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Regional Integration in the Greater Mekong Sub-region: Opportunities and Challenges

By Rosalia Sciortino

Renown for its magnificence and the unpredictability of its waters, the Mekong River is the longest waterway in Southeast Asia, flowing down from the Tibetan highlands to the Mekong Delta and into the China Sea. Through a drift of more than 4,300 kilometers, its waters connect six countries –Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam– offering a mute testimony to the unfolding of their histories and their transnational relations.

Centuries ago, in a borderless past, ethnic tribes moved their settlements freely through and across the Mekong, making of cultural pluralism an indisputable feature of the region. In successive centuries, tensions shook the river and its surrounding region. On the banks of the Mekong, rival kingdoms were established, fought and fell, and colonial powers confronted each other before finding themselves challenged by socialist-inspired nationalist movements. With World War II, the Cold War and their aftermaths, the Mekong became a theater of international conflicts, internal struggles, and cross-border tensions, which resulted in indelible scars on the people and the countries bond by the river. Emerging in the 1980s from decades of unrest and economic isolation, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam had to scramble to catch up with more developed neighbors and to become part of the global order by transitioning, like China, from centrally planned to market oriented economies.

Only in the 1990s relative peace provided an opportunity for collaboration among the six riparian countries. A range of initiatives were started to promote regional integration, including the revamping of the Mekong River Commission, the Japanese initiative of the Forum for the Comprehensive Development of Indochina, the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Cooperation Program supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and other international parties, the ASEAN Mekong Development Cooperation and, more recently, the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) initiated by Thailand. All these overlapping initiatives are meant to foster greater liberalization and integration of national markets in pursuit of economic growth for the entire region. The adopted regionalism model prioritizes the construction of large-scale telecommunication and transportation infrastructure to facilitate intra-regional trade, investment and use of natural resources, thus also strengthening the members' country competitive position as a trading bloc in the global economy.

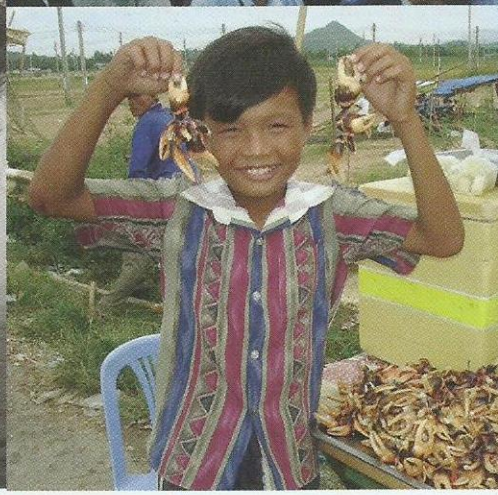
Spurred by the GMS cooperation program, and supported by the other regional plans, the integrated area of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and China's Yunnan Province and Guangxi

Photos on the front cover and page 4 to 14 courtesy of IPS Asia-Pacific news agency.

The pictures are a selection of photographs taken by Mekong journalists as part of their work under the Imaging Our Mekong media fellowships (www.newsmekong.org), an annual programme that gives them the opportunity and creative space to look into cross-border issues at a time of regional integration. Imaging Our Mekong is carried out by IPS Asia-Pacific news agency (www.ipsnewsasia.net), which works with photojournalists and writers, and Probe Media Foundation Inc (www.probefound.com), which works with TV journalists.







Zhuang Autonomous Region, is undergoing profound transformations.

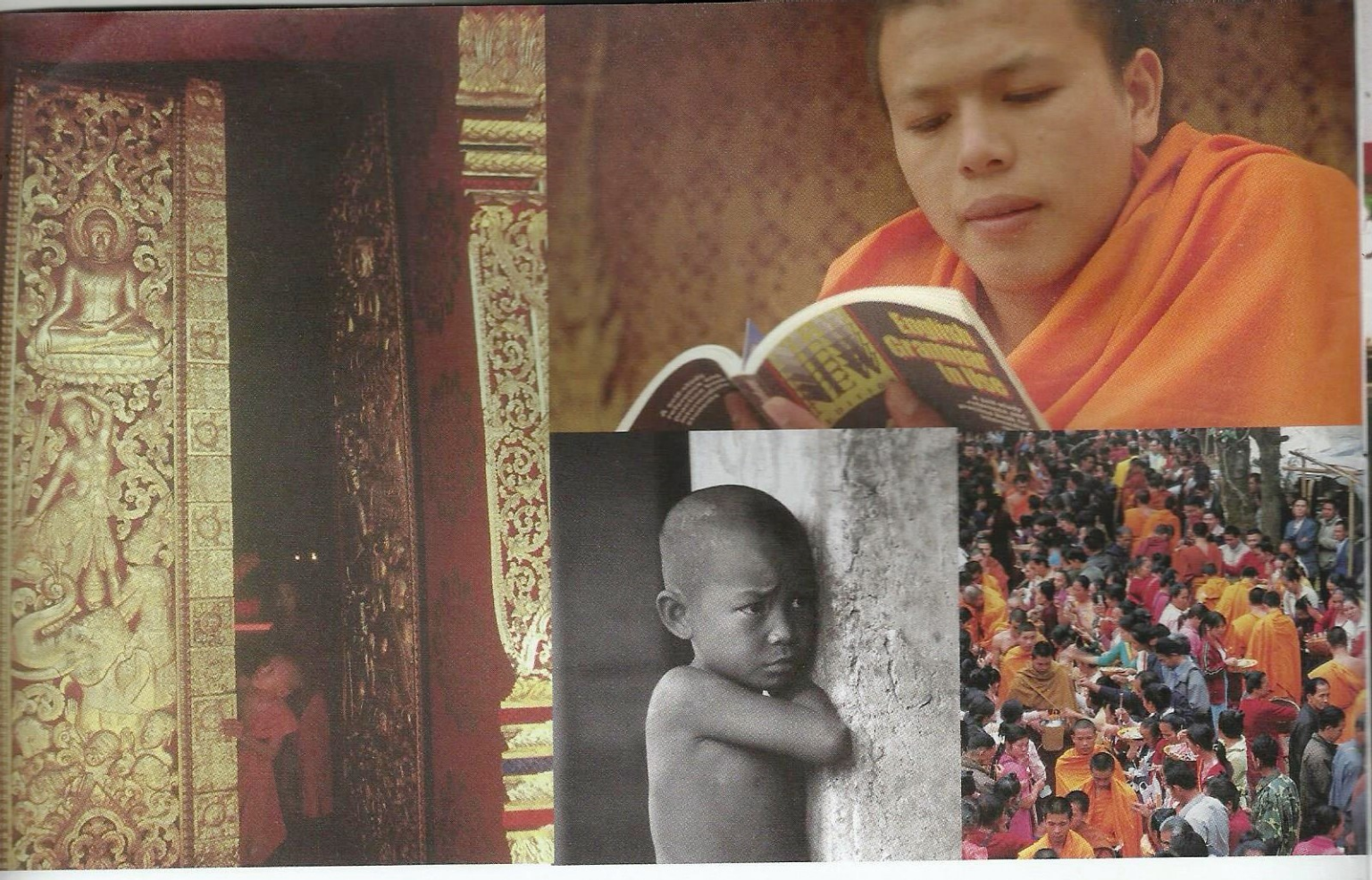
A regional economy is taking shape, wherein Thailand, China, and to a lesser extent, Vietnam have become commercial and financial centers as well as anchor markets for the disadvantaged, but resource-rich, GMS countries of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, exporting industrial products while importing raw material to feed their export-oriented industrial sector. A fast growing infrastructure network of roads and bridges, firmly linking the GMS to India, other parts of China, and peninsular Southeast Asia, is facilitating unprecedented traffic of raw material, goods, and people. Plans to increase the navigability of the Mekong mainstream by the removal of rapids and other interventions are opening up new possibilities for tourism and commerce, providing an outlet for inner China to reach the outside world. Expansion of hydropower plants is transforming trans-border energy trading relationships and increasing electricity supply to communities and industries.

As a result of these and other complementary activities, intraregional trade and investments have been on the rise, making of the GMS one of the fastest growing economic areas in the world, with a consistent yearly growth of more than seven percent during 2005-2007. In a corresponding trend, poverty has been declining over the years, and many have been lifted out of poverty and achieved higher living standards.

The same transformations, however, are also cause of concern, as regional growth has been unevenly distributed and social and environmental impacts have been substantial. A large proportion of the 310 million people living in the GMS have not benefited from development efforts, with 30 percent remaining mired in poverty and many more barely living at subsistence level. Unbalanced development has also widened income gaps within and across countries. In the absence of redistribution mechanisms, pre-existing structural asymmetries, among GMS countries are being reinforced, with a larger proportion of gains accruing to the stronger economies. Weaker countries not only benefit less, but are at risk of becoming disproportionately burdened with cultural, social and environmental costs.

The region's cultural and biological diversity is at stake. Enhanced integration of localities into global and regional processes is having a "homogenizing" impact on previously distinct cultures and lifestyles and leading to a devaluation of indigenous knowledge, traditions and identities. Upland ethnic communities, whose homelands are located on both sides of the border, are particularly affected. Not only are their minority cultures not appreciated by the majority population, but they are loosing their livelihoods to development interventions targeting their habitat, rich in natural resources. More generally, infrastructural and commercial changes are degrading the GMS environment and causing depletion in flora and fauna: species endemic to the GMS are facing extinction, the fragile river and watershed ecosystem has been disturbed, fisheries and forests overexploited, and the occurrence and severity of floods and droughts have been increasing.

Greater interconnectivity has other consequences that are trans-boundary in nature and scale. Labor migration is being spurred by the emergence of a regional labor marker shaped by the widening disparities in economic growth, but a comprehensive regulatory system is lacking. Host societies, albeit willing to utilize migrant labor, are still unprepared to integrate migrants, and no multi-lateral arrangements have been made for their marriages and bearing of children abroad.



Conservative estimates range from 2 to 5 million undocumented, lower-skill intra-regional migrants in the GMS, working and living in vulnerable conditions. Irregularity is further compounded by forced migration of people fleeing conflict and abuses, and trafficking for labor, prostitution and begging purposes.

Diseases also cross borders unchecked. Increased movement of goods and people, and the intensifying of cross-border trade and large-scale agriculture is causing the emergence and spreading of new zoonotic diseases, such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Avian Flu (AI). The combination of high mobility, intravenous drug use, and unsafe sex practices has caused many parts of the sub-region – Cambodia, Thailand, Yunnan and Guangxi – to become flash points of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Crime has also capitalized on market expansion and infrastructure development. The region's shadow economy has become more organized and diversified, including illegal trade of cultural artifacts, wild animals and natural resources, gambling and money laundering, and product counterfeiting. The 'Golden Triangle', across the borders of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, remains the second largest source of opium and heroin in the world, and has become a major source of meta-amphetamines.

These and other unwanted ramifications of regional integration point to the need to integrate economic with human and socio-cultural development. Only with the recognition that development is multi-faceted and that a focus on economic growth is insufficient to promote well-being, can new strategies be devised to address the trans-boundary challenges deriving from lop-sided development, thus ensuring that all diverse communities of the GMS finally enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives.

Acknowledgments

This article builds on a previous column by the author entitled "The Mekong: An Unfinished Story" under the Mekong Currents series published by Inter-Press Services Asia-Pacific at www.newsmekong.org/mekong_currents. It also draws on the "Learning Across Boundaries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region" strategy paper developed by the author when she served as Director, Southeast Asia Regional Program, The Rockefeller Foundation.

About writer:

Rosalia Sciortino, is a cultural anthropologist and development sociologist by training, who is currently working in Thailand as Associate Professor at the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, and Visiting Professor at the Masters in International Development Studies at Chulalongkorn University. Before that, she was Regional Director of the Rockefeller Foundation Office for Southeast Asia in Bangkok, overseeing grant-making activities in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. She also worked with the Ford Foundation in Indonesia and the Philippines, and has published widely on development issues.