fully and protective integration into regional groupings including the AFTA and even the WTO,” he noted.

Mr Steve Dowall, NZAID Representative, as a Development Partner:

The NZAID and MI relationship goes back right to the beginning with NZAID being one of the founder members of MI along with Thailand. NZAID has had this relationship as a very important part of its work in the GMS region. It's been a strategic relationship and one that I think has had a high profile in NZAID's work in the wider region.

“A turning point both for MI and for NZAID was when the MI charter was signed in 2003. This brought MI into a new era, an era in which MI truly became a regional institute owned by the GMS states; one which was not only owned but of strategic importance to the ongoing development of GMS countries,” he says.

MI now has proceeded on a year and half or so beyond that charter and is developing its new identity in some special ways. The training and needs analysis that NZAID's commissioned in 2003 led to the establishment of a new strategic plan that has provided quite a new and dynamic focus for MI and its provision of leadership and management training in the region.

New Zealand is now itself moving into a new era in terms of its development systems in the region. It established last year (2004) a new Asia strategy, and this strategy has as its central focus sustainable rural livelihoods. An important part of this is human resource development.

“And so, with MI advancing beyond the establishment of its new charter, and NZAID moving itself into a new strategy for the region, we last year (2004) went into a new agreement with MI that takes us forward another three years. We see MI as being an important part of NZAID's human resource development activities in the region,” he remarked.

INTERVIEWS

The view from Dr Kenneth Smith, an ADB facilitator for the learning program on Project Feasibility and Design

Dr Kenneth

Dr Kenneth Smith found that this group was outstanding in their eagerness to learn and their ability to absorb what we taught them in a very short time and turn around and apply it.

We set them up with different sectors, and even though some people had never worked in that sector because we mixed them up by country they pitched right in worked very hard; they worked through the breaks. We had to chase them out sometimes to come to lunch and the coffee breaks! At night time they were still working when we had packed up and left for the hotel. So they were a very, very, hardworking group.

"I was also surprised at the quality of the presentations they made and in the presentations, they actually applied the tools we had talked about. So it wasn't just general theory, they actually got down and learned how to use it, including the software. So I was really amazed at how much they picked up and turned round and applied," he noted.

"My area of expertise was largely the tools for project design and project scheduling, project framework, cost benefit, earn-value analysis tools for doing those things. But I did not have any subject matter sector expertise; that was provided by other people, including the participants themselves. So it was really exciting.

"I think that, from what I've seen, they will not only go back and work but aware when somebody else talks to them about these topics. I think they can take the initiative to launch and require that they actually be used, if somebody shows them something they will be in a good position to critique it and question it," he noted.

In the final session it was really interesting. Each team did its presentation; the other teams gave them the third degree - critiquing what they had done. Again they were able to think on their feet and respond. And although it was all simulation they did a very, very, thorough job.

"As I commented to Dr Chung, it takes ADB months to develop a project, and these projects look very realistic," he said.

The View from Dr Do Kim Chung, an ADB lead faculty at the learning course on Project Feasibility and Design

Dr Chung

The course was designed to enhance the competencies of participants in the identification and design of development projects. It gives emphasis to project identification, preparation of a project concept, designing a project and assessing the feasibility of a project. The faculty is drawn from a pool of project management experts in the academia and from the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The philosophy adopted in this learning program is participatory learning and action (PLA) approach. Participants were organized by learning groups, to facilitate participatory learning and emphasize practitioner orientation and action learning. Participants had a chance to get to know each other, to facilitate team building. Brainstorming techniques and group-led activities were intensively employed during the courses. These created good learning environment for participants.

Through two weeks of intensive work, the stated objectives were fully achieved. The outcomes of the learning program on Project Feasibility and Design exceed our expectations. First, the course has provided participants with an in-depth understanding of development issues, transcending borders, the country's development strategies in the GMS region.

Secondly, the course intended to enable participants to familiarize themselves with key processes and concepts of project design and feasibility so that they are able to understand the process and sufficiently guide or monitor the process in their respective work area. But after the course, most participants were not only familiar with the process and concepts but more importantly, they had better skills in project design and feasibility establishment, particularly in project identification, preparation of a project concept, project design and establishing project feasibility.

Thirdly, the course has created an opportunity for participants to exchange their views and country experiences in development project design and feasibility establishment. Fourthly, the course has strengthened human resources in the countries of the GMS region. The course continued to build partnerships and promote effective cooperation among the countries in the GMS. All participants commented that they would like better cooperation, so the Mekong River is always a river of change, solidarity, cooperation, development, wealth and happiness. And lastly, the program fostered a network of project management professionals in the GMS.

Participants learned very much from this course and were very dedicated. They had great commitment in going back to their country to contribute and renew the process of project feasibility design.

FEATURE: LAOS / VANG VIENG

Vang Vieng, the land of natural beauty: cool climate, nice place to breathe fresh air, named after the Chinese town as 'Guilin' of Laos which has become as a new country resort and tourist destination located outside Vientiane.

Our Mekong Institute held a three-day retreat program for staff recently with a visit to Laos. Our destinations in Laos were Vientiane, Vang Vieng and Nam Ngum Dam.

We left Khon Kaen for Udon Thani and then Nong Khai, the border province between Thailand and Laos. We stopped for a while at Thongwiset Tour Office to meet Arthit Thongwiset, a tour manager, accompanied by the two guides who had organized the trip to Laos for the 20 of us. Our visas were also arranged with them, along with border passes and passports for customs and immigration procedures.

From there we crossed the border at the Mekong using the 'Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge', and arrived at Laos's customs and immigration offices. While we were waiting for the entrance procedures to be finished, an Indochina Travel tour coach from Laos arrived, lead by two Laos guides dressed up professionally in their national dress. They, Waan and Nok, greeted and welcomed us at the border checkpoint with great courtesy and made a fine impression.

It took around half an hour for the whole process, after which we started with Indochina tour bus, heading for Vientiane, a further 20km away. The first place we visited in Vientiane was Chao Mae Si Muang, one of the most respected temples in the Laos capital. We paid respects there to bring luck, success and prosperity to all of us, before we left for the countryside with the town of Vang Vieng as our next destination.

The national road (No. 13) lead us 165km from Vientiane to Vang Vieng, and took about three hours' drive. From Vang Vieng other towns can be reached, notably Kasi and the famous World Heritage Site of Luang Phrabang in northern Laos.

At about 4pm on the first day of travel we arrived at Vang Vieng town and checked in to the Phou Angkham hotel. We took a rest for a while before going out to dinner under the sunset along the Nam Xong riverside. It is a very pleasant place with great natural beauty and fresh air. We were not alone there; several other groups of tourists were present, from Japan, America and Europe, taking time to absorb the wonderful atmosphere there.

Vang Vieng was a fine place for relaxing, catching breath and resting in the upcountry side of the third world. Touring Vang Vieng, one should not miss a visit to Tham Chang mountain cave or a boat ride or rafting trip along the Nam Xong, just a kilometer away from the town center.

Along Nam Xong riverside there is a beautiful backdrop of the river and mountains. It is where tourists or visitors sit by the riverside at restaurants, to view the flowing water of the Nam Xong and take in the mountain views far behind.

On the way up to Tham Chang cave there was a hanging bridge spanning the river, and also an organic farming village. Nearby is the mountain cliff called Pha Tao, and also Thamjung Resort among others.

Overall, visiting Laos's Vang Vieng is very relaxing, allowing one to get in touch with the natural beauty of mountains, caves, and river scenery in a virgin and unspoiled atmosphere. We left Vang Vieng and headed next to Nam Ngum Dam, and Vientiane. We got back to Vientiane in the late afternoon of August 29, for one more night in Laos -which we never forgot!



The sunset over the River Mekong, running under the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in Nongkhai, Thailand, and forming the border between the two countries.



MI staff on Nam Xong riverside get ready for a wonderful dinner under the sunset, with the river on one side and mountains on the other.



A natural view in Laos. Nam Xong River and the surrounding mountains are the main attractions.



MI staff pose for a photo in front of Phou Angkham Hotel in Vang Vieng, Laos, for a precious and lasting memory...

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Mekong Institute has announced the schedule for nine learning programs to be offered in the 2006 Professional Development Series (PDS), aimed towards preparing manager from public and private sector for today's challenges in the GMS:

1. Project Management for Poverty Interventions

9 January to 3 February 2006 (4 weeks)

This program applies management knowledge and skills to poverty interventions in sectors such as education, health, employment generation and local capacity building. In the course participants will use relevant case analysis to creatively design poverty intervention projects that include the participation of stakeholders and are implemented through efficient and transparent mechanisms. The course will highlight how successful projects can stimulate partnerships among stakeholders to ultimately benefit a sector assistance strategy.

2. Tourism: A Regional Approach to Development

6 February - 3 March 2005 (4 weeks)

24 July - 18 August 2006 (4 weeks)

This program presents the challenge that success actually threatens GMS tourism sustainability by overburdening host communities, infrastructures and environments. Further, regional and global crises have dramatically affected tourism markets. Fortunately, regional economic cooperation and sectoral development strategies present opportunities. Four major topics are therefore addressed:

1. sustainable tourism and pro-poor development,
2. community based tourism,
3. regional tourism marketing and promotion
4. regional tourism planning and management.

3. Leadership for Public Sector Reform

6 - 31 March 2006 (4 weeks)

This program presents Public Sector Reform as a change process from a present, known state to a future, desired state. The course also advocates effective leadership as essential to ensure reforms are implemented and sustained. The course therefore emphasizes two interdependent capacities:

1. knowledge acquisition of frameworks for GMS public sector reform, and
2. professional skill development to lead a change process

To provide realistic and applicable delivery, the course curriculum follows the role of a leader through four stages of a public sector reform process:

1. understanding the need for change
2. meeting resistance to change
3. managing the pain of change, and
4. sustaining change

4. Rural Development

17 April - 12 May 2006 (4 weeks)

21 August - 8 September 2006 (4 weeks)

Despite rapid growth in GMS countries, rural communities often lack necessary infrastructure and service. Further, poverty drives people from the countryside to cities in search of a better life but far too often results in disappointment and increased social problems. These dynamics have created a need for rural development that provides infrastructure and services to assist development of non-agrarian livelihoods that will support and sustain local cultures and environments. Further, experience has taught that in order for rural development to be sustainable it must also involve the people themselves and their institutions at all levels.

Specifically this program focuses on:

1. raising living standards of small scale farmers
2. creating rural non-farm employment
3. building human capacity
4. urban-rural inequalities
5. conservation of natural resources
6. participatory rural development techniques

5. Project Management for Infrastructure Development

15 May - 9 June 2006 (4 weeks)

Sustained and equitable GMS growth is hindered by limited infrastructure development. The GMS has therefore attracted a large number of multibillion dollar projects developing local, national and regional infrastructures.

This program provides project managers with professional skills to develop, implement, monitor and evaluate projects that are on-budget, on-schedule and on-target with GMS needs. The course will highlight critical analysis of infrastructure projects to determine how they may ultimately benefit the people of the GMS.

Specifically this program focuses on:

1. project leadership
2. project impact and conflict resolution

<< Continued from page 5

3. project organisation
4. project control
5. project closure and evaluation

6. Leadership for Competitive Enterprises**12 June - 7 July 2006 (4 weeks)**

This program highlights core leadership skills together with professional capacity building for more reliable, responsive and professional management. Leadership in a competitive enterprise requires a person with vision, who is able to set strategic goals and objectives and to ensure that impacts are compatible. Leadership requires a number of bridging skills to make the business work as a single entity, with a common purpose. It is essential to identify leaders within an organisation that possess unique attributes and are simultaneously able to make use of these skills in a global market place.

Specifically this program focuses on:

1. leader's role to enhance performance and motivation
2. leader's role in strategic management
3. ethics, social responsibility and governance in leadership

7. Leadership for Education Reform**18 September - 13 October 2006 (4 weeks)**

This program presents education as an essential factor in the development process. As such GMS governments have implemented a variety of educational reforms to assist their people. The course also advocates effective leadership as essential to ensure education reforms are implemented and sustained. The course therefore emphasizes two interdependent capacities:

1. knowledge acquisition of frameworks for GMS education sector reform, and
2. professional skill development to lead a change process

To provide realistic and applicable delivery, the course curriculum follows the role of a leader through four stages of an education sector reform process:

1. understanding the need for change: education sector reform issues
2. meeting resistance to change
3. implementing and sequencing reforms, and
4. managing and sustaining institutional change

8. Leadership for Health Care Reform**30 October - 24 November 2006 (4 weeks)**

This program focuses on access and delivery of health care as an essential service for the improved standard of living for people. In order for GMS governments to meet a wide range of international targets, such as Millennium Development Goals, they work closely with a wide range of partner agencies. The course though advocates that effective leadership at national and local levels as essential to ensure health care reforms are implemented and sustained. The course therefore emphasizes two inter dependent capacities:

1. knowledge acquisition of frameworks for GMS health sector reform, and
2. professional skill development to lead a change process

To provide realistic and applicable delivery, the course curriculum follows the role of a leader through four stages of a health sector reform process:

1. understanding the need for change: health sector reform issues
2. meeting resistance to change
3. implementing and sequencing reforms, and
4. managing and sustaining institutional change

9. Rural Industry and SME Development**27 November - 22 December 2006**

(4 weeks)
This program promotes sustainable economic and social development in the GMS by advocating empowerment of local communities with the skills and resources to develop non-agrarian livelihoods. Rural Industry and SME Development will provide a holistic approach to the entire production process from creating unique products to ensuring adequate sources of raw materials and access to markets. Throughout the role of the government in cooperation with private and civil society sectors will be explored.

Specifically the curriculum focuses on:

1. community analysis
2. identifying unique local potential and market demand
3. production and supply networks
4. technical assistance, training and marketing

For more information and application forms, please go to visit MI website:
www.mekonginstitute.org

MI activities in pictures



August 30: The visiting group of MI staff led by Ajaan Apai Prakobphol, Administration Manager, 7th from left, called in on the administrators of National University of Laos in Vientiane.



Dr Narongchai Akrasanee, Chairman of Mekong Institute Steering Committee, right, attending The GMS Food Festival organized by participants from the learning course 'Tourism: A Regional Approach to Development' in the MI reception area on September 23.



Some participants of the learning course on "Poverty Reduction" are seen enjoying the fun and games held at the welcome party at the MI conference room.



Khon Kaen University (KKU), Loei Rajabhat University (LRU), and Mekong Institute (MI) jointly signed an academic agreement and cooperation form at a ceremony held on October 7, 2005 to launch a new PhD program and curriculum in the field of Regional Development Strategy for next year.



A warmest welcome party was organized by MI for the group of 15 participants from the six GMS countries, attending the learning course "Tourism: A Regional Approach to Development" on September 6, 2005.



The participants from the six GMS countries attending the learning program "Project Feasibility and Design" spent their leisure time exploring the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in Nong Khai province. The trip was organized by MI to the tourist spot on August 13, 2005.

ALUMNI NEWS

Views from participants at the learning course on Poverty Reduction

Mr Mohammad Ahsen, Deputy Secretary, Planning and Development Department, Government of AJ & K, New Civil Secretariat, Pakistan:



Mr Mohammad

My name is Mohammad Ahsen, I am from Pakistan. I belong to the Pakistani part of Kashmir; we call it Asad Kashmir. I am a journalist officer, currently working with the planning and development department and at the moment I will go back home, I will be working with a development project called Multi Sector Rehabilitation and Improvement Project.

Our experience at MI has been great, very excellent. I already have a degree in Development Administration and Management, and this course was, I think, very helpful in strengthening my knowledge I already had. Particularly some techniques taught to us by Dr Ravi, was not only an addition to my knowledge but helped improve participatory rural appraisal and assessment.

Similarly, risk management, stakeholder analysis and evaluation of development project were some of the topics that were certainly a great learning experience for me.

Ms Nguyen Thi Minh Chau, Official, Department of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs, Viet Nam:



Ms Nguyen Thi Minh Chau

My name is Nguyen Thi Minh Chau; I am an officer from Vietnam. I'm officer for the Department of Labor Invalid and Social Affairs, near Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam.

This is the first time I went aboard, so this chance came to me because some years ago I started work as assistant officer in my province in poverty reduction. I think I had no knowledge about poverty reduction before because it's a new work in my province, so all the people in my office had no experience. I mean, we had experience by working with the people in the rural. I was very lucky to have this chance.

MI News In Brief

MI is selected by ADB as GMS venue for learning program on Project Feasibility and Design



MI Director Dr Anake Topark-ngarm, centre, presided over the closing ceremony. Here he is seen presenting a certificate to a Vietnamese participant at the graduation day held on August 19, 2005. With him, at right is Dr Kenneth F. Smith, ADB facilitator.

MI was recently chosen to be a Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) training venue for Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Phnom Penh Plan (PPP) to organize Learning Programs on Project Feasibility and Design here in Khon Kaen province in Northeastern Thailand.

MI has just completed the first learning course at MI's training center that lasted from 8 to 19 August 2005. In all, 32 participants took part in the training program which focused on performance management systems and design/monitoring frameworks. The participants came from the 6 GMS countries where they work as senior-level officials.

For more information about PPP, please go to www.adb.org/GMS?phnom-penh-plan/default.asp



Visiting Mekong Institute

Students from King Prajadhipok's Institute, Bangkok, call in on the Mekong Institute, Khon Kaen.

Mekong Institute (MI) Administration Manager Aphai Prakobpol gave a special lecture on MI background and activities to a visiting group of students from King Prajadhipok's Institute, Bangkok, on August 19. The group of 70 students was led by Prof. Wanchai Wattanasap, the class chairman. The students were studying for a certificate in Dispute Resolutions, and took part in a field trip to Khon Kaen to learn more about social issues at the MI conference room.