

Book Review

Social Challenges for the Mekong Region.

Edited by Mingsarn Kaosa-ard and John Dore. [Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. 2003. 448 pages. ISBN 974-480-42-9]

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The book consists of 15 essays and an introduction by the editors and provides a regional perspective on a wide range of significant regional social challenges for the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).¹ The essays are written by both older and younger generations of GMS writers. Two essays were written by non-GMS citizens who have been working in a GMS country and on GMS issues for many years.

The broad aim of this book is to influence policymakers. It also aims to contribute a more robust interdisciplinary debate regarding the question of what comprises a better future for the subregion. As a consequence of relative peace in the GMS and thanks to global and regional drivers (the GMS economic program launched in 1992, for example), the people and countries in the subregion are increasingly connected, and a “GMS community” is becoming a reality.

Sufficient reflection is required on what regionalism in the GMS means for the present and what it might mean for the future. It is also important to know that regionalism has different meanings for different interest groups: state elites want political solidarity, ecosystem advocates want to scale up the limited scope of state and cross-border programs, civil groups hope to increase their political space, and so on. In other words, a sound and shared understanding of existing and emerging social challenges and the consequences of development interventions is required if societies are to deal with them effectively.

The essays successfully highlight four complex sets of social challenges facing the GMS countries: relations among states and among people; support for the disadvantaged and less-empowered; more equitable access to and sustainable use of natural resources; and improved regional governance. The increasing integration of the GMS is providing opportunities but it also poses new challenges and conflicts. Despite greater cooperation

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¹ The original GMS comprised Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam and Yunnan Province of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In 2004, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of the PRC also joined.

among all GMS countries on many matters, Mr. Dore draws attention to the insufficient cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the lower Mekong countries in developing water resources. On the other hand, Mekong water governance highlights the growing and critically important cooperation of civil society. In general, new forms of regionalism are challenging traditional inter-governmental regional organizations. The emerging relations between states and people need to be dealt with wisely.

The second set of social challenges is also formidable. How can Mekong societies better protect the less empowered, i.e., the poor, ethnic minorities, women, the sick (HIV/AIDS sufferers and drug users), refugees, and vulnerable migrant workers? Many people in the five Mekong countries and in Yunnan Province of the PRC are living in poverty; in fact, Yunnan has one of the highest incidences of poverty in the PRC. The ongoing fight against poverty often focuses on cash income. Ms. Kaosa-ard, Director of the Social Research Institute at Chiang Mai University, examines the substance of poverty and inequality.

About 21 million people in the GMS are classified as ethnic minorities, and many of them experience more than their fair share of socioeconomic deprivation. Two essays discuss state policies on these people from both a geographical and a sociopolitical standpoint. One concentrates on Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand, and Viet Nam, and the other concentrates on Yunnan Province.

Gender issues present another challenge. In contrast to discussions blaming women's ills on globalization, Kobkun Rayanakorn, lecturer and Deputy Director of the Social Research Institute, argues that ongoing gender inequality throughout the region is caused largely by locally entrenched norms, culture, and attitudes. The book also contains four essays discussing migrant issues, the threat of drugs and HIV/AIDS, and the trafficking of women and children.

Balancing ecosystem protection, human access to natural resources, and governance of cross-border resources such as the Mekong River is the third set of social challenges in the GMS. The book touches upon these issues but does not deal with them in great detail.

Good governance is a key social challenge for the Mekong governments and people; it is a prerequisite to dealing with other social challenges and to creating a conducive environment for trade and investment to make the community competitive. While Mr. Dore ends the book with an emphasis on enhancing governance, Ms. Kaosa-ard particularly stresses participation as one element of good governance. She warns in her essay that more social conflicts could emerge if the development projects pouring into the subregion do not address their environmental impacts and do not take into account the voices of the people. She argues that the understanding of government agencies about the need for and benefits of the active participation of the citizens of the GMS needs to be improved. Participation means not only cost sharing but, more importantly, empowerment.

While effectively outlining these issues, the book loses the opportunity to deal with the vital challenge of harnessing business for development. All Mekong countries are badly in need of financial capital (and, very likely, technology) to implement their development agendas. The range of important issues includes a more active role for the private sector, public-private partnerships, and privatizing state-owned enterprises to create a fair and competitive business environment. The implications of these initiatives for the social agenda and for the goals of equity and poverty reduction should also be investigated. No essays are devoted to any of these issues. In addition, complicated jargon, figures, and tables make some essays difficult to understand for readers who are not experts in the field of social research.

Nevertheless, the book is a very useful addition to the existing literature on GMS development as it is largely either about a theme or a country. In contrast, *Social Challenges for the Mekong Region* covers problems with regional dimensions.

The book is well presented. It starts with historic accounts and ends with what governments and other agencies in the subregion are doing today. The introduction helps the reader to gain an overall understanding of the issues covered in a short span of time. The book is of interest to academics, the staffs of public and private development organizations, government officials, students of development, and others interested in the GMS.