

The Mekong People

Rich Human Diversity

A combination of rich natural and human resources make the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) an area of enormous economic potential, yet many of its inhabitants remain poor. Of the 255 million people living in the Subregion, about three fourths live in rural areas and survive on subsistence or semi-subsistence agriculture. About 35 million people—one in every seven—are undernourished. Modern changes have come slowly especially in the more remote areas where most children under five are underweight. These communities face structural impediments that have made it difficult to achieve sustained economic growth.

The people that presently occupy the lowlands of the GMS are the ethnic Khmers of Cambodia, the Lao of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), the Burman of Myanmar, the Thai of Thailand, the Kinh of Viet Nam, and the Han of Yunnan Province in the People's Republic of China (PRC). These groups total about 180 million. With the onset of peace in the 1990s, they experienced rapid changes and improvements in living standards and conditions, and there has been a gradual shift from subsistence agriculture to more diversified economic activities.

Approximately 200 ethnic minority groups totaling about 75 million live in remote mountain areas, mostly along shared national borders.¹ Many inhabit the water-

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¹ For details see ADB. 2004. *Greater Mekong Subregion Atlas of the Environment*. Manila.

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sheds along the Mekong River and its tributaries. They live on a combination of subsistence agriculture, hunting, and limited trade in forest products. Because of their geographic isolation, they have little or no access to basic health and education services and often have high levels of both income and non-income poverty. A new poverty paradigm appears to be emerging in these remote locations because people are facing environmental, population, and commercial pressures on the natural resources that have traditionally provided their livelihoods. Forests and fisheries no longer provide adequate subsistence due to overuse and exploitation. The plight of these poor—many of whom are women—can be improved by managing natural resources on a sustainable basis. An example is the Tonle Sap Environmental Management Project² that provides community-based management of natural resources supported by an improved regulatory framework.

Sharing Natural Resources

The ecology of the Mekong River basin is highly complex. The river originates in the Qinghai-Tibet plateau at 5,000 meters above sea level and passes snow-covered mountains, tropical rainforests, and marshy wetlands on its 4,880 kilometer trajectory through the PRC, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Thailand, and Viet Nam. It finally empties into the sea after splitting into scores of tributaries in the highly productive rice growing delta of southern Viet Nam. The river basin encompasses vast floodplains in Cambodia and Viet Nam that remain inundated for up to six months each year. The Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia depends on the annual flooding cycle of the Mekong. The fish in the Tonle Sap provide as much as 70% of the protein intake of Cambodia's population and 10% of its gross domestic product .

Structural interventions at various locations within the basin such as multipurpose reservoirs, flood control works, river channel deepening, and flow diversions have impacts

² The Tonle Sap Environmental Management Project was approved by the Asian Development Bank in October 2002.

that extend well beyond their sites. Cumulatively they can be detrimental to fish migration and breeding, to the replenishment of groundwater, to the regeneration of wetlands, and to the seasonal flooding of farmland over vast parts of the basin. The countries downstream bear the brunt of these negative effects. These impacts must be assessed and monitored. On the Tonle Sap, for example, such activities could permanently lower water levels or change flooding patterns.

These interrelated environmental concerns underscore the cross-border challenges posed by the Mekong River. Balancing the competing interests of flood control, power generation, natural resource exploitation, and environmental protection thus takes on a special significance. These concerns warrant a basin-wide approach to economic development, the protection of livelihoods, and natural resource management. This is reflected in the studies undertaken by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in designing flood control measures within the integrated water management system of the Mekong basin. At the same time, ADB is helping regional governments strengthen capacity through a strategic environmental framework that is a combination of analytical, participatory, and policy-oriented processes that guide investment decisions so that projects promote sustainable development that conserves natural resources and biodiversity.

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Millennium Development Goals

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) concern human development and poverty reduction and are to be achieved by 2015. Most social indicators have improved in line with the MDGs since the inception of the GMS program in 1992, but progress has been uneven, and in some cases there have been relapses. The incidence of poverty remains high in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam. Most importantly, however, fewer people suffer from hunger: the proportion of undernourished people decreased from 23% in 1990–1992 to 15% in 1998–2000. Much progress has also been made toward universal

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primary education. The net primary enrollment rate rose to an average of 89% in 2000–2001, and that in turn resulted in increases in youth literacy rates from 93% in 1990 to 95% in 2001. Cambodia and Viet Nam have the Subregion’s highest net primary school enrollment rates despite lower per-capita incomes.

There have also been substantial but again uneven declines in mortality. The average under-five mortality rate of 69 per 1,000 live births in 1990 fell by 19% to 56 per 1,000 in 2001; however, Cambodia’s child mortality rate deteriorated from 115 to 138 per 1,000 live births between 1990 and 2001. Maternal mortality rates in the Lao PDR and Cambodia are very high at 650 and 537 per 100,000 live births, respectively. Fewer pregnancies, adequate nutrition, and better health care would help to reduce these rates.

Gender equality and empowerment of women are major priorities for the region. Only 55% of women in Cambodia and 69% in the Lao PDR enter secondary school. The situation is worse at the tertiary level, although Myanmar is a notable exception.

Communicable diseases are a prime concern, and HIV/AIDS is a grave problem. In 1999, the number of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS had reached 75,000 in Thailand alone, with another 43,000 in Myanmar and 13,000 in Cambodia. Malaria and tuberculosis are also major killers.

In promoting social development, most investments in the education and health sectors are through national programs supported by ADB and other donors, yet the ease with which diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS are communicated across borders means that regional approaches are particularly appropriate. Gender equality also has regional dimensions because of migration and other factors.

Promoting Gender Equality

ADB accords high priority to gender equality and empowerment of women. Major efforts are underway in support of these objectives through ADB-supported national programs in the GMS. At the regional level there has been a focus on

exchanging views and coordinating efforts to better understand regional dimensions to complement the attention provided under national programs. At one level, this has involved encouraging greater participation of women under human resource, agriculture, and rural development programs. At another level, more resources are being directed, often in cooperation with other multilateral and bilateral agencies, in combating human trafficking and exploitation of migrant workers, practices that disproportionately affect women. These are critical issues in the GMS given the vulnerability of women in isolated communities as access to markets and roads improves. It will be important to develop a framework to curtail and prevent these problems.

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Reducing Poverty

Economic growth is an essential prerequisite for achieving the MDGs. It creates opportunities to cut income poverty and increases the resources available for investments in nutrition, health, and education that depend on government funding. However, economic growth alone may not be sufficient. The strong links between economic growth and poverty reduction are moderated by policy choices and structural impediments. Consequently, the MDGs and the GMS strategy also focus on public policies to reduce the multifaceted causes of non-income poverty.³ Recent ADB research demonstrates that providing transport and energy contributes meaningfully to improving access to education and health services.⁴

3 See United Nations Development Programme. 2003. *Human Development Report 2003*. New York.

4 Cook, C. 2003. *Assessing the Impact of Transport and Energy Infrastructure on Poverty Reduction*. Manila: ADB.