

MEKONG CONNECTION

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20 Years of Cooperation for Development

20th Anniversary Celebrations of MI: Looking back in order to move forward

The 20th Anniversary celebrations on the evening of August 28th – exactly 20 years to the day since MI was founded – were a showcase of diversity and cooperation. The cultures of the six GMS countries that own and support MI – Cambodia, P.R. China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand - were well portrayed in the clothing, food, performances, and most importantly, the people. In addition to the diverse staff, the event was well attended by a variety of stakeholders – academics, development partners, and government authorities, among others.

All of the guests have been involved in MI's journey, providing their effort and support and saw it develop into a well-recognized IGO in the sub-region. This journey was traced through the "historical walk" that commenced the celebrations, undertaken by the two key persons involved with the formation of MI – Rt. Hon. James Bolger, the 35th Prime Minister of New Zealand, and Dr. Vanchai Vatanasapt, the Founder of MI. Both emphasized in their speeches that the development of the people of the GMS requires everyone's participation.

Similarly, building adequate capacity to address the developmental challenges of the GMS requires sharing experiences and learning from one another and of course celebrating together – which is what the events of August 28th were all about. Everyone gathered together for the common purpose of looking back on the performance of the institute over the past two decades and used the experience to reflect how our current mission and strategies need to evolve to address the demands of our core constituents in the context of recent developments in the sub-region. Dr. Jean Pierre Verbiest, an honorary advisor to MI Council declared that he is confident MI will be a unique organization within the sub-region going forward.

We spoke to a lot of our distinguished guests during the celebrations. Unsurprisingly, all of them, in both their individual and institutional capacities, felt they have a great role to play in supporting MI into the future. The academic institutions for example, represented by Dr. Kittichai Triratanasirichai of Khon Kaen University and Dr. Le Van Thuyet of Hue University, Vietnam, reiterated their support for training of the next generation of researchers and policy-makers within their respective institutions and providing resources and expertise to fill current gaps in the MI training portfolio.

It was clear that everyone present was on board with MI's vision for the future, as emphasized by both the chairman of MI's Steering Committee and Council respectively, Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee and Mr. Tun Tun Naing.

As MI Executive Director Dr. Watcharas Leelawath emphasized, "We will be working toward MI's goal of being a catalyst for further development of the GMS by improving trade and investment, agricultural development and commercialization, and innovation and technological connectivity within the sub-region."

We invite everyone to join us in the next phase of MI's journey.

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Editorial

Mekong Forum: Sharing Responsibility for Common Prosperity



Mekong Institute recently held the Mekong Forum 2016. This served as a platform that brought together opinion and thought leaders, including development practitioners, senior policy makers, business and civic leaders, and academics who are all committed to advancing the development of the GMS. They have shared extensive success stories, identified some of the key challenges they are facing, as well as discussing solutions.

The development partners presented the real stories behind their efforts to develop capacities in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), which I hope will help us shape development cooperation in the GMS. The Forum also identified the priority needs of the GMS countries aiming to strengthen coordination. By aligning our needs and gaps with the resources and opportunities provided by development partners, we can ensure and solidify aid effectiveness in the region. This is a win for both sides.

Some of the highlights include the topic on market efficiency which is very important. The involvement of the private sector was also pointed out; they have to be engaged if the region is to attain sustainability. However, apart from all the very significant points made on how to have a more prosperous region, the key is sharing responsibility for common prosperity. Prosperity is simply not reliant on the aid of developed nations or the implementing agencies, but on the shared responsibility that every country has to recognize and implement, to make development projects sustainable. For the implementing agencies, and intergovernmental organization, we will be the catalyst for growth in the GMS in the future.

We hope that the Forum has provided enough motivation to ignite initiatives that will push the development of the capacity of the countries in the GMS. This can be aided by the fully-formed networks of participants who have attended and are interested and involved in aid effectiveness and regional integration.

Mekong Forum 2016 – Finding the Perfect Fit

On August 29, Mekong Forum 2016 successfully took place at the Pullman Hotel in Khon Kaen, Thailand. The event, under the theme “Sharing Responsibility for a Common Prosperity”, could not have come at a better time. It was held just a day after the main event celebrating the 20th Anniversary of Mekong Institute, which saw partners and supporters of MI – both old and new – joining the celebrations at MI Annex on the evening of August 28th.

For Mekong Forum 2016, the key objective was finding the perfect fit between development needs, challenges and gaps in the GMS and the support, resources and opportunities available. Hence, participants involved key development partners from, among others, NZAP, SDC, TICA, P.R. China, Japan, Mekong-ROK and Embassy of Israel, as well as representatives of academic institutions and government officials from the GMS countries.

In his keynote address, the 35th Prime Minister of New Zealand, Rt Hon James Bolger summed up the support from the New Zealand government which started 20 years ago noting, “We’re not planning to go anywhere, we want to continue to contribute”. The Israeli Ambassador to Thailand H.E. Simon Roded declared that, “The sky is the limit for cooperation between Israel and MI and the GMS.” For development of the GMS and ASEAN, such declaration of ongoing support from key allies is very important.

The discussions provided an opportunity to hear about current projects being implemented in the GMS – how they are developing capacities and supporting the work of governments. In alignment with the goal of MI, the aim of these projects is to impact the lives of the people of these GMS countries. Farmers from some of the project sites in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand were shown to be direct beneficiaries – indicating that the benefits being received from the involvement of these partners are not stopping at the government level. As MI Council chairman Mr. Tun Tun Naing said, “The benefits of development cooperation should be for the people of the countries of the GMS.”

To narrow the developmental gaps among the GMS and ASEAN countries, it is essential to identify the specific needs of each member country in order to optimize the distribution of support. Representatives of the CLMV shared details of their national development strategies, with the aim of identifying commonalities between these and the support from development partners to ensure perfect alignment of resources to needs. As the distinguished speakers demonstrated in their discussions of development, cooperation and integration have a greater impact when there are a good fit.

MI Executive Director Dr. Watcharas Leelawath noted in his opening remarks that MI and the countries of the GMS want to be seen as partners and not just as recipients of donor funds, while the Chairman of MI Steering Committee Dr. Narongchai declared in his keynote that effective programs that meet the needs of the GMS need to be developed cooperatively – through governments, development partners and organizations such as MI. At the end, Mekong Forum 2016 concluded with the identification of priority needs, development of action-oriented ideas on how to strengthen coordination to improve performance, and a firm commitment from all stakeholders present on how to work together towards more effective integration and development of the GMS.



MEKONG FORUM 2016





20 Years of Cooperation for Development



CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF MEKONG INSTITUTE

August 28, 2016





The Right to Safe Food

Food safety has been receiving significant worldwide attention due to the increasing number of foodborne illnesses occurring every year. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) recently reported that 550 million people (7.9 percent of the world population) suffer from foodborne diseases every year, a staggering 230,000 of which are fatal.

The sad reality is that foodborne diseases affect vulnerable populations harder than other groups. According to WHO, infections caused by contaminated food have a much higher impact on those with poor or fragile health status and can easily lead to serious illness and death. For infants, pregnant women, the sick and the elderly, the consequences of foodborne diseases are usually more severe and may be deadly.

Diarrheal diseases alone kill an estimated 1.5 million children annually—most of whom are from very poor countries. These children, more often than not, are only provided two choices: to consume contaminated food or drinking water, or die from starvation.

This is precisely the scenario in the Lower Mekong Region (LMR), where the consequences of unsafe food are disastrous. While developed countries can afford to impose stricter food safety regulations and provide better access to health care facilities, developing nations—such as the LMR countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV)—are constrained by the lack of food supply, scarcity of supporting infrastructure, and the absence of effective food safety policies.

The food safety challenge in CLMV has become even more complex in the context of the emerging ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The AEC supports easier and faster trade of goods among ASEAN countries,

encouraging globalization in trade, thereby making the food chain longer and complicating foodborne disease investigation and product recall in case of outbreaks. The dilemma, therefore, is how to make trading between countries more efficient and less rigid, while at the same time imposing strict quality controls.

Shifting the Spotlight to Food Safety

At first glance it would seem that food safety is a major concern solely for scientists and medical practitioners, but going deeper into the issue shows that food safety is in fact a multi-sectoral concern. Food contamination can cause adverse effects beyond direct public health consequences—it undermines the exports of goods, tourism, the livelihoods of food handlers, and economic development in general, especially in developing countries.

The world has become increasingly aware of the consequences of unsafe food, but at the same time the need to ensure food safety is not as pressing as before. The attention of many health experts, food researchers, and even development agencies has begun shifting from solely promoting food security (i.e., ensuring that everyone has enough food to eat) to improving food safety (i.e., ensuring that food does not cause any harm to its consumers).

Mekong Institute (MI), an intergovernmental organization mandated to provide integrated human resource development initiatives in the Greater Sub-region and the New Zealand Aid Programme (NZAP), a funding agency offering support to developing countries, are among the many organizations that aim to spotlight the issue of food safety in CLMV.

Food Safety Project in CLMV

Food safety and post-harvest training courses were delivered by MI from 2012 to 2015 under the auspices of NZAP. The food safety courses were based around Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) and targeted mid-level CLMV government officials and private sector participants.

However, lessons from agricultural projects and studies in CLMV have shown that GAP systems have not proven to be effective in food value chains and do not contribute to improve food safety. Consumers lack confidence in GAP certification, while farmers have not implemented GAP systems due to their complexity and compliance requirements. A major weakness in the GAP-led approach is that there have been no other significant complementary safe food measures along the value chain in the CLMV countries to date.

To address this gap, MI and NZAP jointly implemented the Food Safety Project (FSP), an 18-month initiative which aims to train government officials in CLMV on the essentials of food safety and regulatory standards throughout various value chains, with particular emphasis on fresh produce.

Ms. Maria Theresa S. Medialdia, Director of the Agricultural Development and Commercialization (ADC) Department and Project Leader of the FSP, has been directing the project team to align its proposed activities with the overall goal of the project. “Within the project, important aspects that need to be considered include the connection of CLMV regulations to select agri-food value chains to capture higher value market opportunities, the engagement of private sector to strengthen market access, and the role of CLMV officials in applying and sharing knowledge and skills in market-focused food safety regulation development and implementation.”

While regional in scope, the project also acknowledges the country-specific concerns of each CLMV country. As such, outreach activities will be initiated under the FSP, allowing more freedom for the project to explore ways to work with each country in a more localized manner.

“The rationale of the outreach activity is to enable the project to address concerns that are, say, only happening in Cambodia. While the training programs are set in a regional context, the outreach activities, on the other hand, serve to extend these programs in a local setting tailor-fit to the needs of each particular country.”

Finally, a key feature of the project design is the use of New Zealand food safety expertise to train and advise CLMV officials on improving food regulations in select value chains. New Zealand’s safe food expertise was considered to be the most appropriate in up-scaling existing regulations to facilitate trade to more profitable markets in the targeted countries.

All these guiding principles are being realized in the hope that the project can produce genuine and visible impacts on the food safety landscape in the region.

Providing Safe Food for All

Judging from its current progress, the MI FSP team is on track to meet its objectives. Two months ago, the MI FSP team has finished conducting its Training Needs Assessment (TNA) in each CLMV country, together with two food safety experts from New Zealand. The TNA was conducted from August 8th to the 25th, where country-specific needs were identified directly with relevant government officials and private sector actors.

Following this, the “Regional Consultation Workshop on Promoting Food safety in CLMV” was held. Nineteen officials from partner ministries in CLMV were invited to share local experiences with food safety regulation in their respective countries. During the workshop, best practices, challenges, and possible areas of collaboration in securing food safety in the region were identified by the participants and strategic plans of action per country were also developed.

The TNA report and consultation workshop painted a clear picture of how the project should run in the remaining months of its implementation. However, the challenge, still, is how to address all the diverse country concerns to produce the greatest impact, given the limited timeframe.

“The pressure really is to produce impact quickly. Given the trust the government officials and other related food safety stakeholders placed in MI, we could not let them down. This is why the ADC, as the department responsible for this project, is giving its best shot to truly address concerns that are highly significant and crucial in each country—not just needs that we think are important and are easy to address.”

But amidst all the challenges, MI remains positive in its vision for the region. “The vision really is for everyone, men and women of all ages, whether rich or poor have access to safe food; that safe food, in the future, is not anymore a luxury, but a right everyone should enjoy,” Ms. Medialdia said.

Climate Change- Linking theory to practice



Climate change has become a major issue today because of its undeniable influence on sustainable development worldwide. Its impact has already gone beyond immense natural disasters. In the case of Vietnam, millions of people not only lose their homes but also their livelihoods because of the rising sea level and other calamities caused by climate change. Food productivity then decreases, affecting the country's food security. Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development is the organization tasked with ensuring the country's food security by preventing and mitigating natural disasters on behalf of society and sustainable development.

One of the key elements for successfully achieving this is learning the right measures and adopting them on time.

To this effect, Mekong Institute (MI), in collaboration with Vietnam's Monitoring Office of Program 165, organized a two-week training program on "The Impact of Climate Change on Environment and Natural Resource Management in Agricultural Sector." The training was held from August 9 to 19, 2016 at MI, and 18 government officials of Vietnam working on agriculture, rural development, and climate issues participated.



The training aimed to enhance the understanding of participants on the impact of climate change on environment and resource management, focusing specifically on agriculture, rural development, and food safety. On the first day, participants learned more about climate change and how it impacts sustainable development, followed by learning how to manage these impacts through effective international cooperation, as well as about how climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts can achieve better GMS cooperation and ASEAN integration. Lastly, the training discussed the impacts of climate change on agriculture, rural development and food safety.



The training also included structured learning visits to communities in the provinces of Kalasin, Roi Et, and Chaiyaphum of Thailand. Thailand has already begun implementing noteworthy strategies to adapt to climate change; to mitigate some of the effects that are already being felt in some sectors and to protect its farmlands, coasts and cities. The participants were able to observe some of these innovative climate adaptation and mitigation measures. Participants reflected on the lessons learned and the applicability of their learning experiences during discussion sessions over the course of the training, enabling them to come up with recommendations and identify

possible areas to strengthen climate resilience efforts in Vietnam, as well as improving its socio-ecological systems.



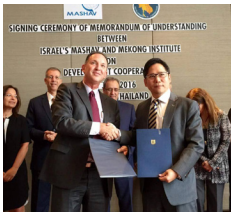
Dr. Dinh Vu Thanh

Deputy Director General, Department of Science Technology and Environment, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development

"I have learned a lot of knowledge and skills on climate change response in the agricultural sector from the training at Mekong Institute. I do think the acquired knowledge and skills will be very helpful for my work in Vietnam."

Overall the training was deemed a success. The participants were able to take advantage of the opportunity to link theoretical knowledge with the good practices of three communities. The participants were also able to learn about the cooperation framework, as well as the participation and partnership arrangements for the measures undertaken by the rural communities in Thailand.

OTHER ACTIVITIES



MOU: Mekong Institute and Mashav

Bangkok July 16, 2016 - Dr. Watcharas Leelawath, Executive Director of Mekong Institute (MI), and Ambassador Gil Haskel, Head of Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation

(MASHAV), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for regional cooperation and integration MI and MASHAV agreed to strengthen cooperation in agriculture, entrepreneurship and sustainable development between Israel and Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries.



MOU: Mekong Institute and Trade Policy and Strategy Office

Bangkok, July 28, 2016 - Mekong Institute (MI) and the Trade Policy and Strategy Office (TPSO) signed an MOU. Both parties have agreed to strengthen their cooperation by developing their academic collaboration through data exchange, research, and training.



First Governing Board Meetings for 2016

MI held its first Governing Board Meetings for 2016 on August 27 and 28 at MI Annex. The Steering Committee and Council members reviewed MI's performance in the first half of 2016. The meetings were chaired by the respective chairmen – Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee for the Steering Committee, and H.E. Mr. Tun Tun Naing for the Council.

Visit to Beijing, China

September 22 - 26, 2016, Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee, Chairman of MI Steering Committee, went on an official visit to Beijing, P.R. China. He was accompanied by Dr. Watcharas Leelawath, MI Executive Director, and MI staff. The visit was organized by the Department of International Economic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, P.R. China. They explored deliberations which included possible collaborations with relevant government organizations in Beijing to enhance the capacity of human resources in the GMS member countries.



With Mr. Tan Jian, Deputy Director-General, and Mr. Cheng Lie, Division Director of the Department of International Economic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, P.R. China.



At the Development Research Center of the State Council, P.R. China, headed by Mr. Cheng Guoqiang, Director General, International Cooperation Department.

Visit to Beijing, China



With Mr. Li Yuan, Director of Trade and Investment Division, ASEAN-China Centre.



At the National Energy Administration, P.R. China with Mr. He Yang, Deputy Director General, Department of International Affairs.

Activities under Enhancing Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises along the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) of ASEAN Mekong Sub-region (AMS) funded by Japan – ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF)



Project Fieldwork to Prepare for SME and Product Cluster Development

MI designed and implemented the Study on Market and Value Chain Mapping in nineteen provinces along the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) from May to July 2016. The study identified the SME product clusters by mapping to understand their linkage between the national, regional, and global value chains.



Regional Training on SME Cluster Development and Export Consortia Formation

MI successfully conducted a one-week regional training on “SME Cluster Development and Export Consortia Formation” from September 12 - 17, 2016. The participants gained knowledge and skills on the interrelated themes on Cluster Identification Need and Development of Potential Clusters, SME Cluster Development Plan and Business Plan, Export Consortia Formation, and Cluster Financing. The participants also developed Action Plans (AP) on SME cluster development.



Regional Seminar on ASEAN Economic Community : Sharing Perspective, Knowledge and Experience

MI successfully conducted a regional seminar on “ASEAN Economic Community: Sharing Perspective, Knowledge and Experience” on September 19, 2016. The seminar created an interactive platform for all participants to share knowledge and perspective and exchange experience in ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and its Blueprints 2015 - 2025 from the perspectives of the four countries (Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam).

REFLECTIONS ON THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY



Rt Hon James B. Bolger, ONZ

The 35th Prime Minister of New Zealand

“I can say with total confidence, this has been a remarkable 20 years. It gives me great pride to have been associated with this 20 years although at a distance. I wish you every success as you go forward because the need never ends, it changes. New Zealand can provide support, but here on the ground in Thailand and in the sub-region, you can drive it forward. I wish you every success as you go forward.”



Dr. Vanchai Vattanasapt

Founder of Mekong Institute

“We have planted something that I call GMS spirit in this area; to build understanding, friendship, trust and cooperation. At the 20th Anniversary of MI, it’s growing and growing.”



Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee

Former Minister of Energy and Minister of Commerce of Thailand

“From the beginning, I have had confidence in the role of MI, through the years particularly when MI reached its teens. There were problems and difficulties, but I have never lost the confidence that MI can contribute to the development of the GMS. Now reaching the age of 20, the age considered to be an adult, expected to have more responsibility, I think MI is ready for the task. Looking to the future, MI will be able to deliver more comprehensive programs of human resource development including training networking and research. As MI cooperates and collaborates more with other learning institutions, MI can really make more impact on human resources in the GMS. So, Happy 20th Birthday, wishing you the best for many more years to come!”

INSIGHTS FROM THE MEKONG FORUM



H.E. Mr. Simon Roded
Ambassador of Israel to Thailand

“This is the beginning of a wonderful friendship and I see that the sky is the limit. If we could collaborate with local governments and institutes like Mekong Institute and turning this know how into successful business, we’ve got the good of the world, and the sky is the limit.”



Mr. Brent Rapson
Manager, New Zealand Aid Programme to Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand

“New Zealand has worked with the Mekong Institute for a long time. We want to be part of the projects. It’s about working together as partners, talking together about what we want to achieve together, what Mekong Institute wants to achieve and how New Zealand can support that. A certain part of that will be through funding but another will be through technical expertise from New Zealand.”



Mr. Li Hong
Permanent Representative of P.R. China to UNESCAP, Thailand

“The environment for development, the dynamics of the region is changing. We have to adapt to this new situation for MI. One of the aspects of changing is we need to emphasize changing the concept for training. We have very rich expertise for training in the past decades and now we should develop this capacity to a more upgraded human resources development. Secondly, it is very important for the regional countries, who have strong demand for science, technology, and innovation capacity building; we should adapt our program to meet the demands of the regional countries. We need to think over how to provide such capacity building for the regional countries. MI should strengthen its partnerships with all these institutions, strengthen coordination and cooperation with all the new and existing mechanisms and that will make the objective of common responsibility and common prosperity more feasible for our region.”

Alumni Quotes



Activity: Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Rural Development, August 1-12, 2016

Mr. Dai Bin, Engineer and Section Chief, China

“I think the training course greatly satisfied my expectation and helped me form a clear understanding of poverty alleviation. The most useful for my job was the evaluation and analysis method for poverty alleviation. Three things I liked most in this training were the smiling place of Thailand, the warm welcome, and the practical course and field survey.”



Ms. Lai Thi Lan- Lecturer, Vietnam University of Agriculture, Vietnam

“As a participant from a developing country, I found that this training course provided me necessary and useful knowledge, as well as hospitality and friendship. The most useful aspect to my work is the knowledge on poverty and how it is different in each country and each period. Therefore, in order to alleviate poverty sustainably, there should be a deep understanding. To reach that objective, I have to apply a lot of knowledge and skills from this course such as 4 levels of thinking and PRA tools.

The things I like the most were the methods of training; they were diverse and flexible. I also liked the field trip to Sam Sung district to apply PRA in the project. Lastly, I liked the support from facilitators of the training course.”



Activity: The Impact of Climate Change on Environment and Natural Resource Management in Agricultural Sector, August 9-19, 2016

Ms. Nguyen Thi Huyen, Deputy Director General, Vietnam

“I have enjoyed a special week of training in Khon Kaen, Thailand. It is a great opportunity for me to meet with new friends, to learn new knowledge and to share my experiences from Vietnam. I hope I will have a chance to come back to share my learning by utilizing the knowledge I obtained from the training at Mekong Institute.”

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