

# MEKONG CONNECT

Volume 2, Issue 1, July 2020



## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE MEKONG REGION



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# **MEKONG CONNECT**

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# Message

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In recent decades, the people living along the Mekong River have experienced many issues ranging from natural disasters such as flood and drought to man-made disasters such as the effect of hydro-dams and climate change. As such, to mitigate the consequences of those issues, states must find a common way to build a developed and sustainable society based on mutual interests. Cooperation is a necessity in this regard because these issues could not be addressed by any actor alone. As stated above, the Mekong River spans across geo-political boundaries of states. Thus, a problem stemming out from the Mekong River is not an issue of one particular state, but an issue of the whole community sharing the river.

Freedom, justice and solidarity are the basic principles underlying the work of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). The KAS is a political foundation, closely associated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU). As co-founder of the CDU and the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Konrad Adenauer (1876–1967) united Christian-social, conservative and liberal traditions. His name is synonymous with the democratic reconstruction of Germany, the firm alignment of foreign policy with the trans-Atlantic community of values, the vision of a unified Europe and an orientation towards the social market economy. His intellectual heritage continues to serve both as our aim as well as our obligation today.

In our European and international cooperation efforts, we work for people to be able to live self-determined lives in freedom and dignity. We make a contribution underpinned by values to help Germany meet its growing responsibilities throughout the world. We encourage people to lend a hand in shaping the future along these lines. Our offices abroad are in charge of over 200 projects in more than 120 countries. We make a unique contribution to the promotion of democracy, the rule of law and a social market economy. To foster peace and freedom, we encourage a continuous dialogue at the national and international levels as well as the exchanges between cultures and religions.

Human beings in their distinctive dignity and with their rights and responsibilities are at the heart of our work. We are guided by the conviction that human beings are the starting point in the effort to bring about social justice and democratic freedom while promoting sustainable economic activity. By bringing people together who embrace their responsibilities in society, we develop active networks in the political and economic spheres as well as in society itself. The guidance we provide on the basis of our political know-how and knowledge helps to shape the globalisation process along more socially equitable, ecologically sustainable and economically efficient lines.

We cooperate with governmental institutions, political parties, civil society organisations and handpicked elites, building strong partnerships along the way. In particular we seek to intensify political cooperation in the area of development cooperation at the national and international levels on the foundations of our objectives and values. Together with our partners, we make a contribution to the creation of an international order that enables every country to develop in freedom and under its own responsibility.

KAS has been one of the earliest think tanks that have been established in Cambodia in 1994. For nearly three decades, KAS has expanded its scope to activities including various fields of study, such as foreign policies, digital economy, rule of law, youth empowerment, media education and environmental protection. In regard to environmental issues, KAS has put forward many successful projects such as the Waste Summit, which was organised for the first time in 2018, and it is the biggest conference and exhibition about waste management in Cambodia. We also recognise the importance of the Mekong River as one of its environmental missions.

This publication brings together authors who share common interest in environmental issues and socio-economic development to explore and develop thoughts, ideas, and knowledge about current and relevant topics related to the Mekong River and the communities whose livelihoods are based on the river. The topics range from analysing potential risks that are currently presented such as the construction of hydro-dams and climate change to discussing sustainable development frameworks for communities in Mekong riparian countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to our partner, AVI, for cooperating in this project. We hope this publication will get your interest and encourage you to be more engaged in the discussed topics. After finishing your reading, we hope that you will apply the findings and analysis of the authors to your implementation of any associated projects in order to bring ideas into reality.

Enjoy your read, keep on exploring, and share new ideas and concepts!

**Dr. Daniel Schmücking**, Country Representative

**Mom Saroeun**, Senior Program Manager

**Konrad Adenauer Stiftung**

# Editorial Foreword

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which was set in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly, consist of 17 interconnected global goals which serve as the blueprint to “achieve a better and more sustainable future for all”. SDGs have been widely adopted and integrated into national development policies by governments including those in the Mekong region.

Countries in the region have made remarkable progress in a number of SDGs’ key aspects including the significant reduction of poverty and unemployment rates, the expansion of affordable energy supply to rural villages, the improvement of public access to health care and compulsory education, urbanisation and economic development. Despite the progress, they have not achieved satisfactory results in the implementation of other areas of SDGs, particularly in sustainable use of natural resources and upholding of justice, transparency and accountability in development practices. In the contexts of rapid transformations in the Mekong region, inclusive and sustainable development is more important than ever before and needs to be placed at the top of national and regional development agenda. Therefore, this volume of the Mekong Connect Magazine put together nine short analytical articles examining different themes of sustainable development in the Mekong region.

Water is a very important theme, as it is predominantly focused in four articles of this volume. Article one provides an overview of the work of the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the only treaty-based inter-governmental river basin organisation in the region responsible for developing and managing the Mekong River and its shared resources in a sustainable and responsible manner. Article two is also related to the MRC and the Mekong River, and it places emphasis on transparent data sharing among the riparian countries as crucial to sustainable management of the river system. The next article is about hydro-electric dams along the Mekong River system and their impacts on nature and communities. Mega dams have profoundly changed the natural and human landscapes and have resulted in uneven development. The last article in the group takes us to the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia where the Lake becomes shallower and its region has experienced more frequent droughts. The article shows how communities in the Lake region have localised adaptation methods to respond to the ecological change.

The remaining five articles examine other key aspects of sustainable development in specific Mekong countries. Fully aware of the importance of sustainable development to the region, article five proposes that current and future rural development projects need to adopt “Place-Based People-Centred (PBPC)” model to ensure sustainable and inclusive growth and rural resilience for societies in the region. Article six looks at what Vietnam has achieved in its 30 years of implementing sustainable development and what challenges the country needs to overcome to achieve greater sustainability. Article seven examines one key aspect of sustainable development in Cambodia, which is about the opportunities and challenges in implementing renewable energy financing in the agri-food sector. The next article is about sustainable development in Thailand, showing how various individuals and civil society groups in major cities have initiated different projects to help each other in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. These civic initiatives can provide innovative solutions to urban crisis, and they should be integrated into local and national policies for sustainable urban development. The last article of the volume is about Myanmar. It offers an overview of the contexts of sustainable development implementation in the country and provides some recommendations for the country to attain SDGs.

Taken together, the nine articles provide rich data and analyses about both past and contemporary accounts of sustainable development in the Mekong region. The editorial team hope that this volume of the magazine contributes knowledge, data, and policy recommendations about sustainable development, which may be useful to government policy makers, development NGOs and donor countries, researchers and the general readers.

# MEKONG CONNECT

*Volume 02, Issue 01*

*Sustainable Development in the Mekong Region*

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# 25 Years of Mekong Cooperation: Achievements, Challenges and the Way Ahead

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*An Pich Hatda, Anoulak Kittikhoun, and Sopheak Meas*

The Mekong is one of the world's greatest rivers. It drives development and supports the livelihoods of millions of people, from its source in China and then as it snakes its way through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam on its 4,763-kilometer journey to the sea.

Rivers are the blood vessels of the land, transporting nutrients far and wide and carrying life wherever they run their course. They provide habitats for an incredible variety of species. They nourish and refresh our stock of energy and food. And they connect nations, bringing governments and peoples together to act in the common interest.

On 5 April 1995, the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam signed the *Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin* (the 1995 Mekong Agreement), establishing the Mekong River Commission (MRC). Through this Agreement, the Member Countries vowed to develop and manage the Mekong River and its shared resources in a sustainable and responsible manner.

Over the last 25 years, what has the MRC, as the only treaty-based inter-governmental river basin organisation in the region, achieved? What problems does the river face? What should Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam – as the Member Countries – do to address the challenges?

## Key achievements

The MRC has achieved much to be proud of. After the turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s, it has been a force for peace, a forum for discussion, a wealth of knowledge, and a platform for conflict management, resulting in more equitable economic growth and poverty reduction across the region. It has gained recognition internationally as a well-established regional knowledge hub and water diplomacy platform.

Specifically, the MRC has brought the four Member Countries together, despite their varied interests, to implement basin-wide procedures, guidelines and strategies to develop, manage and protect the Mekong River. For example, it has put in place a common basin-wide strategy – the *Basin Development Strategy* – to develop and manage the Mekong River. The strategy captures development opportunities and lays out measures to minimise risks, using results from the MRC's studies on basin conditions, development opportunities and challenges.

The organisation's monitoring and reporting systems on basin conditions and the impact of mainstream dams and other infrastructure have expanded. The MRC has grown a network of monitoring sites in hydrology, sediment, water quality, fisheries and ecological health across the four countries to provide fundamental information for the study, management and protection of the river. This information has enabled the Member Countries to tackle flood and drought risks, which has enabled

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**Dr An Pich Hatda, Dr Anoulak Kittikhoun and Mr Sopheak Meas** are all employees of the Mekong River Commission Secretariat. Dr Hatda is the Chief Executive Officer, Dr Anoulak is the Chief Strategy and Partnership Officer, and Mr Sopheak is the Communications Officer for Press. Views expressed here in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the MRC Member Countries or partners.

vulnerable communities to minimise their losses.

In recent times, the MRC has also carried out some of the most critical studies to aid Member Countries' planning, investment and safeguarding of the Mekong River system. Two of the major studies are the *Assessment of Basin-wide Development Scenarios* (BDP2) and the *Study on Sustainable Management and Development of the Mekong River including Impacts of Mainstream Hydropower Projects* (the Council Study). Through its studies, the Commission has been able to advise on the synergies and trade-offs between water resources developments and their impacts on the people, economies, and environment of the basin.

With various guidelines developed over the years in water related sectors, including hydropower, irrigation, navigation, environment and fisheries, the MRC offers comprehensive guidance to the Member Countries on how to develop projects, programmes and measures in line with their commitments laid down in the 1995 Mekong Agreement.

The MRC's water diplomacy platform is well recognised. For the last 15 years, the Commission has provided a forum for discussion and conflict management observable in real time. The Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA) outline the steps required for MRC Member Countries to establish rules for water utilisation and inter-basin diversions, designed to achieve optimum use of water resources while mitigating adverse impacts on the environment and on the livelihoods of riverine communities.

In fact, despite some gaps, the Prior Consultation process is indispensable. For instance, in the cases of Pak Beng and Pak Lay hydropower projects – the third and fourth projects to go through the PNPCA process – information was transparently and openly

shared with the public. Stakeholders acknowledged that without the process a massive amount of information – from feasibility studies to impact assessments – would not have entered the public space. This was also the case for the improved design of the Xayaburi project, which was also shared publicly.

Without the Prior Consultation process, large-scale projects such as the Pak Beng and Pak Lay hydropower projects or the planned Luang Prabang hydropower project would not have been subject to a second opinion. Without the MRC and its Prior Consultation process, there would have been a lack of regional discussion on big infrastructure projects that have transboundary impacts. There would have been a lack of transparency in planning, a lack of publicly accessible project documents, and a lack of research.

Moving away from a donor-driven organisation to becoming a leaner riparian-owned institution is another important milestone for the MRC. The MRC has been fully led and staffed by riparians since 2016. Thanks to the Member Countries' recognition of its value, they have increased their financial contributions to the organisation and have given their highest political support via three successful Summits, in 2010, 2014 and 2018. Contributions from the Member Countries now cover almost 40% of the MRC's core funding, with this figure set to rise to 100% by 2030. This is testimony that the 1995 Mekong Agreement works.

## Mounting challenges

While rapid development has brought prosperity and poverty reduction across the board, it also comes at a price. Water resources development and increasing water use have placed strong pressure on the Mekong River's aquatic ecosystems. Challenges are mounting – challenges that require a different way of thinking and stronger cooperation among the Mekong governments.

According to the MRC's 2018 State of the Basin Report, the Mekong River has already experienced a permanent alteration of flow regimes, a continuing loss of wetlands, a deterioration of riverine habitats, and a reduction in sediments and fish catches. These impacts have affected agricultural yields and the livelihoods of around 65 million people.

Insufficient information on water infrastructure in the Mekong River Basin and the way this infrastructure is operated has made it difficult to forecast impacts. For forecasting to be fast and accurate, year-round data from various sources is necessary.

The MRC obtains water data from only 22 monitoring stations on the lower Mekong mainstream and 39 on the tributary systems. Rainfall data are obtained from 124 stations across the lower reaches of the whole basin. China, as an MRC Dialogue Partner, only provides its water level and rainfall data during the flood season. The MRC will need to work even more closely with its upstream partners to secure all year-round data.

The Mekong region is also under threat from climate change and extreme weather. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identified the region as one of the world's most vulnerable. The 2016 drought, for example, brought serious economic losses to Thailand, estimated at USD1.7 billion. In Vietnam, the total cost of the 2016 drought was estimated at USD669 million. In Cambodia, the same drought caused water shortages for millions of people in 18 of the country's 25 provinces. The region is once again suffering a severe drought that has brought Mekong water levels to their lowest point since records began more than 60 years ago.

Indeed, the World Meteorological Organization confirmed that 2019 was the second warmest year on record after 2016. The annual global temperature in 2019 was 1.1°C warmer than the average for 1850–1900. Since the 1980s, each

decade has been warmer than the previous one. This trend, the World Meteorological Organization has warned, is expected to continue as record levels of heat-trapping greenhouse gases are emitted into the atmosphere.

According to MRC studies, droughts are expected to increase both in terms of severity and frequency over the next 30 to 90 years. Rapid water level fluctuations due to hydropower operations and flash floods due to the changing climate are also set to cause severe challenges in the future.

Demand for water use will not cease. It is expected to rise, due partly to climate change, partly to increasing population, and partly to the demands for increased irrigation and energy production across the Mekong region. Difficult trade-offs between development on the one hand and environmental protection and local livelihoods on the other are inevitable. Both immediate and long-term solutions must be put in place to tackle these challenges.

### **Regional collaboration to conserve the river for future generations**

The MRC needs to evolve if the Mekong River is to develop sustainably and responsibly. To date, the MRC has cooperated primarily on knowledge creation and sharing. While the Commission agreed to a Basin Development Strategy for 2016–2020, it is largely reactive, outlining the potential impacts of development plans in each of the Member Countries.

The Commission must now move towards more proactive basin planning, assessing and recommending new joint investment projects that will benefit countries more equitably while addressing climate change and other development challenges. It must now start exploring how infrastructure projects throughout the basin might be coordinated to address their impacts on the Mekong mainstream.

As the Mekong River Basin develops, the Member Countries need to further align national and regional interests. They need to recognise that cooperation in its own right has regional benefits in terms of building and maintaining trust and that growth and stability in neighbouring countries is in their own interest.

The line between the immediate benefits of development, social justice for those affected by that development, and environmental sustainability must be carefully navigated. This is the *raison d'être* for the MRC and is captured in the Vision for "*An economically prosperous, environmentally sound, and socially just*" Mekong River Basin.

This is the reason why the Member Countries need to strengthen efforts to work together in the common interest and to honour their commitments to each other and to stakeholders. They need to practice due diligence in development planning and implementation in line with regional and national guidelines. And there is an urgent need for Member Countries to open up and share more information with the MRC for better planning and management, especially data and information on water use and infrastructure. A transparent data sharing arrangement on how water and related infrastructure are operated will help everyone manage risks and avoid misperceptions and misunderstanding about the projects and their associated impacts.

While cooperation between the MRC and China has been strengthened in recent times, more needs to be done. A more institutionalised arrangement will enable the Commission to address risks that can only be managed through a 'whole of basin' approach.

It is also important to note that the 1995 Mekong Agreement is cooperative and developmental in nature. In 1995, the Member Countries recognised that the basin was set for a period of rapid development. And they

understood that sustainable development meant increasing economic growth and improving people's living standards, while conserving the river's resources for future generations. It is a tough balancing act, but one that the MRC and all who care about the basin must strive to achieve. This underpins the MRC's slogan: "*Meeting the needs. Keeping the balance.*"

But the MRC and its Member Countries need to act now. The Mekong Basin is facing unprecedented changes, and the region is experiencing rapid growth. They need to act to ensure that the Mekong River can continue to support livelihoods and sustainable development for all. And they need to act swiftly to conserve the river, so that it can continue to offer protection, remaining a beacon of peace and sustainable development in the region. The MRC has been and will be there for years to come to support these noble objectives.

# **Transparent Data Sharing among Member Countries: Crucial to Sustainable Management of Mekong River System**

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*Serey Sok*

## **Background**

**S**ince its establishment in 1995, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) has implemented its Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin as its legal mandate. This 1995 Mekong Agreement is what defines the scope of the work and cooperation required for joint planning and management of the Mekong River Basin and its related resources in order to attain its mission of a socially just, economically prosperous, and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin.<sup>i</sup> The MRC has served as a vital international cooperation platform, as it has been able to bring together four nations to work together to protect the Mekong River despite their different interests. In facilitating regional cooperation and water resource management, five procedures were developed between 2001 and 2011. They include: (1) Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing (PDIES), (2) Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA), (3) Procedures for Water Use Monitoring (PWUM), (4) Procedures for Maintenance of Flows on the Mainstream (PMFM), and (4) Procedures for Water Quality (PWQ). One of them is the Procedures for Data and

Information Exchange and Sharing (PDIES). It was developed in 2002 to operationalise data and information exchanges among the four riparian countries of the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB). The sharing of data is often considered the foundation for cooperation on shared watercourses, and unsurprisingly it was the first of the five procedures to be finalised.

Over the years, the MRC has built a comprehensive system of data and tools that form the MRC information systems and inform a great number of studies about the Mekong River system. Not only do the data and tools in the information systems reflect the state of the basin, but they also provide a decision-making support framework that can be used to assess the potential impacts of various proposed water uses. These data and tools cover water quantity and quality, fisheries, sediment, ecological functioning as well as socio-economic factors.<sup>ii</sup> However, data and information sharing among the four countries has only slowly advanced. A complete sharing with most up-to-date data has remained a challenge. Misunderstanding and oftentimes ineffective management take place due to the insufficient data and information sharing from the MRC Member Countries, as well as from the upstream country like China, who joins the MRC as a Dialogue Partner. This

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has recently prompted the MRC to call for a greater transparency of data and information sharing among all the countries and the most upstream country, China through which the Mekong flows. In a statement released on 21 April 2020, the MRC expected to advocate for a better level of sharing of data and for more effective cooperation to improve the management of the Mekong River.<sup>iii</sup> Accordingly, this article aims to explain the reasons underpinning the lack of information sharing among the riparian countries and to explore potential areas to increase the opportunity for information sharing.

This article is based on a fieldwork conducted in Laos between 2016 and 2018. During the fieldwork, I approached various experts for interviews. They included individuals from the Embassy of Switzerland's Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, International Water Management Institute, Southeast Asia Regional Office Vientiane, GCGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystem, and the Mekong River Commission Secretariat (MRCS).

### **Importance of transparent data sharing**

As a key procedure, the PDIES has set a process and mechanism for all the four riparian countries to exchange data and information, making the MRC Secretariat the only custodian of the Mekong River's data and information. Transparent information requires a free flow of information exchange, which allows relevant stakeholders to have access to all available information and data. This is crucial for planning and implementing projects and for monitoring and reporting on the health of the river. The MRC Member Countries agreed to exchange data and information routinely or when necessary based on PDIES and other related guidelines or procedures (i.e. PWQ, PMFM, PWUM, or PNPCA, etc.). These updated data and information served as key tools for planners and decision-makers to propose and study any plan or adjust any planned or developed project. In a study I had

participated, which was published in 2019, it shows that PDIES had a moderate level of progress. We found, "The implementation of these procedures has been limited to date, however, with little information or data actually being shared between the riparian countries, MRC or other stakeholders, with data being only uploaded very gradually into the publicly accessible MRC database."<sup>iv</sup>

Once the data are shared by the riparian countries, they are subject to quality assessment processes by the MRC. Thus, the data reflect the agreed state of the basin or become fundamental to study the basin. Similarly, data, information and tools emerging from the MRC studies – like those used in the Council Study – are jointly developed and agreed. The PDIES, therefore, makes these data and tools available on a common platform for the riparian countries and the public to use when planning their proposed water uses. However, neither the PDIES nor any of the other procedures prescribe that the data and tools must be used by the riparian countries and developers when assessing the impacts of the proposed projects. In fact, that power was not conferred on the MRC by the riparian countries. It is, therefore, important that the use of the procedures is integrated into national laws or regulations, where possible. The ongoing update of the PDIES with new data differs from the data shared by the PWUM, PMFM and PWQ in that it satisfies the general commitment to cooperation, whereas the PWQ aims to share data on the substantive commitments made in Chapter 3 of the 1995 Mekong Agreement.<sup>v</sup>

### **Constraints and issues in information sharing**

In appreciation of their shared water, the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam signed the 1995 Mekong Agreement on 5 April 1995, which established the MRC to reduce risks of water conflict escalation,<sup>vi</sup> and to seek inter-governmental consensus on planning and policy suggestions.<sup>vii</sup> Unfortunately, each country has vested interests

in allocating water resources from the Mekong River for their economic development. Both Thailand and Vietnam, for example, have similar interests in allocating water resources to advance their agricultural sectors by developing irrigation systems, while Cambodia and Laos are motivated by fisheries and hydropower development. With the coordination by the MRC Secretariat, the LMB countries are often seen consulting one another over resource management, but critics or environmental activists often say the countries act differently based on their national interests and development agendas. Information and data about water resource management and infrastructure of the Mekong River appear to a great extent confidential in each riparian country. It is sensitive to be shared even among its regional alliance, representing a constraint on trust that needs to be further lessened through the MRC. Another key challenge is the competitiveness to use water or its related resources amongst the riparian countries. The lack of science-based evidence to evaluate some water-use proposals could create tension or mistrust amongst the concerned parties. This also involves, to a certain extent, the neutrality and trustfulness of the work and recommendations provided by the MRC Secretariat.

In early 2016, Thailand's Royal Irrigation Department (RID) planned to divert billions of cubic of water from the Mekong River, with a capacity of pumping 12,000 liters per second to supply water to mitigate the impacts from drought in Huay Laung of Nong Khai province – the country's northeast region usually affected by drought. The Phnom Penh Post quoted a spokesman of RID as saying, “[The] volume of water to be taken is small, and would in no way affect the water level of Mekong River.”<sup>viii</sup> However, while the diversion efforts were reported to be pending for the conduct of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and negotiations, Thailand only informed the MRC afterward, saying that the project was being studied and no diversion had taken place yet.

Under the PNPCA, a country wanting to divert water from the Mekong mainstream is required to inform and consult with the other members before any such action can take place. There was a great deal of media reporting that Thailand had ignored regional and international public critiques, and it had decided to implement the project to bring water to the drought-stricken areas in its territory. RID claimed that by using the term ‘use’ instead of ‘divert’ when reporting the activity would help Thailand to get away with it, as it could bypass the MRC’s consultation.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Policy recommendations to increase opportunity for information sharing**

According to the MRC Secretariat’s current Chief Executive Officer, Dr An Pich Hatda, “To achieve this, cooperation from all the riparian countries and their timely and transparent sharing of data and information on water use and infrastructure is pivotal.” Moreover, transboundary data sharing is widely recognised as a necessary element in the successful handling of water-related climate change issues, as it is a means towards integrated water resources management (IWRM). However, in practice it is often a challenge to achieve it. At the MRC, data sharing procedures were institutionalised and have been officially implemented by the four riparian countries since 2001.<sup>x</sup> In order to increase the opportunity for information sharing, three recommendations are offered below.

First is building trust and confidence in the MRC Secretariat. This creates a momentum for a stronger regional cooperation in many ways, including in data sharing and prior consultation process for mainstream projects that could have potential negative impacts downstream. To do this, it needs to be built from the riparian countries, especially from each National Mekong Committee. Each riparian country should focus on common regional interests rather than on each country’s benefits if the Mekong River is to be developed sustainably

and responsibly. Focusing on the regional interests will bring more sustained growth and better management and development of the Mekong River in the long run. In addition, each country should give the authority or power to the MRC to carry its roles in leading any decision making so that it is fair to all its Member Countries. The MRC can never be strong without a regulatory power.

Second, the neutrality of the MRC toward all stakeholders, including to the four Member Countries, and toward the balancing between development and management/conservation of the Mekong River needs to be further strengthened. The MRC Secretariat has a crucial role to play here, especially through its CEO, who must be given full authority to manage and decide without so much interference from the MRC's governing body such as the Joint Committee. The MRC

Secretariat is in fact the face of the MRC, as it represents the organisation in all aspects of work.

Third, it is also suggested that any Member Country – in particular now Laos – shares as much information as possible, as it has committed itself during the prior consultation process of a development project, outlined in a joint action plan, to sharing information with the MRC and the public. This must also be done in a timely manner. So far, little or close to no information has been made available through the MRC from the Lao government regarding the status and progress of its mainstream dams (i.e. Pak Beng and Pak Lay hydropower projects) that have gone through the MRC's prior consultation process. Each country needs to demonstrate its due diligence and strong commitment to the 1995 Mekong Agreement they signed 25 years ago.

<sup>i</sup>See MRC. 1995. *Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin*. Chiang Rai: Mekong River Commission Secretariat.

<sup>ii</sup>See MRC. 2020. *Understanding the 1995 Mekong Agreement and the Five MRC Procedures: A Handbook*. Vientiane: River Commission Secretariat.

<sup>iii</sup> Phoung, V. 2020. "Mekong River Commission Calls for More Transparency among Members and China." *Cambodianess*, April 22. Accessed 25 May 2020. <https://cambodianess.com/article/mekong-river-commission-calls-for-more-transparency-among-members-and-china>

<sup>iv</sup>See Sok, S., S. Meas, S. Chea, and N. Chhinh. 2019. "Regional Cooperation and Benefit Sharing for Sustainable Water Resources Management in the Lower Mekong Basin." *Lakes & Reservoirs: Research & Management* 24 (3): 215–27.

<sup>v</sup> See MRC. 2020. *Understanding the 1995 Mekong Agreement and the Five MRC Procedures: A Handbook*. Vientiane: River Commission Secretariat.

<sup>vi</sup>See Pearse-Smith, S. W. 2012. "Water War in the Mekong Basin?" *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 53 (2): 147–62.

<sup>vii</sup>See Ha, M.-L. 2011. "The Role of Regional Institutions in Sustainable Development: A Review of the Mekong River Commission's First 15 Years." *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development* 5 (1): 125–40.

<sup>viii</sup>See Kossov, I. 2016. "Mekong Diversion under Way in Thailand." *The Phnom Penh Post*, January 26. Accessed 21 May 2020.

<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/mekong-diversion-under-way-thailand>

<sup>ix</sup>See "Thailand Diverts Mekong, Vietnam Put in Danger." *Vietnamnet*, February 16, 2016. Accessed 15 May 2020.

<http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/environment/150982/thailand-diverts-mekong--vietnam-put-in-danger.html>

<sup>x</sup>See MRC. 2020. *Understanding the 1995 Mekong Agreement and the Five MRC Procedures: A Handbook*. Vientiane: River Commission Secretariat.

# Inside SDG9: Can Hydro-Electric Dams Be “Resilient”, “Inclusive” and “Sustainable”?

Sango Mahanty, Sarah Milne and Chann Sopheak

In a flurry of dust and excitement, the long-awaited water delivery truck arrives at our host's home. In this resettlement village known as New Kbal Romeas, near the Lower Sesan II Dam, groundwater pumps were installed as part of the community resettlement package. To the villagers' dismay, however, the water turned out to be heavily contaminated and could not be used for drinking or washing. Villagers instead must buy water from a delivery service outside the village, which charges US\$5 each time. If villagers use the water sparingly, it might last a few weeks (see Plate 1). This was a significant impost for those still re-establishing their lives after a traumatic

separation from their home village of Kbal Romeas by the Srepok river, where some families stayed behind.

Sustainable Development Goal 9 (SDG9) aims to “Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation”. On the face of it, this looks like a “triple win”: infrastructure to promote economic development, that is socially equitable and environmentally sustainable. Yet, as the story from Lower Sesan II above shows, alongside broader experiences with hydro-electric dams in Cambodia and the Mekong, achieving this triple win is not easy.



Plate 1: A resettled family in New Kbal Romeas buys water for washing and drinking because local water sources are unpotable. (Photo: Soksopea Suong)

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“Mega dams” have been around for several decades, which means we have a good understanding of their social and environmental risks, even though specific impacts are shaped by diverse landscape, country and investment contexts. Because dams typically involve resettlement and social dislocation, threats to food security and social cohesion are common.<sup>i</sup> Land use and labour patterns are also largely transformed.<sup>ii</sup> During dam construction and operation, new people move into sometimes remote locations and introduce new interactions and risks in resident communities.<sup>iii</sup> Dams also promote resource extraction, often through lucrative and unrestrained illicit economies associated with logging and wildlife trade.<sup>iv</sup>

We have observed these kinds of impacts in the case of the Lower Sesan II. For instance, the area was previously home to Bunong and Lao communities, who had long established ties to their customary lands. Tragically, the dam reservoir flooded their farmland, spirit forests and ancestral graves. Here, villages were divided – literally – over the question of relocation and the socio-environmental disruption that it brings. The dam developer’s controversial residential and agricultural land compensation packages provided scant redress and little justice for what villagers lost.

Disruption to the river system is also bringing change. Some local fish species have dramatically declined or disappeared from the river, while other species in the new reservoir have thrived. This has brought new settlers into the area from other parts of Cambodia, who are seeking livelihoods from the apparent fishing boom (see Plate 2). Resource conflicts are emerging between established communities and these new settlers.

In addition to site-level issues, the risks associated with dams play out over large catchments that often span international borders. This is a major concern with dam construction in the Mekong basin.<sup>v</sup> For example, villages upstream of the Lower Sesan II reservoir are threatened by floods not only from potential Lower Sesan II overspill, but also from uncertain flows from the Yali Dam upstream in Vietnam. Villagers in this situation have not received any compensation from any of the two dams, even though they have lost agricultural land to flooding. The unequal distribution of risks and benefits between countries has added to regional tensions, while cumulative and interactive change processes generate uncertainty.



Plate 2: The reservoir and new roads created for Lower Sesan II have drawn migrants from downstream, whose fishing livelihoods had been impacted by the dam. A conflict was brewing between these new arrivals and the resettled community. (Photo: Chann Sopheak)

Therefore, it looks like people and nature will not cope in the resilient way that SDG9 anticipates, and this highlights the critical role for safeguards in infrastructure planning. Historically, the most prominent safeguards for dam projects were those of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), for private-sector lending, and the World Bank, for loans provided to national governments. But infrastructure funding and management is only becoming more complex, especially with the [Multilateral Development Banks' push](#) to leverage new finance for infrastructure from “billions to trillions” through complex investment partnerships.

The Lower Sesan II project is illustrative of this complexity. Initially commencing with Vietnamese and IFC finance, among other sources, this should have triggered the application of several IFC Performance Standard (PS), including: PS4 (community health, safety and security); PS5 (land acquisition and involuntary resettlement); PS6 (biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of living natural resources); PS7 (Indigenous Peoples); and PS8 (cultural heritage). But this was compromised by inadequate national laws and a lack of commitment to serious implementation of the safeguards. Further complications then arose as the Lower Sesan II investment was transferred to the Chinese company Hydrolancang

International Energy (Huaneng Group). Such transfers are not uncommon with large infrastructure projects, but they demand attention because they complicate accountability and responsibility. Finally, even if well implemented, the safeguards would provide little scope to deal with cumulative impacts across the landscape and catchment.<sup>vi</sup>

When it comes to measuring progress towards SDG9, we will need to go beyond narrow technical indicators. The experience with Mekong dams shows that the material and social impacts of such infrastructure must be considered in a contextual and fine-grained way. Otherwise, as Sally Engle Merry suggests,<sup>vii</sup> the SDG9 indicators could become tick-boxes that disguise or gloss over injustices on the ground.

Furthermore, for international safeguard frameworks to be meaningful, they need to attend more to local and national contexts. This means acknowledging that most infrastructure development settings are unequal, marked by differential voices, power relations, gains and losses. Trade-offs between the interests of different groups are therefore inevitable for SDG9. The voices of those who are most affected by infrastructure development must therefore be elevated in all planning and decision-making processes.

<sup>i</sup> Cernea, M. 1997. “The Risks and Reconstruction Model for Displaced Populations.” *World Development* 25 (10): 1569–87; Barney, K. 2009. “Laos and the Making of a ‘Relational’ Resource Frontier.” *The Geographical Journal* 175 (2): 146–59; Hirsch, P., and A. Wyatt. 2006. “Negotiating Local Livelihoods: Scales of Conflict in the Sesan River Basin.” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 45(1): 51–68; Baird, I. 2011. “The Don Sahong Dam.” *Critical Asian Studies* 43 (2): 211–35; Shoemaker, B. & W. Robichau (eds). 2018. *Dead in the Water: Global Lessons from the World Bank’s Model Hydropower Project in Laos*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Baird, I., and K. Barney. 2017. “The Political Ecology of Cross-Sectoral Cumulative Impacts: Modern Landscapes, Large Hydropower Dams and Industrial Tree Plantations in Laos and Cambodia.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44 (4): 769–95; Shoemaker, B., and W. Robichau (eds). 2018. *Dead in the Water: Global Lessons from the World*

*Bank’s Model Hydropower Project in Laos*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

<sup>iii</sup> Walsh, J. 2009. “The Rising Importance of Chinese Labour in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12 (2): 1–11.

<sup>iv</sup> Walsh, J. 2009. “The Rising Importance of Chinese Labour in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12 (2): 1–11; Milne, S. 2015. “Cambodia’s Unofficial Regime of Extraction: Illicit Logging in the Shadow of Transnational Governance and Investment.” *Critical Asian Studies* 47 (2): 200–28.

<sup>v</sup> Grumbine, R., and J. Xu. 2011. “Mekong Hydropower Development.” *Science* 332 (6026): 178–79; see also <https://www.stimson.org/2020/2020-status-of-lower-mekong-mainstream-and-tributary-dams/>

<sup>vi</sup> Baird, I., and K. Barney. 2017. “The Political Ecology of Cross-Sectoral Cumulative Impacts: Modern Landscapes, Large Hydropower Dams and Industrial Tree

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Plantations in Laos and Cambodia.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44 (4): 769–95.

<sup>vii</sup> Merry, S.E. 2011. “Measuring the World: Indicators, Human Rights, and Global Governance.” *Current Anthropology* 52 (3): 583–95

# Adaptation to Climate Change: A Case Study of Tonle Sap Lake Communities

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*Sopheak Seng*

## Introduction

**C**limate change (CC) is one of the significant challenges for development in every nation. In the last few decades, scientific studies have shown that climate change has significant impacts on people's livelihoods around the globe. Extreme weather-related events such as floods, droughts, storms, and heat waves have caused substantial damage to human society, including human health and their wellbeing. Since CC is one of the biggest obstacles to the development of every country in the world, least-developed countries are seen to have been most severely affected by CC impacts.

In a least-developed country like Cambodia, the majority of local people are critically dependent on agricultural production for their primary livelihoods. In the Tonle Sap Lake region, agriculture and fishery resources are essential for local communities, and they play a crucial role in shaping the country's economy. Rice and fish in the region are the foundation of food security and income, and thus the local communities living in the region are strongly dependent on fishing and rice farming for their primary livelihoods. However, in the past few decades, CC and human activities in the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River have caused significant changes to the lake and its ecosystems. Amongst the natural hazards, droughts and high temperature are seen as the most devastating hazards in the region, which have caused the lake to become very shallow. As a consequence, it decreased the fish population and damaged rice and crop farming.

This article is based on a research conducted in two villages (farming and fishing villages) in the Tonle Sap Lake region. It examines how local people in the region have coped with CC when their main sources of income have been affected by droughts. The article provides an insight into the adaptation practices to deal with CC at the local level, and it suggests the involvement of relevant stakeholders to help strengthen local adaptation capacity so that the local people in the region can cope better with the current adverse impacts of CC.

## Local adaptation practices to respond to droughts

CC, specifically droughts and high temperatures, have significant impacts on local people and their livelihoods. To cope with these natural hazards, the Tonle Sap Lake communities have adopted various livelihood adaptation methods as below.

- ***Changing fishing methods***

In the fishing community, fishing is the most significant livelihood activity of the local people. Since the impacts of severe drought on the local communities' fishing activities were too high, most of the common and traditional fishing gears that had been used in the dry season are no longer practical. A cylindrical fish trap (locally known as Lob) and a gillnet, which had been used in the past, cannot be used with current severe droughts in the Tonle Sap Lake. Local fishers reported that they could not use those two types of traditional fishing gears because the water was too shallow and muddy and fish was less abundant in the lake and its tributaries. Instead, they use a seine net with

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lead sinkers (locally known as Proyong) to catch fish. The Proyong is a piece of new fishing equipment, yet it is more practical to catch fish during the severe droughts.

Besides, the local fishers in both communities also changed their fishing zones in the lake to catch fish when they realised that the fishing zones near their communities had become too shallow to catch fish. Those local fishers need to go further in the lake and find other fishing zones where there is enough water to fish. Some of them even cross the lake, which is approximately 30 km away from their villages, to catch fish.

- ***Livestock raising***

Livestock raising is one of the most critical means of livelihoods helping local communities earn extra income. In a farming village where I conducted the research, local people commonly raise pigs and chickens for their livelihoods. The villagers in this community also raise buffaloes and cows. However, for most people, buffaloes and cows are considered more as assets rather than as sources of income. With support from NGOs on technical training, some households are able to raise chickens on a large scale for supplemental income. The participants in my research told me that they had started to raise pigs and chickens when they could not earn as much from fishing as before due to the decline in fish population in the lake and its tributaries.

In the fishing village, however, there are a small number of households raising pigs and chickens for their supplemental income. Typically, pig and chicken raising is in small scale for household consumption only.

- ***Crop farming, vegetable gardening, wild vegetable collecting, and animals and birds hunting***

Growing vegetables and crops in farmlands is one of the adaptation methods the local communities in the region have practiced to

earn supplemental income. The villagers have been practising this method for decades, but some of the participants emphasised that they had started to do crop farming when they realised that they could not earn as much money as before from their primary sources of livelihoods. This method, however, is done mostly by better-off households. Other households, who cannot afford farmlands, do vegetable gardening, either at the front or the back yard of their house instead. The vegetable gardening provides both supplemental income and food for the households.

Moreover, other poor households in the two communities pick wild edible vegetables for their daily consumption. These households pick vegetable and plant species that grow with minimal water, such as drumstick leaves, ivy gourd leaves, and edible amaranth. These species can be found in the village. Other plant species such as water spinach, freshwater mangrove and sesbania flowers could be found at natural ponds, tributaries and on the lakeshore.

Besides, the local communities in the region hunt wild animals such as rice-field rats, aquatic snakes, and birds for their supplemental income and daily consumption while they can no longer heavily rely on their major sources of livelihoods (fishing and rice farming). The meat of snake and rat is sold in the communities and to middlemen.

- ***Wage labour***

Wage labour is one of the adaptation strategies that the villagers in the region rely on to generate income when their main sources of income have been negatively affected by severe droughts. The forms of wage labour of the communities include working in agricultural farms, providing labour to fishing-related activities, and working as a housebuilder and/or a construction worker in town.

## **Conclusion**

In the last few years, CC, especially droughts, have had damaging impacts on rural communities in the Tonle Sap Lake region. The impacts of droughts have threatened the livelihoods and food security of the communities in the region. Having faced the extreme environmental phenomena, the Tonle Sap Lake people are not passive. Instead, the villagers in both the farming and fishing villages in the region have actively adopted different adaptation practices so that they are able to respond to the current CC.

Various CC adaptation methods have been developed by the local communities in the region. However, there appears to be little

official involvement from the government and NGOs in the local adaptation process to CC. The local communities have been left to themselves to deal with CC. The majority of local communities said that their CC adaptation methods had been developed from their local knowledge and experiences with little support from NGOs. Most of the adaptations being used are primarily low-cost and low-tech. They may be questionable in terms of sustainability. Hence, the involvement of the government and NGOs is crucial in helping develop CC adaptation methods and policy at the local level. The contributions from the government and NGOs will not only strengthen local resilience and adaptation capacity to CC, but they will also enhance the adaptation methods to be more productive and sustainable.

# **Place-Based People-Centred (PBPC) Rural Development: A Model for Sustainable and Inclusive Growth and Rural Resilience in the Mekong Region**

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*Keo Piseth*

**F**lowing 4,909 kilometres and draining a total land area of 795,000 square kilometres from the Tibetan Plateau to the Mekong Delta through six countries namely China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the Mekong River has unique ecological characteristics. It is home to more than 20,000 plant species; 850 fish species consisting of large critically endangered fish species namely *pangasianodon gigas*, *orcaella brevirostris*, Giant Mekong catfish, freshwater Irrawaddy dolphin; and other kinds of aquatic resources.<sup>i</sup> For centuries, the river has played pivotal roles supporting local subsistence, income generation, trade and economy, transportation, and cultural practices, among others. It supports more than 60 million people of the riparian countries.

The dramatic increase in demands for energy and food production due to population growth, urbanisation and industrialisation expansion, and economic growth has resulted in ecological catastrophe and environmental depletion and pollution. These impacts along with the natural catastrophe posed by climate change have made the lives of millions of people, particularly the poor, in even greater jeopardy.

With these unprecedented rapid changes and impacts, it is imperative for policy makers to pay closer attention to the maximum use of the potentials of rural areas, which cover the majority of land areas of the Mekong region. With the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on urban economies, there has been an influx of migrant workers returning to rural areas after they had been laid off from their jobs in cities.

With relatively stronger family and community supports in place, to most villagers, if not all, their rural homelands are safe havens protecting them from external shocks such as Covic-19 and other extreme events. The villagers can turn to their close families or other villagers for supports when they are in need of assistance, for examples, in case of a food shortage or a family member falling sick. In addition, with abundant land and natural resources, villagers feel secure that they will be able to find sufficient food to feed their families. In most parts of the region, villagers have access to agricultural land for food production, and they can catch aquatic animals from paddy fields, ponds, rivers, and natural waterways. They can also go to nearby forests to collect plants, herbs, honey, and other types of non-timber forest products to feed their family.

This article posits that Place-Based People-Centred Rural Development, which exemplifies by the TECHO Conceptual Framework, is a suitable model for sustainable and inclusive development of rural areas in the Mekong region. The following sections provide further elaborations on the model.

## **Place-based people-centred (PBPC) rural development**

PBPC rural development model aims to make maximised utilisation of local resources for development, and its focus is on the local people. PB here refers to a development strategy that utilises endogenous potentials to allow local places to grow, drawing on available natural, physical, financial, and

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human capitals. This strategy is adaptive to socio-cultural and environmental contexts. It applies a holistic and integrated approach, which involves multi-sectors and cross-disciplines. PC in this model means putting people at the centre of the development to ensure that everyone equally bears the fruits of the development outcomes. To do so, bottom-up approach and multi-stakeholder partnership are applied.

PBPC uses culture as a core foundation and is followed by Technology, Education, Cooperation, Humanity, and Ownership (TECHO) as guiding principles. The detailed explanation of TECHO are as the following.

‘Technology’ consists of both indigenous and modern technologies to drive the development of villages, which will become growth centres. Technological upgrading process shall begin with taking stock of the existing reservoirs of local knowledge, ideas, and skills, while at the same time embracing innovation and new discoveries. Next, ‘Education’ gives priority to training and technology and skill transfer to equip people with necessary tools to improve their productivities (land, labour, and capital), employability, quality and standards of goods and services, competitiveness, and innovativeness.

Furthermore, ‘Cooperation’ centres on community-building by fostering coordination and expanding relationships between and among communities and villages. Community-building through trust, namely between rural and urban communities, aims to facilitate exchanges of goods and services and to promote transportation that provides economic means for people, in addition to support local tourism development. Moreover, ‘Humanity’ puts people at the centre of village development strategies, and thus their happiness, rights and dignity, among others, are the top priorities for the achievements of medium and long-term development goals. Additionally, ‘Ownership’ emphasises originality of ideas and

development approaches based on the contextualisation of local characteristics and systems. On top of this is recognition of ownership of the village development projects and their outcomes by local communities and local authorities.

For the actual interventions, the project activities may vary, depending on different potentials of each locality. The broad components for project interventions can be categorised into (1) Tourism Development, (2) Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry Production, (3) Cultural Preservation and Environmental Protection, (4) Specialised Human Resource Development, and (5) Digital Governance.

### **Contributions of PBPC to sustainable and inclusive development and rural resilience**

There are numerous ways in which PBPC can contribute to sustainable and inclusive development and rural resilience. Starting with economic dimension, with numerous potential economic activities, rural areas can act as the centres for food production and consumption, goods supply, innovative Small-Medium Entrepreneurship, cultural and ecotourism, and high-tech industries. These are important for local employment, income generation, and rural economy. They are important to slow down outmigration from rural areas and to help lay a strong foundation for national economic growth.

Second, on social dimension, PBPC contributes to supporting villagers’ happiness and well-being. Having been able to get sufficient income from their land or having jobs in the villages allow villagers to stay close to their families and to provide necessary care and support to their family members. Their children can go to school and enjoy their childhood. One of the current main problems from outmigration is that the elderly and young children are left behind without gaining sufficient supports. Old parents find it hard to turn to other villagers all

the time for regular supports. In some cases, young children have to drop school at very young age in order to support their families. Without education, those children are most likely to fall into chronic and intergenerational poverty. Additionally, with more jobs and development projects available in the villages, the inequality gap between urban and rural areas is reduced.

Third, on environmental dimension, to ensure the sustainability of development activities, PBPC is driven by ecologically and environmentally friendly principles that aim to keep the air clean and the nature preserved along with the promotion of green man-made space. Clean air, non-polluted water, and green space are essential for healthy and long lives of the villagers. Forest provides food for consumption and resources for development, and it plays an important role in the ecological processes for water supply and for balancing extreme weather. Numerous activities including forest protection and rehabilitation, fish sanctuary protection, green villages, high-tech incineration, and sewage waste management system are core components for PBPC.

In addition to the above, cultural heritage, which is significant for Cambodian pride and nation-building and economic development, is better preserved by PBPC interventions. With limited government budget, community-based preservation programs with supports from

relevant government institutions, international organisations, and private agencies will be introduced to preserve the country's abundant and rich cultural heritage, which requires closer attention.

Finally, human resource development, physical infrastructure construction, and digital connectivity created by PBPC through Public-Private-People-Partnership lay a strong foundation for sustainable and inclusive development and rural resilience. When external shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic happen, rural economic activities will likely remain robust, and rural areas will be able to absorb the impacts that affect urban economies. Rural areas can supply food to cities, where food supply tends to face disruptions. In addition, in coping with Covid-19, rural areas provide adequate living space favourable for social distancing. Prevention and control of the disease is relatively much easier if there are clear mechanisms in place. Quarantine, self-isolation, and social distancing measures can be effectively enforced in rural localities, as communities there are close-knit, and information sharing about the disease and those being infected can be rapidly and widely shared among themselves. Community supports can also be mobilised to help those in needs. Therefore, better development of rural healthcare infrastructure can help ease the burden on urban health care during times of crises.

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<sup>i</sup> Mekong River Commission. 2020. *Mekong Basin*.  
<http://www.mrcmekong.org/mekong-basin/>; Mekong

River Commission. (n.d). *Fast Facts and Figures about the Mekong River*.

# 30 Years of Sustainable Development in Vietnam: What the Country Has Achieved and the Challenges Ahead

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*Lena Le*

**I**t has been almost 30 years since Vietnam issued the Vietnam National Action Plan for Environment and Sustainable Development 1991–2000 in 1991. However, the topic of sustainable development has always been in vogue. As a developing country, the question of how Vietnam is able to keep its economic development momentum while maintaining sustainability has drawn the attention of policy makers and researchers. This article explores how Vietnam views and mainstreams sustainable development into the country's national development strategies, its achievements, and especially the challenges amidst all the myriad of changes in the international and regional landscape.

## Sustainable development policy framework

Vietnam defines sustainable development as “Development that meets the needs of present generations without doing harm to the ability to meet the needs of future generations based on a close and harmonious combination of economic growth, guaranteed social progress, and environmental protection.”<sup>i</sup> The country's commitment to sustainable development has been reflected in numerous important documents such as the Socio-Economic Development Strategy for 1991–2000, Instructive No 36 - CT/TW dated 25 June 1998 issued by the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the Socio-Economic Development Strategy for 2011–2020, and especially the Strategic Orientation of Sustainable Development in Vietnam (Vietnam Agenda 21). The latest document pertaining to sustainable development is the CPV's

resolution on Vietnam's Sustainable Sea-Based Economic Development Strategy, which was passed in 2018.

Vietnam is also the signatory to several international conventions on sustainable development. The 2017 National Action Plan for the Implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda with 115 specific targets is an effort of Vietnam to nationalise Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the contexts of Vietnam.

## Vietnam's sustainable development achievements

After almost thirty years, Vietnam has come a long way in moving the country's development process towards sustainable development.

*Economically*, since opening up its market, Vietnam has been one of the fastest growing economies in Asia. Its gross domestic product (GDP) has been relatively stable with an average economic growth rate of 6.8% from 2009 to 2019.<sup>ii</sup> In 2019, the GDP increased by 7.02% to USD262 billion, representing a GDP per capita of 2,800 USD, the highest in Vietnam's history.<sup>iii</sup> The economic structure has seen positive changes with higher proportion of industry and services and lower proportion of agriculture in GDP.

*Socially*, remarkable achievements have been recorded. The population literacy rate among those aged 15 years and over has increased sharply over the past 20 years. Primary education is compulsory across the country. The rate of school-age children in school has

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increased, and the gender gap in general education has nearly been eliminated.<sup>iv</sup> The unemployment rate for people over 15 years old was low, at 2.05% in 2019.<sup>v</sup> Vietnam's economic growth dovetails with the nosedive in poverty and hunger rates. Poverty rates declined sharply from over 70% in 2002 to below 6% in 2019.<sup>vi</sup> Also importantly, Vietnam made good progress in human development, with an average annual Human Development Index (HDI) growth of 1.36% from 1990 to 2018. In 2018, Vietnam entered the group of countries with the highest HDI growth rates in the world.<sup>vii</sup>

*Environmentally*, legal system on natural resource management and environmental protection has been formulated and improved. This system engages all sectors and authorities at different levels in the protection of the living environment and the prevention of pollution, and it raises public awareness and opens more space for the participation of people from all walks of life in environmental protection activities. Additionally, budget funding for environmental protection was increased. In 2018, the Vietnamese Government approved a new allocation of US\$23.3 million for a five-year program between 2016 and 2020 for dealing with environmental pollution.

These above achievements paved the way for the increase of Vietnam's status on the universal SDGs index.<sup>viii</sup> In 2019, Vietnam was ranked 54<sup>th</sup> among 162 countries and territories on the SDG Index. In Southeast Asia, Vietnam was ranked second only to Thailand.

## **Challenges ahead**

Successful as it might seem, Vietnam is now facing many hindrances on its path of SDGs. These challenges, as noted in the Directive issued by the Government in 2019, stem from the incomplete awareness about sustainable development and from policies which favored fast economic growth at the expense of environmental protection. While there is

nothing wrong with these, from an international relations perspective, this paper argues that there are several regional and international alarming factors which might strongly affect the country's efforts in implementing sustainable development in years to come.

First and foremost, *climate change* continues to hit the country hard. In 2019, Vietnam was ranked sixth among countries and territories most affected by extreme weather.<sup>ix</sup> Although Vietnam has carried out its international commitments and efforts in responding to climate change, in the context of more intense, more frequent extreme weather events, the country continues to be one of the most vulnerable regions in the world in terms of rising sea levels, landslides, and flash flooding.

Secondly, the *outbreak of Covid 19* has brought about unprecedented challenges to the world economy. Though Vietnam was expected to continue to grow in 2020, the pandemic has significantly impacted its economy, especially its tourism, travel and hospitality sectors.<sup>x</sup> Besides, as an export-oriented country, Vietnam's economy is highly dependent upon other economies. The great lockdown all over the world and the global uncertainties as a result of Covid 19 both have disrupted the supply chains of Vietnamese companies and have slowed Vietnam's main export markets.<sup>xi</sup>

Thirdly, the trade war between China and the US might benefit Vietnam in areas of manufacturing, foreign investment, and increasing exports, but it also presents the country with difficulties. The inflow of Chinese products which are unable to be exported to the US or fake 'Made-in-Vietnam' goods originating from China are likely to enter Vietnamese markets. Besides, the uncertainties of China's and US's markets, which are two important trading partners of Vietnam, and the risk of Vietnam being labeled a currency manipulator by the US because of its trade surplus with the US are another concern.

Fourthly, air pollution has increasingly threatened the country, especially in the two metropolises of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city. At the end of 2019, Vietnam was ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in the number of pollution-linked deaths in the Western Pacific region.<sup>xii</sup> Industrial emissions, the increasing number of motor vehicles using fossil fuels, and construction sites are main causes of reduced air quality. Authorities identified short-term solutions, which could help partially address Vietnam's pollution. However, long-term national policies are needed.

Last, the Mekong River is likely to become a flash point of the region. To Vietnam, the Mekong Delta is the rice bowl of the whole country. However, hydropower dam projects on the Mekong River are forecasted to reduce Vietnam's GDP and create long-term impact to habitats, population and communities, changing

<sup>i</sup> See Vietnam's Law on Environmental Protection, Article 4, Clause 3.

<sup>ii</sup> Author's own compilation from World Bank's national accounts data at  
[https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD\\_ZG?locations=VN](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD_ZG?locations=VN)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://taphitchaichinh.vn/su-kien-noi-bat/quy-mo-nen-kinh-te-nam-2019-cao-nhat-tu-truoc-den-nay-317277.html>

<sup>iv</sup> See Vietnam's population and housing census of 2019.

<sup>v</sup> <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/570368/up-to-15-million-new-jobs-created-in-2019.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://vietnam.un.org/en/27782-viet-nam-has-made-significant-human-development-progress-low-increases-inequality>

<sup>viii</sup> SDGs index tracks and ranks countries' performance on achieving the 17 SDGs set by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015.

<sup>ix</sup> German Watch. 2019. *Global Climate Risk Index 2019*, p. 6.

breeding behaviours, species interactions, ecosystem functioning, and the migration of fish.<sup>xiii</sup> On top of that, the manifestations of climate change, including warmer temperatures, more storms, droughts, floods, and sea-level rise make things worse. In 2016, Vietnam experienced its worst drought in 90 years, resulting in widespread rice crop failures and water shortages for 1.8 million people.<sup>xiv</sup>

After almost 30 years, Vietnam has achieved impressive progress towards the sustainable development goals. In years to come, as Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc asserted, "Sustainable development is a consistent policy of the Party and State of Vietnam."<sup>xv</sup> The country will continue to show its strong commitment to the implementation of sustainable development despite the challenges ahead.

[https://germanwatch.org/sites/germanwatch.org/files/Global%20Climate%20Risk%20Index%202019\\_2.pdf](https://germanwatch.org/sites/germanwatch.org/files/Global%20Climate%20Risk%20Index%202019_2.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Deserted-beaches-show-coronavirus-hit-to-Vietnam-s-tourism-sector>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.pwc.com/vn/en/publications/vietnam-publications/economy-covid19.html>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/pollution-kills-over-71-300-in-vietnam-in-a-year-4030833.html>

<sup>xiii</sup> Yoshida, Y., Lee H. S., Trung B. H., Tran H. D., Lall M. K., Kakar K., and Xuan T. D. 2020. "Impacts of Mainstream Hydropower Dams on Fisheries and Agriculture in Lower Mekong Basin." *Sustainability* 12 (6): 2408.

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timdaiss/2016/05/25/why-vietnam-is-running-dry-worst-drought-in-nearly-100-years/>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/prime-minister-directive-affirms-sustainable-development-goals-in-national-strategies-16741.html>

# Renewable Energy Financing in the Agri-Food Sector in Cambodia

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*Long Sarou*

## What is renewable energy and why it is important?

**R**enewable energy is energy from sources that are naturally replenishing but are flow-limited. Renewable resources are virtually inexhaustible in duration, but they are limited in the amount of energy that is available per unit of time. Renewable energy technologies are considered the clean sources of energy that have a relatively much lower environmental impact than conventional energy technologies.

Cambodia has one of the lowest electrification rates in Southeast Asia. The Royal Government of Cambodia has set an ambitious target to reach 100% of the villages with a certain type of electricity by 2020 (including battery power) and 70% of households connected to grid-quality electricity by 2030. Currently, 62% of villages and 53% of households have access to grid quality electricity in Cambodia.

Energy security, environmental concerns, and sustained economic growth are the essential drivers for the renewable energy deployment. In early 2019, Cambodia experienced power outages of around six hours per day. As a large amount of Cambodia's electricity is generated from hydropower dams (about 48%), and as a result of very dry and hot weather between January to April, the hydropower dams were unable to produce enough electricity. Reflecting on the experience of power outages and in an effort to reduce the country's dependency on hydropower dams, Electricite du Cambodge (EDC), the national electric

utility, is now aiming to diversify energy production and is considering to increase the amount of renewable energy sources including solar energy within the next few years. The government aims to produce at least 20% of energy from solar energy in the next three years, supporting the fact that renewable energy will play an increasingly important role in helping Cambodia to develop energy security.

## Renewable energy in the agri-food sector

Cambodia has experienced rapid development in the last two decades with agriculture as a key driver to this economic development contributing about 20% of the GDP in 2017. Agriculture as a sector continues to be the dominant employer in Cambodia for the rural population although the share of employment decreased from 57.7% to 36.4% between 2007 and 2016.

Despite the size and strength of the sector, there are still many challenges. The sector is highly dependent on monsoon rainfall, which in recent years has become increasingly unpredictable. This irregular rainfall associated with climate change has adversely affected crop production. In addition, Cambodian farmers have difficulty competing with neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Vietnam given their high reliance on grid electricity that is expensive and unreliable. About 6.9 million people or 43% of the country's population have no access to dependable electricity in Cambodia. This issue is more prevalent in rural areas causing many farmers to turn to alternative sources with a predominant reliance on back-up diesel

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generators, which leaves farmers vulnerable to diesel price fluctuations and also contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. Even in circumstances where farmers have access to grid electricity, the prices are still relatively high, and the electricity supply is not reliable in some regions of the country. Those difficulties have hindered agricultural productivity, which has caused negative impacts on sustainable economic growth and development.

There are increasing opportunities for Cambodian people in rural and remote areas to gain access to electricity through the installation and use of renewable energy (RE) technologies. Access to affordable and reliable RE is “a vital input for a productive agriculture value chain”, and thus RE technologies such as solar systems and biogas digesters have already gained some traction, and they have been adopted by Cambodian farmers.

Cambodia has an abundant sunlight for year-long exposure, which represents an exciting opportunity for solar power. Energy from solar panels is a viable and sustainable source of power that could lead to energy independence. This potential for energy transition is further supported by the fact that the price of solar panels has started to decrease dramatically, making solar technologies an economically viable energy alternative for agricultural purposes. In remote areas where diesel fuel is expensive or where reliable access to the electricity grid is lacking, solar water pump systems can provide a relatively flexible and climate friendly alternative energy source for agriculture.

## **Renewable energy loan products in the agri-food sector**

Despite the potential for widespread use of RE technologies in Cambodia, the adoption rate remains low. Key barriers to broad adoption are the lack of awareness and experience, the lack of trust in the technologies, and the high upfront

costs, but the most crucial inhibitor is the lack of access to appropriate financing alternatives.

Although Cambodia has one of the most vibrant microfinancing sectors in the world, RE loan products are not considered as a potential market by local Financial Institutions (FIs). The FIs are hesitant to engage in RE investments, as they believe market opportunities are limited, and investments are deemed too risky and unprofitable. In addition, in some instances the FIs might not have a good understanding of renewable energy technologies on the market, the requirements for an energy assessment, or an understanding of the possible return prospects from such investments.

Based on the study by Nexus for Development, there is a potential for FIs to finance a variety of Small and Medium Agri-Food Businesses (SMAs) who are interested in RE investments such as solar and biogas technologies. The costs of some RE technologies for SMAs could align well with the average loan sizes provided by FIs. For example, an investment in a solar powered irrigation system ranges from US \$500 for small scale farmers to US \$10,000 for SMAs. If FIs wish to broaden their services and to develop products to include a more diverse range that meets the needs of their clients, RE financing could emerge as a new market segment.

Most SMAs take loans from FIs to either set-up their farms or to support the operation of their farms. In these cases, offering RE loans to existing clients and farmers may be a cost-effective option as the FIs require less time and costs for conducting due diligence. In addition, it provides FIs with an opportunity to engage more deeply with existing customers and could thus ensue greater customer loyalty. FIs also already have wide networks with established branches in multiple provinces which will allow for a portfolio of this type to quickly scale in a cost-effective manner.

Most FIs in Cambodia require the borrowers to pledge collateral. If FIs could consider other forms of collateral such as the contracts that are entered into for contract farming, this would also open up new opportunities. For example, CP Cambodia has developed modern farming management systems and has engaged in contract farming of various types with Cambodian farmers throughout the country, especially for pig farms. As CP is a large international organisation with a relatively stronger credit quality, any contract that a farmer may have with CP serves to some extent as guaranteed revenues. This is further supported by the fact CP has high standards that the farmers must adhere to facilitate the higher probability that the pigs will be purchased.

## **Conclusion**

The agricultural sector is the backbone of the Cambodian economy. However, energy access

represents a significant challenge for SMAs and farmers when it comes to production, processing, and distribution, which prevents them from establishing viable businesses that can successfully compete in the local and regional markets. There are increasing opportunities for farmers to gain access to electricity through the installation and use of RE technologies.

Generally, FIs in Cambodia consider providing loans to farmers and SMAs as carrying more risks than to other sectors. According to the Cambodia Agriculture Competitiveness Opportunity Assessment in 2019, although there is a variety of financial institutions in Cambodia, they are currently only funding 11% of capital investment required in the agriculture sector. RE lending is already underway as a few local FIs such as Rural Development Bank have shown interest in taking up RE loan instruments.

# Sustainable Urban Development: Civic Roles in Urban's Crisis Management – A Case Study of Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Thailand

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*Yuwadee Kardkarnklai, Nuttida Yenbumrung, and Chayanit Choedthammatorn*

Sustainable development refers to development practices which create balances in every dimension, such as economy, politics, environment, society, culture, and mentality. In addition, all sustainable development methods need to be run by inclusive multilateral management mechanisms.<sup>i</sup> When the world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, how do we achieve sustainable development or solutions to this crisis? Lessons from Thailand offer useful solutions.

The world has seen rapid urbanisation. Cities are spaces where people gather together and drive the economy at different levels. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and spread all over the world. Although it is not yet known from where the pandemic has actually originated, urban areas with high-density population have become clusters of the infectious disease. Most of Thailand's top ten provinces with the biggest number of COVID-19 infections are mega and popular sightseeing cities, namely Bangkok, Phuket, Nonthaburi, Yala, Samut Prakarn, Chonburi, Pattani, Songkhla, Chiang Mai, and Patumthani (as of May 18, 2020).<sup>ii</sup>

Amidst the urban health crisis, despite the fact that the cities have become main clusters of infections, they have also become important organs in developing innovative solutions and practical responses to the pandemic in Thailand. One of the Thai government's preventive measures is pushing each urban area

to be the main unit in dealing with the pandemic. Thailand is a centralised state, yet the government has launched the Localisation Strategy. The government has decentralised governance power to the governors of 76 provinces, who are in charge of designing strategies and managing their own responsible areas. Consequently, the governors and provincial officials of each province feel to compete with one another to launch effective preventive measures that are compatible with the local contexts and conditions of their areas. The aforementioned policy is part of the broader policies of disease prevention and control along with public health policy and remedies.

The state's responses to the pandemic are one story. Nevertheless, the important factor of successful disease control in Thailand is the active participation and *Jit-a-sa* (voluntary and compassion) of people and civil society. They have lent a helping hand to public health and the economy in their own cities by offering supports to other people who got affected by the recession. The civic societies playing the key roles could be categorised into two groups, which are officially organised *Jit-a-sa* and unofficial *Jit-a-sa*.

First, from observations, there are three sub-groups of officially organised *Jit-a-sa*.

- **Village Health Volunteer (VHV) from Ministry of Public Health** – Volunteers in localities have been trained by the Ministry of Public Health to carry out basic medical

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treatments. Nowadays, there are more than 1,040,000 VHV personnels all over the country. During the pandemic, VHV has used proactive measures by visiting every house in their responsible areas to observe and search for people being suspected to catch COVID-19. Their proactive moves helped them find more than 2,000 injectors, who got cured.<sup>iii</sup>

- **The Royal Jit-a-sa** – His Majesty the King instructed the King's Private Office 904 to set up the Royal Initiative Volunteers (RIVs) to practice local development.<sup>iv</sup> During the time of the pandemic, RIVs have prepared and distributed survival packages from the Palace to slums, the poor, the disabled and other vulnerable groups in Bangkok. More than 642 communities and 170,000 households have received the donations.<sup>v</sup>

- **Monks and monasteries** – There are over 914 almshouses under Buddhist monasteries. Moreover, they have planned to expand their almshouses to be mobile around communities to help people by distributing food and water. Over 274,000 people received aid from almshouses daily. At the same time, Thai Buddhist monasteries abroad have also established almshouses to help vulnerable people.<sup>vi</sup>

Second, the unofficial *Jit-a-sa* are groups of good-hearted and compassionate people. They gathered together and helped other people as much as they could, including giving money and large number of medical appliances to hospitals, making face shields, and cooking food and distributing them at many places. Additionally, they have launched charity projects to help people who have been affected by the pandemic, especially those who are not able to reach government aid.

- **Local BKK** – The new generation of Bangkokians launched this online delivery service for local restaurants. They found out that many small restaurants in small communities were about to close down, as the number of customers were decreasing sharply due to the severe pandemic situation.

Accordingly, they offered this channel to those restaurants and communities to be able to earn some money by becoming members of Local BKK's delivery service.

- **Too Pun Suk (Happiness Sharing Cabinet)** – It is the activity based on thoughts of a sharing society. Cabinets are located in communities and are run by people. The main objective is about sharing instant food, ingredients, and necessary items, for examples, toothbrushes, soap, clothes, sanitary pads, to people who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 and are suffering in silence. At the beginning, there were only five cabinets in Bangkok. However, the idea of *Too Pun Suk* swiftly spread to all the provinces in Thailand, with a total of 1,105 cabinets in the whole country and 155 in Bangkok (as of May 15, 2020).<sup>vii</sup>

- **Farmer's Rice for Fisherman's Fish** – The barter-style project is a cooperation between northeastern farmers and southern fishermen, and its transportation is supported by the Royal Air Force. 16 kilograms of rice equals 10 kilograms of fish. This project aims to resolve food shortage from the pandemic.

Many social innovations have emerged from individual people and groups during the COVID-19 pandemic through both official and unofficial *Jit-a-sa*. These innovations could become tools or alternative ways for sustainable urban development. Furthermore, they show that the core of urban development and sustainable crisis management is not only about relying on the central government, but also about the participation and dedication from every sector of the society. Active and compassionate citizenry together with the respect for the rule of law could build a social capital, which is one of the main factors for building resilient cities to cope with future crises.

Even though people living in megacities are having more individualistic ways of life, future urban development should incorporate the sense of rural living into development plans, i.e.,

patterns of collectivist living, empathy, social contributions, helping one another, and taking care of communities. The public sector should also invest more resources and opportunities in social capital by motivating, engaging and supporting civil society and local communities

to take key roles in urban development and crisis management. Enhancing collective spirit and inclusive multilateral management of social projects is the most decisive factor that determines the resilient capacity of particular cities facing crises.

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<sup>i</sup> Vasri, Prawet. 2003. *Karn Pattana Manut Naew Mai Pue Anakot Tee Yungyuen* (A New Human Development for Sustainable Future). Bangkok: Mor Chao Baan. Professor Dr. Prawet Vasri is a Thai social influencer activist, who received the 1981 Ramon Magsaysay Awardee in Government Service.

<sup>ii</sup> Ministry of Public Health of Thailand. 2020. *Official Daily Report on COVID-19 Cases in Thailand*. Accessed 18 May 2020. <https://ddc.moph.go.th/viralpneumonia/>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Bureau of the Royal Household. 2019. *Background of the Royal Initiative Volunteers*. Accessed 12 May 2020. <https://www.royaloffice.th/en/royal-thai-volunteers/about-royal-thai-volunteers-doing-good-deeds-for-country-and-peoplefrom-our-heart/background/>.

<sup>v</sup> MGR Online. 2020. *Nailuang-Phra Rachinee Proad Klao Hai Choen Thung Yungcheep Phra Ratchatan Morb Chumchon Ae-ud Kwa 1.7 Saen Kruea Ruean* (His Majesty the King – Her Majesty the Queen Give the Survival Package to Slums, 170,000 Households).

Accessed 12 May 2020.

<https://mgonline.com/uptodate/detail/9630000035501>

<sup>vi</sup> Thai PBS. 2020. *Wat Tua Thai Tung Rong Tan Laew 914 Haeng Chuay Khon Thai Su COVID-19* (Temples All Over Country Founded 914 Almshouses, Helping Thai People from COVID-19). Accessed 12 May 2020. <https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/292386>.

<sup>vii</sup> Kulchaervijit, Supakit. 2020. *Yod Too Pun Suk Tarn Pai COVID-19 Tua Prathet* (The Number of Too Pun Suk in the Country in Response to COVID-19). Accessed 15 May 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/bank.kulchartvijit>

# For Myanmar to Attain Sustainable Development Goals

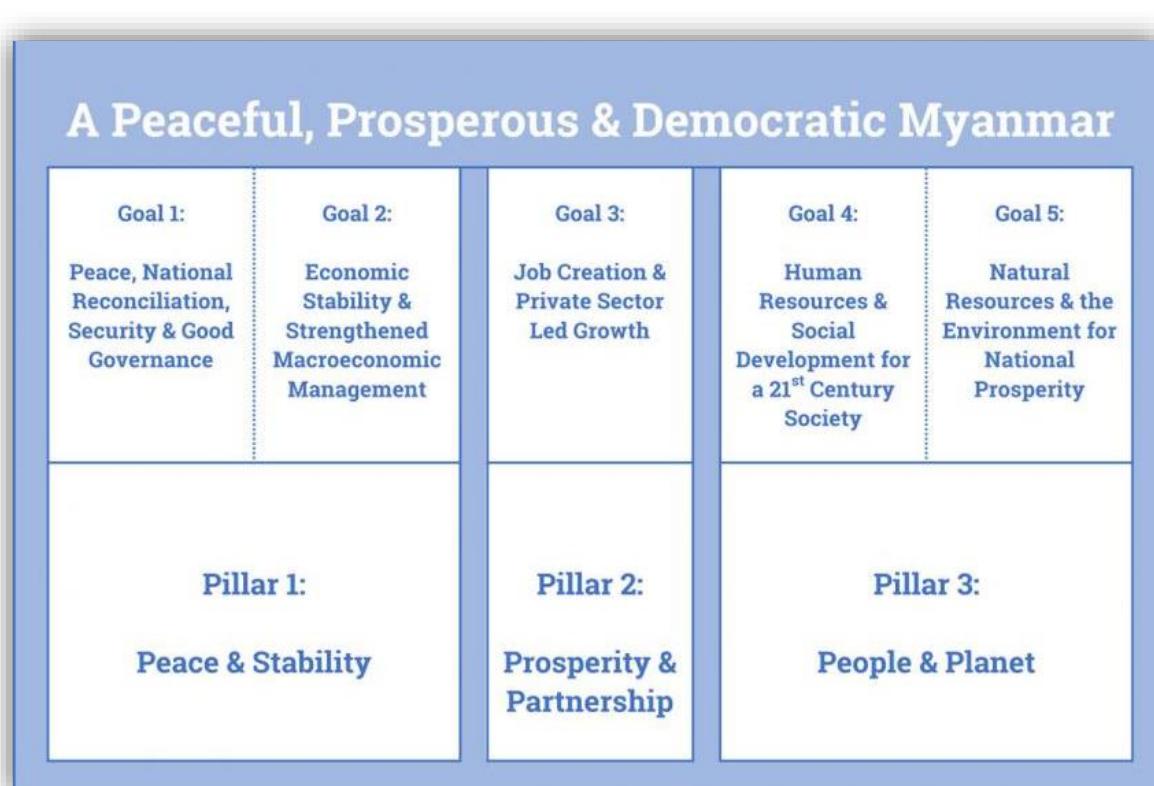
*Khin Zaw Win*

In August 2018, the Myanmar government issued the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP) as the single national strategy (2018–30) to provide an overarching plan for long-term sustainable development and for strengthening coordination and coherence among the myriad sectoral, ministerial, and subnational plans. The 66-page-long document not only builds upon multiple existing strategy documents and sectoral plans, but also mediates between local developmental needs and the global sustainable development agenda. It sets out three pillars, five goals, 28 strategies, and 251 action plans (see the box below). The three pillars include peace and stability (pillar 1), prosperity and partnership (pillar 2), and people and planet

(pillar 3), which are the same as the *five Ps* that broadly capture the scope of the 2030 Agenda.

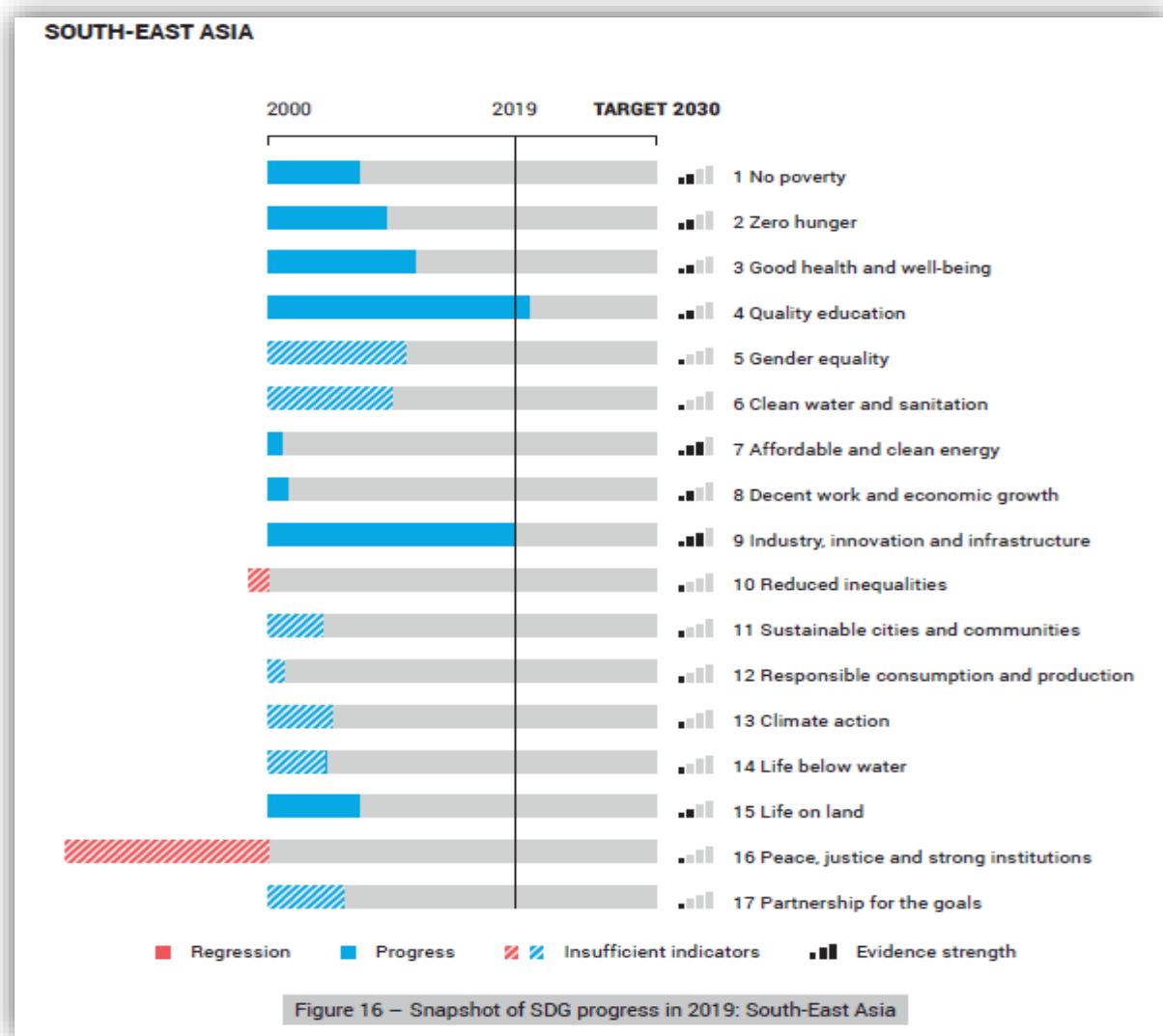
The Ministry of Planning and Finance is the focal entity for the MSDP implementation. The ministry houses the MSDP Implementation Unit, which is responsible for providing guidance, approving strategic decisions and solving strategic issues.

A schematic diagram of the MSDP



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Progress towards the SDG in Southeast Asian region:



Source: Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020.

With the current pace of progress, Southeast Asian region is on track on quality education (Goal 4) and industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9). It is also making a good progress on several other goals, such as zero hunger (Goal 2) and good health and well-being (Goal 3). It needs, however, to strengthen efforts for the remaining goals to accelerate progress, in particular on reduced inequalities (Goal 10), and peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16), where negative trends need to be reversed.

Myanmar being a least-developed country, the SDGs assume special importance. According to the World Bank's *Myanmar Overview* (updated April 2020).

Reform momentum slowed after 2016 as a newly elected civilian government grappled with defining its economic vision and managing the public administration to implement policies and programs. Most recently, the Government adopted an ambitious Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan, reinvigorated its economic reform agenda, and has gradually begun to tackle the more difficult second-

generation reforms needed to sustain the economic transition. The second democratic national elections are scheduled for late 2020.

### **The Covid 19 pandemic**

Myanmar, like the entire world, is facing not only an unprecedented health crisis, but an unprecedented economic crisis as well. Myanmar's economy has already been severely hit by disruptions in global trade and tourism. Thousands of businesses and hundreds of thousands of people - including migrant workers - are already suffering the consequences. With the spread of the coronavirus and enforced lockdowns, the situation could become terribly worse.

The saving grace for Myanmar is that the "outbreak" has been mild. The government's response has been along the urban, middle-class lines. This is inappropriate and inadequate.

Now inadvertently, the Covid-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) could be an added boost. At first glance, it may seem that the Covid-19 pandemic has come as a threat and a huge burden upon faltering economies. To some extent it is but it does not have to be deterministic. With the right mobilisation – which demands good leadership – the structures and resources to fight the pandemic can also be applied towards the SDGs. There is a synergy which can be developed. We can take strong measures to stop the spread of the virus, not only to save the economy but also to strengthen it for the future.

There is this debate going around – saving lives or saving the economy? In poor countries with little or no safety nets, there are compelling humanitarian reasons to keep the economy running. Again, we are copying from other countries by taking an urban, middle-class approach. If you and your family are living a hand-to-mouth existence, a lockdown spells starvation and ruination.

But with the Myanmar government's track record, a lot remains to be seen and to be done.

If carried out well and with wide public and ethnic buy-in, the CERP could become the foundation to address not only the economy, but other looming challenges like climate change. Not to mention the persisting conflict. On the other hand, it could also turn out to be another government programme mired in inefficiency, corruption and plain disconnection.

For the state, it is required that the incumbent government not see the effort in a partisan manner, but as an endeavour which state and society are fully committed to.

### **An added spur to achieving the goals?**

The World Bank adds.

Climate change is another major challenge for the development of Myanmar. It is one of the world's most disaster-prone countries, exposed to multiple hazards, including floods, cyclones, earthquakes, landslides and droughts. Along with Puerto Rico and Honduras, Myanmar is one of three countries most affected by climate change in the period 1999-2018 according to the [2020 Global Climate Risk Index](#) and 19<sup>th</sup> out of 191 countries on the [INFORM Index for Risk Management](#).

While South-East Asia has the highest proportion of forest area in the region (48 per cent of its land area), it is the only subregion with declining share of forest areas. The net change rate of forest area is negative in four countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar and Timor-Leste.

Central to the picture is the "style" of governance by the Myanmar state, particularly the incumbent government. A paternalistic neglect of local views, mistrust of civil society, and very centralised decision-making exacerbate the situation. The private sector continues to be dominated by crony capitalists who keep to their rentier, extractivist practices.

Ending the armed conflict and attending to displaced populations are critical issues to be

sure, but using these as excuses is not going to be enough. A more plural, open and inclusive approach to the business of government is the only way Myanmar can meet its overwhelming challenges.

The present centralised, hierarchical and bureaucratic business-as-usual will not work, and neither will mass party mobilisations, which are a thing of the past. A drastic re-think is desperately required.

The mark of true leadership is to effect change despite all of these. In Myanmar and in other countries, popular revolutions had brought down dictatorial regimes. The 1988 uprising had not been sparked by a single democratic leader – the politicians had moved in later and gleaned power, feeding on the public anger and discontent. Initial political parties emerged, and later what may be called ‘regularized’ civil society. There is cooperation up to now, but the two streams are different and distinct. This is

one sign that democracy in Myanmar is problematic.

The relationship that civil society has with ethnic nationality parties is far better than with the major parties, so there is hope.

The choice and challenge before the country is twofold. The first is to break the impasse between the major parties and civil society. (It is not so much a problem with the state per se). This is difficult with the present gerontocracy and will require a generational transfer. The second is to establish a robust plurality in the legislatures and government. This means that ‘second line’ parties will have to try harder in the next elections.

The two are intertwined, and there will be ripple effects. It is on the success of this manoeuvre that forging the state-society structure make the SDGs attainable, and hence the future of the country hinges.



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