

**Draft Minutes of Meeting**  
**Special Steering Committee and Coordinating Agencies Meeting**

November 16, 2023

Junior Ballroom 2, 3rd Floor Pullman Grande Sukhumvit Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

by Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn, Mekong Institute (MI) Executive Director (ED)

2. ED Suriyan Vichitlekarn explained and elaborated on the agenda. He acknowledged the presence of all attendees including the members of the Steering Committee (SC) and the Coordinating Agencies (CA). He mentioned that the meeting is particularly noteworthy due to the presence of CA members who typically participate either virtually or at the sidelines of council meetings.

**3. Opening Remarks**

By Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee, Steering Committee Chairman

4. In his welcome remarks, Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee individually welcomed all delegates. He reminded the committee that all the agreements made in the meeting would be official for the Council's consideration or approval. He reminded the members of the importance of the meeting, which is to review the MI Strategic Plan (SP) 2021-2023 and consider matters for adjustments or implementation for the remaining two years of the strategic plan.
5. Dr. Narongchai reminded the members of MI's capacity development model aimed at fostering development in GMS countries. He covered various topics related to the development of the Mekong countries vis-a-vis the mandate of the Mekong Institute, setting the context of the meeting.
6. He emphasized the importance of development areas, including agriculture and commercialization, along with adopting a market economy and promoting free trade for economic strengthening. He mentioned that Mekong countries also prioritized environmental and energy sustainability in line with global commitments, and gave attention to cross-cutting issues, including labor imbalances, notably in countries like Thailand.
7. He discussed the labor mobility challenges, particularly for migrant workers, with efforts outlined to support Thai workers facing difficulties abroad.
8. The impact of COVID-19 in accelerating digital technology was acknowledged, leading to plans for intensified efforts in digital transformation for development.

9. Concerns about increasing macroeconomic uncertainties, influenced by global conflicts, were raised.
10. In his remarks, global economic differentiation was noted, with a focus on external trade and infrastructure development. The importance of cooperation amid global uncertainties was stressed, recognizing the need for collaborative efforts to navigate challenges effectively.
11. **Presentation on Results of the Midterm Review (MTR) of MI Strategic Plan 2021-2025**
12. **Snapshots of Progress and Achievements of the 1st Half of MI Strategic Plan 2021-2025 By ED Suriyan Vichitlekarn**
13. ED Suriyan presented MI's achievements from Jan 2021 - Jun 2023, the completed period of the SP's implementation. He mentioned that the presentation aimed to give the SC and CA members background information before dwelling on the key findings and recommendations of the SP's MTR report.
14. He presented MI's evolution from being a project in 1996 to an intergovernmental organization (IGO) in 2009. He noted MI's new regional mandates including serving as fund coordinator for the Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation Fund (MKCF), network coordinator for the GMS Knowledge Network, and as an interim secretariat of the Ayeyawady - Chao Phraya - Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS).
15. He presented the results framework for MI SP 2021-2025, highlighting the strategic goals of contributing to GMS development and strengthening institutional services.
16. He outlined the current and overall achievements of the SP. He mentioned that COVID-19 impacted MI's activities during the first half of the year, from which MI integrated pandemic response and recovery into its work program. MI's shift towards result-based management, expansion of scope, and alignment with GMS programs were noted. Successes in enhancing visibility and financial accountability were highlighted. Contributions to GMS development, particularly in agriculture, digital cross-border trade, SME development, tourism, and environmental sustainability, were discussed. ED Suriyan mentioned key areas of focus for MI's future efforts including labor mobility, social inclusion, and digital economy and innovation.
17. **Findings and Recommendations of the MTR By Dr. Pham Thai Hung, Regional Independent Consultant**
18. Dr. Pham Thai Hung comprehensively discussed the background, process, key findings, and recommendations of the MI SP 2021-2025 MTR.

19. He explained that the SP has undergone a comprehensive MTR process, aiming to dissect its efficacy and address pertinent issues. He mentioned that the MTR aimed to uncover the SP's core elements, assess its successes, and identify areas for refinement.
20. The MTR has several key findings, portraying a journey marked by both turbulence and resilience. Despite a stormy start, the plan has demonstrated continued relevance in the face of emerging challenges. Notably, institutional initiatives have begun yielding tangible results, showcasing the plan's adaptability and impact. However, there are still long paths ahead, with challenges persisting and demanding strategic attention.
21. In response to the findings, the following recommendations emerged. Firstly, the call to "break the limits" urges a departure from conventional approaches, encouraging innovative thinking to surmount challenges. Secondly, the imperative to consider the "unthinkable" emphasizes the need for audacious strategies and creative solutions to propel the SP forward. These recommendations aim to foster a dynamic and forward-thinking approach to addressing the evolving landscape and ensuring the plan's sustained effectiveness.
22. **Observation on the Findings and Recommendations of the MTR from Mekong Institute Secretariat by ED Suriyan Vichitlekarn**
23. ED Suriyan shared the observations of the MI Secretariat to the MTR key findings and recommendations to provide inputs and feedback which SC members may consider during their deliberations.
24. He recalled that MI's mission is clear and focused as stated in the MI Charter: "To contribute through HRD and capacity building to the acceleration of sustainable economic and social development and poverty alleviation in the GMS and promote regional cooperation and integration." The SP, subject to this MTR process, aims to expand MI's mission, particularly in human resource development and capacity building to address socioeconomic development, poverty alleviation, and regional cooperation and integration.
25. He explained the evolving context of the GMS. Consequently, the strategic plan must adapt to reflect these changes and evolving development.
26. ED Suriyan presented several observations and proposals. First, MI needs to focus on unique contributions, avoiding duplication of enhanced capacities in the region. The diverse development stages within GMS must be acknowledged and catered to accordingly, considering emerging issues like green development and climate change. Furthermore, MI needs to recognize the increasing number of capacity development service delivery agencies in the region and redefine its role as a service provider for achieving countries.

27. ED Suriyan also emphasized the need for transformative changes, suggesting a proactive "dual-track approach" to address both immediate issues within the current strategic plan and prepare for more structural changes in the medium to long term. This includes establishing subcommittees to examine transformative changes and assess organizational structures, salaries, benefits, and other key areas.
28. Specific attention was drawn to leadership and governance, proposing a review of the representation in the council to ensure diverse perspectives. The creation of a technical advisory committee or task force was suggested to enhance research agendas and development directions.
29. MI's role as a training center was acknowledged, but there is a call to adjust training programs to cater to the specific needs of countries at different development stages. MI is encouraged to become a regional thought leader and knowledge network, generating knowledge and supporting policy implementation.
30. Lastly, ED Suriyan highlighted the importance of partnership and resource mobilization beyond budget considerations, tapping into networks to identify and deliver services. The steering committee is invited to consider these proposals and provide guidance on immediate implementation during the last two years of the strategic plan and mapping strategies for the medium to long term.
31. **Open Discussion of the Steering Committee Members on MTR Recommendations for Submission to and Approval of the MI Council**
32. Following a 15-minute coffee break, the Steering Committee Chair extended an invitation to the members to raise any questions or seek clarification on the MTR presentation. However, no questions were raised. Given that the report had been circulated to the members, and the MI Secretariat had already received preliminary comments, the committee proceeded to the next agenda item: providing feedback from each country.
33. **Cambodia - Feedback from Mr. Hang Suvidya, Deputy Secretary-General, General Secretariat for Population and Development, Ministry of Planning**
34. Mr. Hang Suvidya explained that the MTR recommendations proposed may pose challenges in terms of implementation within the limited timeframe. Strengthening MI as a robust institution, capable of providing substantial support to member countries and the broader region, is crucial. This necessitates sufficient financial backing and expertise, as highlighted by both the independent consultant and the Committee Chair.
35. Cambodia expressed that addressing cross-cutting issues such as labor mobility and connectivity is paramount. Recognizing the variations in socioeconomic development among different countries, particularly bridging the gap between countries like Cambodia and Lao PDR, is essential for facilitating development. The aspiration for Cambodia to

transition from a lower-middle-income country to an upper-middle-income country by 2030 adds another layer to the complexity of cross-cutting issues.

36. In summary, while acknowledging the ambitious vision set forth, Cambodia explained that it is crucial to ensure that the MTR recommendations are practically attainable within the specified time frame. Financial support, expertise, and strategic approaches to cross-cutting issues will be pivotal in realizing MI's objectives and contributing to the development of member countries.

37. **P. R. China - Mr. Yang Jun, Assistant Permanent Representative of China to ESCAP, Embassy of the People's Republic of China, Bangkok, Thailand (On behalf of Mr. Ke Yousheng)**

38. Mr. Yang Jun started by mentioning that he was honored to represent Mr. Ke, the steering committee member of China, in the special meeting.

39. China commended the work of MI over the past three years. Despite challenges ranging from the pandemic to political conflicts and global economic uncertainties, MI, under the leadership of ED Suriyan, has demonstrated resilience with unwavering support from member states. The institutional strengthening measures and collaborative efforts have allowed MI to overcome these challenges, leading to notable achievements in various activities, workshops, governmental meetings, and policy research.

40. China acknowledged the positive contribution made by MI, hosting events such as the Mekong Forum and organizing the MI 25th-anniversary. Despite facing financial deficits, MI turned the situation around, showcasing its adaptability and resilience.

41. China expressed satisfaction with the quality and comprehensiveness of the MTR report, which consolidates information from various sources. It appreciated the report's reflection on progress, achievements, lessons learned, and recommendations for future implementation of the SP.

42. Several key points were emphasized in China's feedback:

43. *Prioritizing Member States.* As an intergovernmental organization, MI's foundation lies in member states. China recommends MI prioritize member states' needs, enhance communication, and promptly address concerns.

44. *Capacity Development.* China recognizes capacity development as MI's comparative advantage and supports the diversification of services. However, it emphasizes that capacity development should not be viewed negatively but as a strength. China encourages MI to become an international benchmark in capacity development, deepening technical expertise, and researching effective organizational approaches.

45. *Institutional Strengthening.* While supporting MI's efforts in institutional strengthening, China urges careful consideration to avoid complicating MI's governance and management structures. Any necessary adjustments to MI's structure should undergo thorough analysis and discussion before submission to the MI Council.
46. *Expansion of Development Partnerships.* China supports MI's initiative to expand development partnerships and funding resources. However, it emphasizes the importance of ensuring that such expansions serve MI's mission and functions effectively, contributing to the implementation of the SP.
47. *Commitment to Regional Development.* China encourages MI to remain committed to promoting regional economic and social development. It stresses the need to understand geopolitical dynamics clearly, avoiding influences that may jeopardize operational development and cooperation.
48. China reaffirmed its strong support for MI's work and expressed its commitment to standing together with member countries to address challenges and seize opportunities. It emphasized the importance of promoting a peaceful and prosperous community with a shared future in the region.
49. **Lao PDR - Mr. Khamphinh Philakone, Deputy Director General, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vientiane**
50. Mr. Khamphinh Philakone expressed his gratitude for the excellent organization of the meeting. He commended the efforts of the MI team in implementing the SP 2021-2025, as reflected in the comprehensive MTR report.
51. The representative expressed support for the report findings and hoped for its finalization after incorporating comments and suggestions from member countries, intending to present it at the upcoming board meeting next month.
52. Regarding the report's recommendations, the representative emphasized the significance of partnership and progression towards 2030. He highlighted the unique challenges faced by some member countries, specifically Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Myanmar, still classified as Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Given the ongoing impact of COVID-19 and economic challenges, achieving the goal of graduating from LDC status by 2030 may be challenging. The representative proposed aligning MI's activities to provide targeted support for LDCs, addressing development gaps among GMS member countries.
53. The representative pointed to their country's strategies for sustainable development, suggesting MI expand its activities to support LDCs, considering global development agendas. He echoed the importance of addressing specific needs and designing programs accordingly, in line with recommendations from other member countries. The

representative expressed gratitude and looked forward to collaborative efforts to enhance MI's impact on regional development.

54. **Myanmar - Dr. Aung Moe Chai, Deputy Director General, Foreign Economic Relations Department, Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations**

55. Dr. Aung Moe Chai expressed gratitude to Dr. Hung for the comprehensive presentation. Acknowledging the growing significance of MI as a crucial diplomatic support organization for GMS countries, Dr. Aung agreed with the need to strengthen MI and enhance its efficiency.

56. While generally endorsing the MTR report, Dr. Aung suggested a more balanced approach and equal participation of member countries. Myanmar appreciated the current efforts but emphasized the importance of continuous engagement.

57. Looking ahead, Dr. Aung proposed new technical assistance projects in areas such as public health, agriculture, and e-commerce for the remaining 2.5 years of the strategic plan.

58. Myanmar congratulated MI on its past performance and expressed anticipation for future strategies based on the current issues and challenges faced by member countries. Dr. Aung echoed the call for capacity building, aligning with the sentiments shared by Cambodia and P. R. China.

59. **Thailand - Mrs. Arunee Hiam, Deputy Director General, Thailand International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

60. Mrs. Arunee Hiam offered several comments and recommendations during the discussion. She noted a perceived focus on organizational management in the recommendations rather than the strategic plan's three thematic areas. She emphasized the importance of addressing current regional challenges, such as human trafficking and the need for policy advocacy.

61. Mrs. Arunee acknowledged MI's role as a reliable implementing agency but suggested improvements in post-evaluation training and curriculum development. Regarding research, she agreed that MI should be a think tank, collaborating with academic institutes and providing policy recommendations. She expressed reservations about seeking philanthropic sources and cautioned against overburdening MI with diverse tasks.

62. Thailand's key recommendations include aligning training course costs with local standards, emphasizing MI's role as a policy-level think tank, updating course outlines to match regional context, encouraging member countries to contribute more, proposing projects for multilateral funding, and maximizing the use of governing board meetings for policy advocacy.

63. Thailand also suggested proactive project proposals to donors and emphasized the importance of country ownership and collaboration among member countries for MI's success.

64. **Vietnam - Mr. Nguyen Viet Ha, Official, Foreign Economic Relations Department, Ministry of Planning and Investment**

65. Mr. Nguyen, in response to the presentation, expressed appreciation for the comprehensive review and outlined additional suggestions. He proposed leveraging MI's role as the coordinator for the GMS Knowledge Network to diversify training courses by organizing them in different countries within the region.

66. Mr. Nguyen emphasized the need to enrich activities by addressing emerging issues such as climate change and net-zero emissions.

67. The representative suggested recruiting more technical experts to enhance MI's capabilities gradually. However, he acknowledged that building a large team may take time.

68. To expedite progress, Vietnam recommended relying on MI's current comparative advantage—its reputation. Mr. Nguyen proposed establishing partnerships with external experts and utilizing MI's reputation to secure projects and contracts. Additionally, he highlighted the potential for providing consultative services for investment projects funded by donors or governments, generating additional revenue for MI's activities and capacity-building efforts.

69. **Summary of Recommendations - ED Suriyan**

70. In summary, ED Suriyan highlighted several key points discussed during the meeting:

71. The Steering Committee acknowledges the findings and recommendations from the midterm review with satisfaction. The comprehensive review provides a basis for reporting to the council.

72. There is a need to further examine the MI's contribution to GMS development and refine how development and cross-cutting themes align with the individual needs of GMS countries.

73. Organizational strengthening and management recommendations are supported, with a suggestion to move towards multi-year programs or portfolio management instead of relying on short-term projects.



74. The role of MI as the regional coordinator of the GMS Knowledge Network can be leveraged to tap into networks of institutions and enhance technical capacity.
75. It is crucial to address the specific development needs of LDCs in the GMS region to facilitate their effective contribution to regional cooperation.
76. Recommendations related to medium and long-term institutional strengthening require deeper discussions and careful assessment before submission to the council.
77. Further discussions on persistent issues, challenges, and structural changes are needed, with an acknowledgment that not all conclusions will be reached in the current meeting.
78. ED Suriyan informed the committee that a summary of the discussion will be submitted to all members for review and comments by the following week.
- 79. Updates on Upcoming MI Events by Ms. Pornwilai Pumira, MI's Partnership and Resources Mobilization Manager**
80. Ms. Pornwilai Pumira discussed the specific arrangements and agenda for the upcoming Development Partners' Meeting 2023 and the MI Governing Board Meeting 2/2023
- 81. Closing Remarks by Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee, Steering Committee Chairman**
82. Dr. Narongchai closed the Steering Committee meeting, highlighting key points. He acknowledged the significant attendance and interest from various countries and partners in the upcoming Development Partners Meeting as a positive sign for MI and urged members to capitalize on the momentum.

## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

### **Steering Committee Members**

<b>MI Steering Committee Chairman</b>	Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee MI Council Member (Business Representative) Bangkok, Thailand
<b>Royal Government of Cambodia</b>	Mr. Hang Suvidya Deputy Secretary-General General Secretariat for Population and Development Ministry of Planning Phnom Penh, Cambodia
<b>Government of the People's Republic of China</b>	Mr. Yang Jun Assistant Permanent Representative of China to ESCAP Embassy of the People's Republic of China Bangkok, Thailand (In place of Mr. Ke Yousheng)
<b>Government of Lao PDR</b>	Mr. Khamphinh Philakone Deputy Director General Department of Economic Affairs Ministry of Foreign Affairs Vientiane, Lao PDR
<b>Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar</b>	Dr. Aung Moe Chai Deputy Director General Foreign Economic Relations Department Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar
<b>Royal Thai Government</b>	Mrs. Arunee Hiam Deputy Director General Thailand International Cooperation Agency Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bangkok, Thailand
<b>Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam</b>	Mr. Nguyen Viet Ha Official Foreign Economic Relations Department Ministry of Planning and Investment Hanoi Vietnam
<b>Mekong Institute</b>	Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn MI Executive Director

## Coordinating Agent Members

<b>Royal Government of Cambodia</b>	Mr. Thanh Chantola Deputy Director of Training and Development Department General Secretariat for Population and Development Ministry of Planning Phnom Penh, Cambodia
<b>Government of the People's Republic of China</b>	Mr. Li Shengyuan Vice Director Yunnan Academy of Science and technology for Development Kunming City, Yunnan Province, P.R. China
	Ms. Li Wen Director Yunnan Lancang – Mekong Research and Coordination Office Yunnan Academy of Science and Technology Development Kunming City, Yunnan Province, P.R. China
<b>Government of Lao PDR</b>	Mr. Bomba Phapmexay Official Regional Economic Cooperation Division Department of Economic Affairs Ministry of Foreign Affairs Vientiane, Lao PDR
<b>Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar</b>	Ms. Eaindray Kyaw Official Foreign Economic Relations Department Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar

## Observers

<b>Royal Thai Government</b>	Mr. Sinpira Nakchamrassri Development Cooperation Officer (Practitioner Level) Thailand International Cooperation Agency Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bangkok, Thailand
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## MI Head of Department

<b>Mekong Institute</b>	Ms. Maria Theresa Medialdia Program Director Agricultural Development and Commercialization Department
	Mr. Madhurjya Kumar Dutta Program Director Trade and Investment Facilitation Department

	Ms. Wang Jian Program Manager Sustainable Energy and Environment Department
	Mr. Buth Rithy Director Finance and Operations Department

### **Independent Regional Consultant**

	Dr. Pham Thai Hung Independent Regional Consultant
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### **MI Secretariat**

<b>Mekong Institute</b>	Mr. Mohammad Halimur Rahman Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Specialist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Unit Greater Mekong Community Affairs Department
	Ms. Pornwilai Pumira Partnership and Resource Mobilization Manager Partnership and Resource Mobilization Unit Greater Mekong Community Affairs Department
	Ms. Anna Leigh V. Anillo Communications and Knowledge Management Coordinator Communications and Knowledge Management Unit Greater Mekong Community Affairs Department
	Ms. Natchaya Potiwat General Service Supervisor General Service Unit Finance and Operations Department
	Mr. Narathip Dahan Senior IT Support Officer Finance and Operations Department
	Mr. Tanadech Sriwanchai Executive Secretary Office of Executive Director
	Mr. Thanatatch Kittisakdamrong Assistant to Steering Committee Chairman

