

Developing the Mekong Subregion

Edited by Bob Stensholt

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Nearly three decades after the Khmer Rouge retreated from Phnom Penh and the U.S. military withdrew from Laos and Vietnam, the six countries of the greater Mekong subregion (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma or Myanmar, and China's southern Yunnan Province) now collectively represent one of the world's fastest growing regional economies. While the current global economic crisis has severely disrupted political and economic stability throughout Asia, their sustained growth and social harmony—despite considerable religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity—maintain optimism in the subregion. With aims of pinpointing key opportunities and sectors in each country, and encouraging further private sector investment, Australia hosted a series of workshops in 1996 on the Greater Mekong Subregion. An area of great cultural heritage and containing some of the most biologically diverse sites in the world, the region confronts an increasing population and limited resources, antiquated land tenure and telecommunications systems, health epidemics, conflicting gender roles, and ethnic warfare.

Drawing on selected papers from the meetings, *Developing the Mekong Subregion* suggests the cultural and ecological implications of greater development both locally and intra-regionally, and the possibilities of proactive alternatives. The objectives are to expose readers to major trends and changes (social, environmental and economic) in the broader Mekong region, and to direct attention to emerging cultural and physiographic geographies. The very important question of where the region is headed in the future, and whether it can foster a new model of sustainable community development, is also addressed.

Part One explores the roles assigned donor countries and institutions (such as Japan, the Asian Development Bank, ASEAN, and the World Bank), the experiences of Australian companies active in the Mekong subregion, transboundary and environmental concerns, social constraints, and the alleviation of poverty. A study of Nam Theun 2, the trans-basin hydroelectric project now under development in central Laos, is presented as a test case for sustainable development with an appraisal of anticipated benefits and potential impacts. To emphasize the need for community education and participation in sustainably managing the region's natural resources, several papers contrast the experiences of managers in the Murray-Darling Basin of

southeast Australia and the Lancang River in Yunnan Province, as well as the significance of ASEAN's increasing leadership and participation in the development of the Mekong Basin.

Part Two consists of proposals from the Working Committee on Infrastructure Development (WCID), an intergovernmental committee of senior officials established at the initiative of Japan in 1995. Acknowledging the opportunities provided by the cessation of hostilities and the relative stability of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the chapters in this section advocate accumulation and the reallocation of capital (through savings and investment), more efficient use of labor, and technological change to deliver and sustain economic growth throughout the Mekong subregion. In so doing, the writers together establish the interconnectedness of economic, social, and political prosperity and security in Southeast Asia, "one of the most fascinating and most exciting regions of the world."

Among the recurrent themes of the book are the mobilization of private and public resources, implementation of supportive mechanisms that expand complementary linkages and projects, and the creation of meaningful cooperative ventures across political, gender, and ethnic boundaries. Given this context—and its role in organizing the Australia meetings—several writers also evaluate the Japanese government's strategy for greater cross-border cooperation, with its emphasis on infrastructure improvements and trade.

Appendices include the proposal submitted in 1996 by the Greater Mekong Task Force affirming Japan's historical interest and role in the region and its development. Noting recent trends in Asia, the report proposes a "blueprint" for regional development defined by geography, perspective, and potential. Analyses of the economic development plans of the six countries are also appended, as are suggested guidelines to meet the interests and needs of the entire subregion by the year 2020.

Stensholt does a good job of including both conceptual and practical information in his selection of papers, and the reader interested in sustainable development and the Mekong subregion will find the case studies and historical data particularly helpful. Unfortunately, as a collection of professional working papers, there is also some discontinuity between chapters, as well as duplication and even contradictions by different authors in describing individual countries. The current economic crisis in Asia has also effectively outdated many of the authors' assumptions and projections. Despite these shortcomings, I found the book informative and a useful resource for anyone interested in regional economic development and the evolving cultural and industrial landscapes of Southeast Asia. ■

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