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## THE MEKONG SUBREGION'S GROWTH PARADIGM AND COMMITMENTS TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES

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### **Abstract**

*Mekong nations have enjoyed rapid economic growth and millions of their citizens have escaped extreme poverty. Part of this growth is owed to unsustainable economic models of natural resources extraction. This article discusses the notion of inequality and challenges experienced by citizens of the 6 riparian nations that are directly dependent on the rich resources of the Mekong river and its ecosystems for their livelihoods, given the reduction of the river's ecological integrity. The future of the Mekong lies with its dynamic people, affordable technologies, inclusive and resilient management of the Mekong River Basin as well as strong collaboration among various Mekong institutions and platforms. It is argued that more secure and prosperous Mekong societies can be attained if nations pursue joint sustainable landscape-level planning and development of the Mekong and its riverine systems. Important factors to consider are the ecological outcomes, the creation of safe spaces for meaningful discourse with decision makers, and a more equitable sharing of resources that respect the rights, livelihoods and ways of life of all Mekong people*

### **The Mekong Subregion's Economic Growth and Reduced Ecological Integrity**

Over the last decades, Mekong nations have successfully lifted millions of individuals out of poverty. China and Thailand have attained upper-middle-income status, while Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos have climbed up the economic ladder as lower-middle-income countries. The Greater Mekong sub-region (GMS) is characterized by rapid population growth and urbanization, growing inter-connected economies, changing geo-politics, including the increasing importance of Asian institutions. In addition, it is defined by the rise of investment and trade within the region, and the continued emphasis of large-scale natural resource exploitation that contributes significantly to economic growth. The region's rapid economic growth continues to be built upon a paradigm of resource extraction and development, including on major river systems. This comprises the damming of rivers for hydropower development, water diversion for irrigation, forest clearing, land use changes, mining comprising of riverbed mining and dredging for navigation and

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disposal of waste/pollution. Collectively, these activities pose threats that undermine the health of river systems. Key learnings from the *People Protecting their Ecosystem in the Lower Mekong* (PEM) project (2013-2019), implemented by Oxfam, have highlighted that at the Mekong watershed level, rapid land use change, degradation of forest and riverine ecosystems, and water pollution, due to a lack of control in waste management from industrial and agro-business development, have caused the deterioration of certain parts of the Mekong river systems.

### **Transboundary Water Resources of the Mekong and CLV Development Triangle**

There are 13 provinces across Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam that share administrative borders and physical borders with the Mekong river. They fall within the so-called Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Areas (CLV-DTA), which includes the Mekong and 3S rivers. CLV-DTA is 1 of the 5 socio-economic development corridors of the GMS. The Mekong river is an international waterway that flows near 6 countries, cutting directly and indirectly across to the 5 GMS development triangle areas. The CLV-DTA connects to the Sekong river system that has distributaries from Laos and Vietnam and is met in Stung Treng in Cambodia. Between its countries, the CLV-DTA aims to foster transboundary development in the following areas: (i) investment promotion; (ii) trade facilitation; (iii) cooperation with enterprises; (iv) industrial master planning; (v) small and medium-sized enterprise development; (vi) human resource development; and (vii) rural development (Ishida, 2012). While the CLV-DTA has the potential to bring further social and economic development to the region, this development may have consequences, resulting from risks and challenges such as: (i) risks of using unsafe chemicals in agriculture; (ii) challenges in increasing the demand in natural rubber that could lead to further deforestation; (iii) challenges in the extraction of mineral resources; and (iv) challenges to hydropower generation. These risks and challenges would place additional pressures on the Mekong and especially the Sekong River system, including degrading the quality of watersheds, water pollution and the over-use of water resources.

The major rivers, their watersheds and floodplains continue to play an essential role on the rural livelihoods of the majority living across the Lower Mekong Countries. The rivers of the region offer multiple resources that provide water for vital ecosystems that support the integrity of biodiversity, offer critical sources of food and income, allow energy to be produced through hydropower, provide sand for the construction industry and enable routes for trade and environmental services. The Lower Mekong inland water transport industry for cargo and passengers was valued at 6.8B USD for cargo (2007), transporting an estimated 69.4M passengers and employing approximately 750,000 individuals (in 2014). The annual value of wetlands was estimated at 2.9B USD (2010) and for capture fisheries 11.2B USD (first-sale price). In addition, an estimated 3.33M individuals were directly involved in capture fisheries. Smaller and less

documented industries, such as sand mining, were valued at an estimated 175M USD annually (MRC, 2019).

The cumulative impact of river resource exploitation rarely considers the complex ecological, economic and cultural values with which it is associated, and whose impact is only be seen downstream and at a distance from the actual site of development. Recent studies have indicated that the Mekong Delta is sinking, owing to reduced sedimentation caused by disruption to the flow of sediment. This is due to obstructions such as hydro-electricity dams and excessive sand mining. A team from Utrecht University, estimated that at its current rate of subsidence, the Mekong Delta could be under 0.8 meters of sea within 57 years, forcing over 12 million people to relocate. Moreover, the adverse effects of climate change are leading to rising sea levels, and reduced sediment reaching the Mekong Delta, resulting in saltwater intrusion, which is majorly impacting the lives, livelihoods and ecosystem of the Mekong Delta (InfoRD, 2016).

### **Mekong and Sustainable Energy Options**

In the past decade, the lower stretch of the Mekong river has witnessed construction and operation of mainstream hydropower dams, notably the Xayaburi dam and Don Sahong dam in Laos, which began operating in 2019. Four mainstream dam projects have recently been submitted (with Sanakham project, currently reviewed under the Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement process) (MRC, 2020). The use of hydropower dams to generate electricity has been one of the main sources of energy production in the Mekong region. However, there is apprehension over the construction of the hydropower infrastructure, notably how the process has been largely unilateral and uncoordinated, with concerns over site selection, design and impact playing minimal roles in the decision-making process. There is rich literature and discussion on the impact of current exploitative technologies and practices on livelihoods, sustainability and productivity of key natural resources and ecosystems of the rivers and freshwater habitats, food security and nutrition, as well as fishery resources and internationally recognized conservation sites such as Ramsar Sites. These are complemented by growing regional and global expertise on alternative models of renewable and sustainable energy options. At the same time, more sustainable and equitable renewable energy options are increasingly feasible and cost-competitive with hydropower and fossil fuel generated energy such as large-scale solar and wind farms, as well as decentralized microgrids that further challenge current national energy models. As Weatherby & Eyler (2017) note in *The Letters from the Mekong*, Laos and Cambodia should consider prioritizing the production of a power development plan that not only examines the business-as-usual scenario of proposed projects, but also a variety of alternative economically feasible development scenarios for the coming decade. As for Thailand and Vietnam, both countries are encouraged to reflect on climate change emissions and the sustainability of energy sources when signing power

purchase agreements to import electricity from neighboring countries. Moreover, GMS countries should consider the storage of renewable electricity sources and utilizing this electricity during peak demand periods during the warmer dry season, eliminating the need for some of the additional reserve capacity in the long-term.

Key river infrastructure projects are being reviewed in Cambodia, and it has been announced that “from 2020 to 2030, there will not be any development of hydropower on the main river” (White, 2020). This signifies the decision of the Cambodian government to delay the Sambo and Stung Treng mainstream dam construction. Similarly, the cabinet decision in Thailand, which formally called for the cancellation of the Lancang-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement Project, also referred to as the ‘rapids-blasting’ project, (Deetes, 2020) is another bit of welcoming news for the citizens of the Mekong.

Moreover, there is increased momentum from governments and institutional donors to foster greener and more circular economies where alternative and sustainable forms of energy, such as solar energy, can be used to power domestic appliances or larger facilities at the community or sub-national level. This momentum has brought with it opportunities for developing innovative business models under public and private partnerships to promote energy efficiency and best energy management practices.

### **The Concept of Inequality in the Mekong**

More than 72 million individuals directly dependent on the Mekong river for their livelihoods, and 300 million depending on the produce from its basin. The extraction economic model, as well as unsustainable agricultural practices and other forms of large surface land uses, have collectively applied pressures on the watershed and riverine systems of the Mekong basin across the 6 riparian nations. There is a worrying outlook regarding the sustainability and deterioration of the natural environment, and the impacts of climate change. The Asian Development Bank estimates that between 1.7% to 24.8% (ADB, 2012-2018) of the Mekong’s population<sup>1</sup> live below the poverty line, with gaps widening between the rich and poor due to the unsustainable management of natural resources. These issues must be addressed as preconditions to the livelihood development of rural and ethnic minorities, in addition to the lack of sustainable economic opportunities. Growing inequalities in wealth in relation to unequal access to and large-scale concentration of land ownership are observed across the region.

Many forms of inequality persist within and between countries of the Mekong. Governments, private sector actors, urban populations and upstream countries tend to benefit the most. In contrast, the negative economic, environmental, and cultural impacts tend to fall on rural, forest and riverine communities, particularly women, girls,

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<sup>1</sup> Across Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

the poor, remote and often ethnic minority communities and those living in downstream locations. For the hydropower and major water infrastructure sector in particular, many of its social and environmental costs are externalized to local poor and rural communities downstream with inequitable benefit sharing that favors urban populations and international consumers.

Forest and riverine communities are particularly vulnerable to large-scale resource exploitation, rapid changes in the Mekong river ecosystems due to their reliance on locally available natural resources, lack of information and understanding of potential impacts, and low engagement in and influence over decision-making processes that impact their lives. When these communities, comprising indigenous groups and women, are better informed and empowered with the support of civil society and stronger national and regional platforms, these vulnerable communities can better voice themselves and participate in decision-making and planning processes that could lead to improved processes that benefit individuals and economies.

The strong economic growth enjoyed by countries across the Mekong region over the past decades has been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Mekong governments have demonstrated exemplary achievements in controlling and managing outbreaks and protecting vulnerable communities and businesses. Governments have been praised for their rapid response to offer immediate relief to the most vulnerable. However, further actions are required to support broader groups, such as persons with disabilities and the homeless, with accessing social assistance. Numerous workers have resorted to unsustainable coping strategies that negatively impact the environment, such as fishing or logging in protected areas, to alleviate the financial burdens of their families (FAO, 2020). Most of these families are already struggling with indebtedness, and susceptible to falling into further debt. The deeply-rooted gender inequalities already faced by women and girls in the region have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 outbreak, which has placed further pressure on women and girls to take up precarious jobs and increased their risk of sexual exploitation. This pandemic has not only forced millions of people back into poverty, but also deepened inequality across the region. Studies have shown that countries that have invested significantly in healthcare and social protection are better prepared in tackling this pandemic (Oxfam, 2020).

### **Mekong Governments' Commitment to Reduce Inequality**

Extreme inequality fuels poverty. Inequality is not inevitable or accidental. It is the result of deliberate policy choices. Oxfam's global commitment to reduce inequality index (CRII) ranks 158 governments on their policies and — on most indicators— their practices in relation to public services, tax and workers' rights. These 3 areas are pivotal to reducing inequality and weathering the Covid-19 crisis. In most countries, health and social spending remain far too low to provide universal coverage; tax systems are unfair —with the wealthiest people and corporations paying a relatively small amount in tax—

and do not collect enough revenue (in part because many countries act like tax havens) while labor rights, such as the right to sick pay, are not upheld. Minimum wages are falling well short of what is needed to ensure a decent standard of living. CRII 2020 results shows that only 26 out of 158 countries were spending a recommended 15% of their budgets on health prior to the pandemic, and in 103 countries, at least 1 in 3 workers lacked basic labor rights and protection, such as sick pay, when the virus struck.

Oxfam tracks the commitment of Mekong governments to tackle inequality both in policies and practices. In terms of overall commitment, the 2020 ranking illustrates that all Mekong governments have improved their performance considerably compared to previous years, with China in the lead ranking at 57, and Thailand and Vietnam closely trailing behind at 68 and 77 respectively. In 2018, the index ranked Cambodia at 121 out of 158 countries, and today the country has climbed to 111. The increase in rank demonstrates the positive progress that Cambodia has made in 2 out of 3 policy areas: tax policy and workers’ rights.

**MEKONG COUNTRIES IN FIGHTING INEQUALITY**



Myanmar, which had a lower ranking in the 2018 CRII, tops all Mekong countries by far on labour rights in 2020. In addition to the introduction of various policies and improved practices in protecting the rights of workers — which increased its ranking — the government has found a new impetus in response to the pandemic, which was to enroll an additional 21 million informal economy workers into the social protection program. This saw an increase of 8,684% to its program. Thailand and Cambodia are also performing better by increasing minimum wages and introducing programs to support migrant workers. Three out of six Mekong countries remain at the lower end of the index (China, Laos and Vietnam) because they do not allow independent unions.

**REDUCING INEQUALITY THROUGH RESPECT FOR LABOUR RIGHTS AND FAIR WAGES**





Yangtze River Delta, a migrant family. Farmers work in cities to improve their livelihoods. In recent years, more families are moving to cities, but they face many challenges in social inclusion. Photo by Wenyan Wang/Oxfam

It is important to note that Vietnam recently agreed to ratify the International Labour Organization’s Convention on Freedom of Association by 2023, which will allow independent unions as of 2021 to be part of the recently negotiated European Union–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement embedded in the legislation.

Relatively few countries have changed their VAT rates since 2018, with only China making a significant cut of 4%, reflecting a wish to reduce its reliance on indirect taxes. Vietnam’s tax collection is strong, especially compared to other countries in the region. There could still be potential for tax incentives favoring

#### REDUCING INEQUALITY THROUGH PROGRESSIVE TAX POLICIES



\*Global Ranking

TAX RANK

corporations to be further reduced in the country. While both China and Vietnam have performed exceptionally better on making tax policy fairer, ranking in at 3<sup>rd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> place respectively among 158 countries, Cambodia and Thailand have also progressed to earn 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> place among the Mekong countries in this category.

Oxfam recommends governments to invest 15% on social spending. China, Thailand and Vietnam have all exceeded the recommended level, which has significantly contributed to narrowing inequality. Since the 2018 CRIL, Vietnam has doubled health spending. However, there is further need



to reduce health inequalities and the substantial amount that individuals are paying for the cost of healthcare. Following reforms of its healthcare system, Vietnam’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been among the best in the world. The government is also considering integrating the reduction of inequality as a central part of its upcoming 10-year plan, which would be a very important and positive step.

Thailand has a highly efficient universal healthcare system that provides a comprehensive package for all citizens, disbursing 277 USD per capita, whereas in the United States, where millions of people are still not insured, spending is at 11,000 USD per capita. 80% of Thailand’s healthcare is delivered by the public sector, compared to the United States, where it is mainly delivered by the private sector and based on private health insurance, thereby rendering it extremely expensive. Moreover, Thailand spends 15.6% of its budget on public health, and counts itself among the top 25 countries in the world to invest in this sector. Although Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos rank in the same places as previous years given the limited increase in public spending towards essential services, these countries have demonstrated an incredible effort to rapidly mobilize budgets to safeguard public health as soon as the Covid-19 pandemic was declared.

### The Governance of Transboundary Water Resources is Complex

Good practice in water governance, particularly for transboundary rivers, emphasizes on rule- and knowledge-based regional cooperation. However, in certain sectoral and political contexts, these practices challenge the traditional culture of non-interference between countries and reinforces power inequalities. Decisions on how water and related resources are shared, developed and managed will determine whether the millions of people in the Lower Mekong - who rely on water resources and wild capture fisheries of the Mekong region - will improve their food security and strengthen their livelihoods or are further disadvantaged.

There are many actors, institutions and programs involved in water governance, each with different powers, approaches and varying degrees of influence. The diverse interests from investors, officials in government agencies, local users such as fishers and



farmers are challenging to reconcile despite the rhetoric of trade-offs, benefit-sharing and win-win solutions. As a result, water resource use and development continue to be contested within and between countries, particularly between upstream and downstream users and sectors that see unilateral decisions on the construction of major infrastructure such as mainstream hydropower dams despite public social and environmental concerns and investments in rule-based and formal multilateral processes.

There is a large and complex array of inter-governmental organizations and initiatives involved in water governance in the GMS. The emergence of new institutions and programs, in addition to the already broad array of actors, reflect changing geopolitics within the region, and this poses significant challenges to coordination, with different actors involved in different institutions, and to the multiplication of processes and new ways of engagement.

Marginalization is experienced in the formal processes of deliberation convened by governments, or through mandated processes within the Mekong River Commission, centered on intergovernmental facilitation, which lack the requirements for enabling meaningful public participation. It is also experienced in decision-making and approvals for specific projects, where requirements such as the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment are poorly implemented, or narrowly scoped. Those who benefit from development are not those who bear the risk, and public involvement in the consideration of development options is rare (ICEM, 2010). Formal requirements for stakeholder consultation and public participation are not standardized in policy or practice throughout the GMS.

With the growing pressure on the great rivers of the GMS and the rapidly changing economic, social and political contexts within each country and the wider region, there is significant potential and need to scale-up support for civil society across the region to play a greater role in shaping the trajectory of water resource and energy development. Good governance of water resources cannot be achieved without the meaningful participation of civil society, including the women and men who rely on these resources. This recognizes the unprecedented social and economic connectivity across the region,



**Doan Van Phuc**, member of Tan Phu Fisheries Group. The group made an agreement with the Srepok 3 hydropower dam company to use 360 square metres of the reservoir to set up a fish farm. Oxfam's partner has provided the group with training in aquaculture techniques, disease treatment and cage sanitation. The group is reaping the economic benefits of the farm and now working to scale it up, alongside building a community-based ecotourism project. Photo: Oxfam

the growing interest in social and environmental sustainability and the emergence of viable alternatives that challenge established assumptions on river resource valuation and development. This also recognizes that an informed, engaged and effective civil society can and should be able to influence river resource development to better respect the rights of riverine communities and better reflect the environmental, cultural and social values of rivers.

### **A More Inclusive, Equitable and Sustainable Mekong**

Fair and inclusive water resource governance is of paramount importance to the future of the GMS and a key factor in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>2</sup> Across the Mekong Region, women hold the primary role for meeting household water needs. Yet, they are often underrepresented in water governance, including water-user communities. Development policies fail to recognize women as key stakeholders in water management and perpetuate the cycle of gender inequality (Miletto et al., 2019). As noted in the High-Level Panel on Water, convened by the United Nations, it is recommended that practices strengthening water governance and ensuring that gender and social inclusivity are to be implemented alongside integrated water resource management at local, national and transboundary levels (UN, 2018). Oxfam's experience of implementing the *Inclusive Civil Society in Water Governance in the Mekong* project (2014-2020) has indicated that the people who are most affected by hydropower infrastructure development and management such as local and rural communities, women, ethnic minorities and indigenous people, continue to be routinely excluded from participation in decision-making processes. When included, the process is often marginal and characterized by one-directional information flow during gathering or events (Oxfam, 2019). While progress has been made in raising awareness and capacity to engage in policy and decision-making fora at all levels, further progress is needed to embed these examples as standard practice or policy. Furthermore, the documentation and consideration of the social and gendered impacts of water resource development are regularly ignored or understated. While there have been improvements in women's participation in water governance over recent years, the pace of change is far too slow to achieve SDGs 5 and 6. Efforts to advocate for women's representation in water governance and make funding for water development conditional on it must continue (Oxfam, 2020).

### **The Future of the Mekong Lies with Fostering Closer and More Equal Collaboration**

Several arguments in this article have pointed to the growing disparities and discontent between women and men, downstream and upstream communities, and rural and urban populations widened by development initiatives in the Mekong region. There are nonetheless possibilities to bridge these disparities by building on good practices, and

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<sup>2</sup> In particular SDGs 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10, 13, 14 and 17.

making further commitments to reduce inequalities with fairer taxation, improving labor rights and skill development, increasing social spending targeting vulnerable groups, and deprioritizing large scale unsustainable extractive projects that negatively impact the river and its watershed ecosystem, as well as the livelihoods of resource-dependent communities and their ways of living. In various countries, governments are reviewing how policies can be further enforced to reduce, and ultimately prevent social and environmental impacts caused by development from aggravating these tensions. Mekong governments have the potential to offer its leadership, worldwide, in river management by fostering equal partnerships and jointly exploring an exemplary circular economic investment model for the Mekong region. Development agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs), indigenous groups, women and youth will be key in supporting governments in defining greener development solutions that will enable benefits to be shared more equitably and in the long term.

Emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, the region has an opportunity to invest differently in new infrastructure and economies that connect sustainably and regenerate ecosystems and communities rather than further fracture and exploit. Enhanced collaboration is key to ensuring that the voices of the most vulnerable are amplified and enacted upon, and this in turn provides governments with opportunities to detect early signs of growing discontent and manage conflicts. Governments have already demonstrated their commitment to foster more inclusive consultations and dialogues with affected communities, CSOs and the private sector. Reducing the pressures emanating from the CLV-DTA on the Mekong and Sekong river system is a locale where further multi-stakeholder dialogue is needed between Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Agreeing on a coordinated approach would enable all lower Mekong countries to prevent flood disaster and drought, conduct water quality monitoring, as well as address and avoid transboundary water conflicts between existing users and new users, and between small users and large users.

As a recommendation, Mekong institutions should work together to further deprioritize large-scale unsustainable hydropower projects, and instead promote leadership in green economies by exploring joint investment in large-scale alternative energy solutions such as solar and wind power, and focusing on improving off-grid microgrid efficiency for rural populations, especially the floating population and communities on the Mekong and its tributaries to support micro, small and medium sized enterprises in their safe food production.

In recent years, youths across the Mekong region have shown strong engagement in advocating for environmental justice and the protection of natural resources. The worrying impacts of climate change and environment degradation, caused by construction and over-exploitation, are examples of life-threatening realities that future generations will have to face. Recognizing this, youth groups and activists are demonstrating that they are empowered more than ever to hold governments

accountable and demand action. As energetic users of the internet, youths are finding innovative ways to raise awareness of environmental sustainability and exemplifying how digital technologies can deliver impactful messages and outreach, such as through social media activism. Driven by its conviction that youths are critical actors of change, Oxfam actively engages with young women and men to increase their leadership capacity in various thematic areas, including natural resource management. Oxfam has organized various workshops in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and China to assist youths with channeling their concerns for the environment and society’s welfare into action plans and strategies that will enable them to participate in development decision making processes to define their own futures. With the appropriate tools and know-how, youths will continually demonstrate that they are force to be reckoned with.



*Youths from Mekong nations joined the “Race up the Mekong” campaign to discuss and share each knowledge about the Mekong river. Photo: Oxfam*

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