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“Accelerating Post COVID-19 Recovery and Building Resilience in the Greater Mekong Subregion”

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2022

ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCG	Bio-Circular-Green
CBEZs	Cross Border Economic Zones
CEA	Creative Economy Agency
COC	Chamber of Commerce
EEC	Eastern Economic Corridor
ERIA	Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia
ESEP	Ecosystem Services and Environmental Policy Research Laboratory
EU	European Union
EZs	Economic Zones
GAP	Good Agricultural Practice
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GHP	Good Hygiene Practice
GHSI	Global Health Security Index
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point System
HDI	Human Development Index
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LAO PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
MI	Mekong Institute
NFAFRI	National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute
NHI	National Health Insurance
OH	One Health
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEAOHUN	Southeast Asia One Health University Network
SERD	Southeast Asia Department
SEZs	Special Economic Zones
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
TCDC	Thailand Creative Design Center
TCEB	Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau
TFA	Thai Fintech Association
TIF	Trade and Investment Facilitation Department

ACRONYMS

U.S.	The United States
UIBE	University of International Business and Economics
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

No country and not a single one of us has been spared from the deadly coronavirus.

Just like the rest of the world, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) countries too have been adversely impacted by COVID-19 in the last two years. The degree varies depending on the resilience of the economies and the capacity of the public health systems.

At the regional level, challenges exist in building back socioeconomic stability, especially among the poor and vulnerable groups where opportunities to generate new progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are limited.

As the situation is beginning to unfold, the GMS countries is now facing a multidimensional challenge which is unprecedented in nature. As such, the crisis demands coherent recovery policies and action plans more than ever before.

While countries continue to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19, it is also an opportune time to draw lessons learned so that if such a pandemic ever happens again, we will not be so adversely affected.

Since its establishment in 1992, the GMS has increasingly cooperated and integrated to promote the flow of goods and services through the GMS Economic Corridor, as well as on tourism and hospitality, food security, and energy resources. Now in the post COVID-19 world, much work remains to be done to re-

cover and particularly to build forward better. For instance, the focus must now be on smart agriculture, sustainable tourism, green economy and finance, and a food-energy-water nexus should we aspire to revitalize GMS economies for greater and lasting impact. It is critical to redefine priorities and prosperity while facilitating socioeconomic reconstruction that is built upon integrated, inclusive, green, resilient, sustainable, and stronger reforms.

Of equal importance is also how to utilize and synergize existing cooperations and frameworks for greater impact.

This is precisely what the Mekong Forum 2022 seeks to achieve.

The Forum, on the theme “Accelerating Post COVID-19 Recovery and Building Resilience in the Greater Mekong Subregion” is aimed at bringing together opinion leaders to discuss tools, instruments, experience and practical solutions which have been implemented to accelerate recovery and resilience of the GMS; demonstrate the linkages between recovery and transition toward building resilience and capacity building and countries’ development agenda; and lastly serve as a regional platform for building trust and synergies among the public and private sectors as well as development organizations and academia.



INTRODUCTORY SPEECH



*Mr. Suriyan Vitchitletkarn
Executive Director, Mekong Institute (MI)*



Over the past two-and-a-half years, progress has been made, but much remains to be done. This is what the Mekong Forum this year will be about. It is not to investigate policy or develop an action plan, but to comprehend the situation and assist in identifying issues and challenges where there is still room for improvement.

Dr Narongchai Akrasanee, Mekong Institute Council Member and concurrently Chair of the Steering Committee, renowned international development economist and former Thai Minister of Energy, we are delighted to have you here today. We are also pleased to welcome Mr. Ramesh Subramaniam, Director General, Southeast Asia Department, Asian Development Bank (ADB). Distinguished guests, representatives from the consular general in Khon Kaen, representatives from GMS countries, development partners, youth associations in ASEAN, civil society organizations, and media, a pleasant good morning to all of you.

This is indeed an exciting time for the Mekong Institute and GMS countries to be able to hold this Mekong Forum. It has been almost three years since the last event in 2019. At the same time, it provides an opportunity for us to reconnect and initiate our consultative process again — looking into the future of what the GMS will be and how we can better recover from COVID-19, as well as other issues such as the impacts of the Ukraine war and climate change.

We are fortunate to have partners joining us in organizing the Mekong Forum this year, and I would like to mention here that the event is co-hosted by the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau, in partnership with Khon Kaen Chamber of Commerce (COC), Thailand Creative Design Center (TCDC) Khon Kaen, and, of course, many other development partners who, in one way or another, have supported the Mekong Institute's activities over the past few years, conducting studies or research among others.

The Mekong Institute is an intergovernmental organization established by the six GMS countries, namely Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam, and the two southern provinces of China, Yunnan and Guangxi. We are mandated to promote capacity development to support regional cooperation and integration. The Mekong Forum is the Mekong Institute's flagship event. It is aimed at providing a consultative

platform so that the stakeholders can discuss issues that matter most to the Greater Mekong Subregion. At the same time, we should also be discussing what could be our potential collaboration and agendas for action so that we can all look at how cooperation and partnership can be fostered in the coming years.

The Mekong Institute has conducted studies and continued to develop capacity over the last few years. I am also honored to announce that in 2021, the Mekong Institute was recognized with the ASEAN Prize, which is normally awarded to an individual or organization in support of ASEAN community building. This is the first time that any agency located in the Mekong region has received such an award.

Mekong Institute recognizes that this is not just a prize, but also a reflection of our close partnership with all stakeholders, including the GMS countries, the private sector, and others. We hope to use this opportunity to put forward important issues of the GMS so that ASEAN can consider how GMS can help build the ASEAN community and even development beyond the region's borders.

Ladies and gentlemen, it has already been stated that COVID-19 has afflicted every corner of the world beginning in 2020, and the same is true for the GMS. Our leaders have put in place policies and resources to respond and also support recovery. Over the past two-and-a-half years, progress has been made, but much remains to be done. This is what the Mekong Forum this year will be about. It is not to investigate policy or develop an action plan, but to comprehend the situation and assist in identifying issues and challenges where there is still room for improvement. We also hope to assist with the implementation of policy and strategy so that the benefits derived are shared by the people and communities of the GMS. We hope too that at the end of this forum we will be able to hear recommendations and suggestions from all the participants so that we can really form an agenda for action. Mekong Institute will be ready to help socialize these important priorities so that we can find ways to promote cooperation and partnership to support the implementation of such important priority issues.

During today's Mekong Forum, we will have a plenary session which will include the opening and keynote presentations and also a parallel breakout session that is a reflection of how the Mekong Institute has

been working with development partners and stakeholders.

We feel that it is equally important to look into how we can promote an inclusive and resilient society so that we are not only strong in terms of recovery from COVID-19 but are ready to face any possible future extremes and impacts. We will also discuss seamless connectivity, both in terms of how we can boost logistics and facilitate cross-border trade, and digital acceleration, particularly the role of e-commerce. There will also be a session working on priority sectors. We cannot deny that all sectors play a part in shaping what the future of GMS will look like, but we believe that agriculture and tourism will play important roles in terms of how we can engage the people and community so as to really recover better and quicker from the pandemic and build a more resilient future for the years to come.

Mekong Forum will have a final plenary session where there will be a report back from the parallel sessions so that we can hear the discussion, recommendations, and agendas for action. I would strongly encourage everyone to really use the opportunity to share their thoughts and also offer their perspectives on how we can do this together.

In closing, I would like to express my thanks to Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee for graciously being with us. He will also be delivering a keynote message. To the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau, Khon Kaen Chamber of Commerce, and Thailand Creative Economy Agency for supporting and collaborating on the event. To the resource persons. To the speakers who participate both onsite and online. Last but not the least, to all the guests and participants who are joining the forum this year. This is an important element that makes the Mekong Forum different. Without your insight, your thoughts, and your aspirations, we will not be able to identify agendas for actions and find ways of collaborating in partnership so that we all can be part of the solutions for the GMS.

I hope you will enjoy the forum, and I would also like to extend my thanks to my fellow Mekong Institute colleagues and the organizing committee for your hard work in organizing it. We hope that this will make the participants comfortable, and you will find the forum interesting and useful for your work in the years to come. With that, I thank you for your kind attention.

OPENING AND KEYNOTE SPEECH



Dr. Narongchai Akrasanee

Steering Committee Chairman, Mekong Institute (MI)



***A disaster from
COVID-19 pandemic
affects the labor factor
or human resources,
their inputs into the
workplace and their
movement for
production and
consumption.***

Ladies and gentlemen, I am here to welcome you and to say a few words about the Mekong Forum, 2022. First, a very warm welcome.

We used to have the Forum every year until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020. So, a very warm welcome indeed. As a person tasked with steering MI forward for GMS development, two years of absence is a very long time. I missed you all.

In the last two years MI, just like all of you, all of us, struggled to survive and to stay relevant. We believe we have built a good institution for human resources development to enhance GMS cooperation. Now we are into the last quarter of 2022. Obviously, we have survived. Now, we at MI are managing our recovery, and building a stronger degree of resilience. This is what all of us in the GMS are doing.

How best to recover? How best to build stronger resilience?

In economics, when we talk about recovery from a disaster, we need to identify which factors of production have been most affected. A natural disaster, be it flood, storm, fire, or earthquake would affect land, plants and equipment, and perhaps some lives. Repairs and replacements are required. A financial disaster would affect capital. Additional investment would be needed. A disaster from COVID-19 pandemic affects the labor factor or human resources, their inputs into the workplace and their movement for production and consumption.

But the long period of the COVID-19 pandemic has had severe effects on the macro economy for all of us. We need to manage our foreign exchange reserve which we must have because all of us rely on imports of essentials, particularly oil and gas. We need to manage our fiscal budget because we all had programs and projects to assist the people, which has resulted in more public debt. We need to manage our inflation level. Etc., etc., etc.....

While managing all these macro variables, the recovery after COVID-19 pandemic must focus on the people, their ability to return to work, and to reconnect for commercial and personal purposes.

And in the long-term, measures must be created and organized so that the people will not suffer from another pandemic so severely and for so long.

Thus, the issues to be discussed at this Mekong Forum 2022 are about the health and wellness of the people of the GMS.

One Health is such a subject. No one is safe unless everyone is safe. Reconnecting the people is another. Our GMS economies are very much integrated by the movement of the workforce, and of goods and services. We must bring them back to movement, and for further enhancement.

Then, what sector should our workforce focus on? We have learned from the pandemic that the world will always need to meet the basic human needs, i.e., food. Our GMS with excellent water and land resources is good for this sector. So, we should make it even better.

Ladies and gentlemen, you will hear two important keynote addresses from two prominent speakers, about the recovery and resiliency of our people. Then you can join the three individual sessions on the three areas I have highlighted.

I am sure your participation and concluding recommendations and actions will make this Mekong Forum 2022 most interesting and to the benefit of us all, and of our GMS people.



KEYNOTE SPEECH II



Mr. Ramesh Subramaniam
Director General
Southeast Asia Department (SEAD)
Asian Development Bank (ADB)



***The Asian
Development Bank
(ADB) is working
closely with our
member countries to
face the challenges of
post-pandemic
recovery. Our
emphasis is on
supporting resilient
economic growth and
green infrastructure
development.***

Greetings to all of you. It is a privilege to give these opening remarks at the Mekong Forum 2022 on the importance of accelerating post COVID-19 recovery and building resilience in the Mekong Subregion.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is working closely with our member countries to face the challenges of post-pandemic recovery. Our emphasis is on supporting resilient economic growth and green infrastructure development. As the secretariat of the GMS economic cooperation program, ADB is also supporting the GMS countries in achieving these targets and overcoming the challenges they face. In this context, it's my pleasure to share with you a few examples of the work the GMS program is supporting in the sub-region.

The GMS program is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. It's indeed a celebration of a program that can boast significant achievements over the past three decades. The unique strengths of the program remain its strong ownership from the six GMS countries, its work in the four sectors, its focus on achievement of quality development projects, knowledge generation and capacity building through technical assistance projects and significant success in terms of financing and the achievements accomplished.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been, and its impact continues to be, one of the most significant challenges to the subregion since the inception of the GMS program. The global adversities coming from some of the other global challenges also need to be carefully monitored in the near term. To take one example, the tourism sector where GMS was the best performing sector in 2019 has been decimated. Besides its contribution to growth, there is also a significant risk of sliding back in terms of the poverty alleviation achieved over the last two decades in the tourism sector. Galvanized into action to counter these challenges, the GMS leaders met at the GMS leaders' summit in 2021 and endorsed the new GMS pro-

grams, the strategic framework 2030, and the GMS COVID-19 response and recovery plan 2021 to 2023. The GMS 2030 is based on a solid assessment of the key trends, challenges facing the subregion as well as the potential opportunities, and the values, interests, and principles commonly shared by the GMS countries. It contains a new GMS vision of a more integrated, prosperous, inclusive and sustainable subregion. It retains the three traditional pillars of the GMS program, namely community, connectivity and competitiveness. All GMS initiatives are being reoriented toward a new mission for the program which retains the original strength of the program—the 3Cs—with greater focus on environmental sustainability and resilience, internal and external integration, and inclusivity for building a GMS community with a bright shared future.

GMS 2030 also promotes innovative approaches to key cross-cutting areas including harnessing the digital revolution, an enhanced spatial approach based on an integrated network of economic corridors with clusters of competitive cities connected efficiently to rural areas, a deeper dialogue and policy and regulations, embracing private sector solutions to leverage expertise and financing, gearing the program to cooperate closely with other regional cooperative and integration initiatives as well as with local governments, the private sector, regional knowledge institutions and civil societies, and establishing a results-monitoring framework. The GMS leaders, while endorsing the new strategy, expressed confidence that it will ensure that the program continues developments and responsiveness in this decade and will

help move the subregion closer to its new proposed mission.

The direct health impact of COVID-19 in the subregion was initially relatively mild, largely due to the GMS countries' prompt, sound and science-based containment actions. However, the subregion faces adverse economic impacts from the pandemic with reduced consumption and investment, increased unemployment and a risk to increases in poverty and inequality. The program responded immediately with prompt collective actions to support the GMS countries' response to the pandemic.

Understanding that the post-pandemic growth and development will remain a challenge in the short-to medium-term, the GMS leaders endorsed the GMS COVID-19 response and recovery plan 2021-2023 which is supporting GMS 2030. The plan is predicated on three strategic pillars, namely a 'one health' approach addressing human and animal health, healthy crops and food and healthy cities, addressing the needs of the vulnerable and the poor, as well as safe and orderly labor movement and management, and finally, keeping borders open and accelerating economic recovery focusing on trade facilitation, investments, tourism and agriculture. Both these key policy and strategy documents deal in large part with challenges of growth and green recovery. The GMS countries understand that green recovery is critical for the subregion and necessary to reduce the risk of future pandemics, mitigate and adapt to the impact of climate change, sustainably boost economic recovery and economic activities, and meet the sustainable



development goals.

Let me now share with you a snapshot of some of the interesting work on the way in the GMS program to ensure a resilient post-pandemic recovery and rebuilding of the GMS. As national and regional health security is a critical matter, let me delve a bit deeper into this aspect before briefly covering other sectors and other issues later.

First, on health and human resource development, guided by the three strategic pillars of the GMS health cooperation strategy 2019-2023, and the COVID-19 response and recovery plan I mentioned, the GMS working group on health cooperation has been an effective mechanism of the GMS program in supporting the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery efforts. This is at both the regional and national levels. Significant financial and technical assistance support has been mobilized and some of that is also on the way to strengthen Covid-19 surveillance and response systems, improved communicable disease control in border areas, procuring materials and equipment for diagnosis and protection and particularly building capacity for pandemic preparedness and resiliency. Partnerships with institutions such as the ASEAN secretariat and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have focused on addressing health threats linked with regional connectivity and human mobility. Vaccination has been a very effective tool in the fight against COVID-19.

In 2021, the GMS program quickly supported countries in vaccine roll-out and delivery through a US\$5 million technical assistance, supporting enhanced COVID-19 vaccination and post COVID-19 health security response in Southeast Asia called 'Secured'. In 2022, Cambodia received additional assistance of \$95 million under the Cambodian Rapid Immunization Support project aimed at helping the government's vaccination initiative in 2022 and 2023 including booster shots for those already vaccinated, and primary doses for children under five years of age. This program is part of ADB's \$9 billion Asia-Pacific Vaccine Access Facility APVAX which supports procurement and delivery of safe and equitable vaccines. In addition to the APVAX project, the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank is providing co-financing of \$50 million for the ADB project.

The GMS program is also supporting post-pandemic recovery through development, dissemination and exchange of knowledge. The use of digital health technologies has been one of the key focus areas while fostering labor mobility with strong health se-

curity features has also been receiving significant attention. Another priority in the GMS health security strategy is 'one health'. One Health responds and takes a unified approach to environmental, animal and human health and their interactions. Planning for a new GMS health cooperation strategy 2024-2030—this is looking ahead—is underway with the GMS working group on health cooperation which is set to discuss later this year the emerging areas of support and partnerships needed to deliver on the region's future health opportunities and challenges.

This new strategy will assess first the results of the ongoing strategy, draw lessons from the region's COVID-19 response, and will further reinforce the link to ASEAN's health cooperation and other development partners' strategies on regional health cooperation.

The GMS program will also renew its work on migration and health and communicable disease control through regional security initiatives. Working with the GMS members, we will considerably enhance focus on the interlinkages between climate change and health.

Now let me highlight another few key priorities for the GMS program. First, on environment, the GMS core environment program is supporting green and resilient COVID-19 recovery efforts in the GMS covering Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam through the GMS climate change and environmental sustainability program which provides policy support, builds institutional and technical capacities, and demonstrates innovative options to build back cleaner, greener and more climate-resilient economies. Second, on energy, the GMS program supports countries' efforts to achieve greater integration of renewable energy sources through their respective country's energy development programs. The countries have just set up the GMS task force on energy transition to help develop an overall energy transition vision that emphasizes the subregion's inclusive development of clean energy in transitioning away from fossil fuels.

Third, transport infrastructure remains the backbone of the GMS program. In GMS 2030, railways are an area where innovative strategies are being sought given that it is the most energy efficient and environmentally friendly form of transportation. Through the framework of the Greater Mekong Railway Association, GMS countries are now moving forward in pursuing various priority rail links in the region.

Next, on agriculture, the GMS working group on agriculture and various projects are helping the GMS countries to ensure food safety and particularly food security which has become a critical issue now and boosting competitiveness of agriculture value chains, a critical part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Key themes to support include harmonization of agriculture food safety and quality standards, support for livelihoods and job creation in rural areas, control of trans-boundary animal diseases or zoonosis and anti-microbial resistance, support for greening and financing inclusive agri-business supply chains, and promotion of climate adaptative agriculture in the context of the all-important water, food and energy access.

Now to tourism: Most countries have reopened to international travelers since late 2021, and travel restrictions and requirements have been substantially reduced in the first half of 2022, allowing for an increase in tourist arrivals. This has in turn led to greater receipts. GMS countries' COVID-19 response and recovery efforts for the tourism sector have been continuously supported by the GMS tourism COVID-19 recovery communications plan as well as the accompanying toolkit prepared by the GMS tourism working group. These guided the dissemination of accurate and timely information that supports a safe, resilient and sustainable GMS tourism recovery. Next, on urban development, the GMS 2030 priority directions for this area include building the resilience of cities to future pandemics over the medium term through enhanced use of digital technology among others, and over the long term develop livable cit-

ies that combine gray, green and blue infrastructure and strategies for a holistic development. The GMS project's plan for approval under this theme will support urban planning and community resilience and provide infrastructure particularly in water and solid waste management services and urban stormwater drainage systems that will facilitate long-term sustainable economic growth.

To support the GMS countries in building resilience in cities, the GMS urban development working group is exploring the emerging ICD and visible solutions including transformative opportunities for more efficient water management and improved public service delivery.

In closing, distinguished guests, ADB recently conducted an extensive and rigorous internal assessment of the GMS program. All GMS countries have exhibited a strong commitment to the program, and they consider the GMS Secretariat's role as crucial to the implementation of the program. As the GMS Secretariat supports the implementation of the GMS 2030 in this decade, we hope to develop and expand our partnerships with knowledge institutions in the subregion including particularly the Mekong Institute. We will look forward to more such mutually beneficial engagements. I am confident that the Mekong Forum 2022 will be very successful as it discusses these urgent issues which I have covered that are likely to shape the growth and development landscape of the Greater Mekong subregion in this decade.

Thank you.



THEMATIC BREAKOUT SESSION ROUND I





Inclusive and Resilient Society

A1: Strengthening Health and Society Resilience



The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light significant inequities and vulnerabilities within and across countries that have existed in the GMS for decades. It has created a reset moment for leaders to reimagine more holistic solutions to build resilient health and social security systems to mitigate the domino effects from any future large-scale outbreaks. The session explored pathways toward building resilient health systems in the GMS.

The session commenced with the lessons learned from COVID-19 for improving innovations and co-ordination to achieve resilient health care systems in the GMS. Prof. Dr. Wongsu Laohasiriwong, Dean, Faculty of Public Health, Khon Kaen University, gave a presentation entitled “Strengthening Innovation and Coordination for One Health Implementation in the GMS.” She compared various containment and mitigation measures against COVID-19 that were deployed across the GMS countries. The varying capacity of health systems in relation to the different socio-economic development stages of each GMS country were highlighted. To mitigate a recurrence of the socio-economic crisis, she put forward a number of suggestions. These included increasing invest-

The session commenced with the lessons learned from COVID-19 for improving innovations and coordination to achieve resilient health care systems in the GMS.

ment in anticipation of disasters and pandemics; establishing a fund to protect the most vulnerable; and using data collection and assessments as evidence-based guidance for recovery efforts. She further underlined the importance of dedicated national leadership and strong engagement with local governments and communities for an inclusive response to sustain long-term recovery. She then provided a glimpse of the innovative health solutions that have proliferated during the course of the pandemic, and urged the countries to scale up such practices in preparation for unexpected public health emergencies. Turning to the key lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, Prof. Dr. Wongsu underscored the deep interconnectedness between public health, biodiversity, a healthy environment, and food systems. “Although warnings of a pandemic arising from a previously unknown zoonotic pathogen have been on the international radar for many years, the COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the urgent need for an integrated One Health approach to pandemic prevention,” she said. In closing, the professor called for a ‘One Health’ approach that requires more coordinated and integrated collaboration across multiple sectors and disciplines as the way forward for building a resilient GMS society.



The second session examined the building blocks of health equity by drawing experiences from Lao PDR. Dr. Viengmany Bounkham, Deputy Director General of the Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Health, Lao PDR, gave insights into this issue under the title of “Bridging the Gaps in Promoting Health Equity: Experiences from Lao PDR’s Health Sector.” In Lao PDR, the roll out of National Health Insurance (NHI) in 2016 resulted in coverage for the entire population of all schemes (including the public sector, the military, and the police) reaching 60% in 2016 and about 94% in 2020. Nonetheless, the pandemic took a toll on the provision of essential health services as well as on the economy. Lao PDR, therefore, has formulated its recovery plans by giving special consideration to health equity in cooperation with various stakeholders and development partners at both the national and regional levels. The country formed a multi-stakeholder taskforce in May 2020 to develop the National COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (2020-2025). Building upon the experiences of Lao PDR, Dr. Viengmany put forward the areas that could be enhanced to address health inequality through regional cooperation. These focused on narrowing the gaps in quality of health services in the region by improving health infrastructure; improving laboratory capacity; enhancing capacity development activities for health

workforces; and supporting Point of Entry (POE) facilities. She made the point that in addition to pandemic preparedness efforts, economic recovery was central to the country’s forward-looking agenda, saying, “It is important to revitalize the trade and investment environment in Lao PDR by promoting private sector engagement, tourism and e-commerce”. She concluded her presentation by stressing the need to enhance cross-border collaboration in public health management as well as providing universal health coverage for migrating and mobile populations.

Dr. Raymond Francis R. Sarmiento, M.D., National Telehealth Center, National Institutes of Health, University of the Philippines Manila, presented “Prospects towards Accessible and Affordable Digital Health Solutions in Southeast Asia.” The interface between technology and the health sector is a major milestone for improving sustainable and responsive healthcare systems. Dr. Raymond explained various streams of digital health solutions such as the electronic medical/health record (EMR/HER), interoperability, blockchain-based apps, COVID-19 vaccine I.M.S and digital vaccine certification that could facilitate more cost-effective and responsive health care systems. Through engagements with all stakeholders, the key to success was the use of a whole system approach, not investing in obsolete solutions, learn-

ing and re-using success from others, and ensuring an appropriate level of maturity in infrastructure and in the workforce. In wrapping up, Dr. Raymond made a thought-provoking statement, saying, “Ultimately, it will be up to us to define whether the embracing of interoperability and health data sharing will work.” As key take-aways, he pointed to increased investments in human resource development; infrastructure development; as well as R&D to improve productivity and disseminate quality knowledge products so as to chart a course for making innovative solutions accessible and affordable in Southeast Asia.

Finally, Dr. Vipat Kuruchittham, Executive Director of Southeast Asia One Health University Network (SEAOHUN) gave a presentation on “Collaboration toward One Health Capacity Building in the Mekong Region”. According to him, improving the capacity of health workforce is a fundamental role in building health systems resilience. As such, universities and producers of the health workforce play an essential role in supplying resilient and competent health professionals to effectively prevent, detect and respond to increasing health threats. SEAOHUN was established to meet this need with support from USAID. In principle, SEAOHUN connects and brings togeth-

er over 95 member universities in 8 Southeast Asian countries. Its aim is to institutionalize the One Health (OH) curriculum into educational offerings and to build the next generation of OH professionals to solve complex health challenges. Additionally, universities conduct OH research to support policymakers with evidence-based information, and provide innovative solutions to support governments in their surge capacity. “SEAOHUN represents academic voices often lacking at the national, regional, and international forums. SEAOHUN is a member of the Global Health Security Agenda and a partner of Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, and ASEAN+3 Field Epidemiology Training Network, among other leading OH institutions and networks,” he added. He concluded his presentation by highlighting the power of networks and multi-sectoral collaboration to build on each other’s strength in keeping the world safe from infectious disease threats.

The speakers and the audience agreed that there was a need for continued conversation and actions to enable multisectoral, and transdisciplinary collaboration and cooperation as the way forward to One Health implementation in the GMS.



B Seamless Connectivity

B.1 Boosting Logistics and Cross-border Trade



This session focused on facilitating cross-border trade and investment through the strengthening of intra-regional infrastructure linkages. Economic Zones (EZs) and Cross Border Economic Zones (CBEZs) were also discussed.

To set the context for the discussion, Dr. Julian Clarke, Program Specialist, Trade and Investment Facilitation Department, MI, described the trend in East Asia to create value chains across the GMS. He underscored the fact that the GMS region can take advantage of the trend towards offshoring from China and into the east Asian region. This is also a facet of 'near shoring' in which Japanese and Korean manufacturers move their supply chains closer to their home countries, simplifying their value chains, and taking advantage of a tariff environment that provides duty free privileges for exports from the Mekong to the EU and US markets.

Referencing cross-border opportunities and logistics technologies, Mr. Sathaporn Larkanpan, Managing Director, Stevia Technew Thailand, provided an analysis of the economic linkages that have arisen in parallel with physical infrastructure. According to Mr.

This session focused on facilitating cross-border trade and investment through the strengthening of intra-regional infrastructure linkages.

Sathaporn, the new Lao Thai Railway, for example, would create new markets in Southern China for Thai exporters and the new technologies would provide an opportunity for agricultural exporters to increase their sales by up to 20%, with welfare benefits accruing to farmers and the broader economy.

Jelena (Yelena) Kremenjas, General Manager Sustainability, from the Head Office of DHL Supply Chain (Thailand) Ltd., gave a presentation on the impacts of electric vehicles on the logistics industry. She gave an example of how the DHL trucking fleet was moving towards low emission standards. By transitioning to hybrid and then fully electric vehicles, some fitted with solar panel rechargers, emissions would be significantly reduced. Consequently, the transition to clean emissions would create new opportunities for suppliers as well as new jobs.

On “Sharing Experiences of SEZs to boost cross-border logistics”, Ms. Michelle Zhao, General Manager for Operation, Royal Group Phnom Penh SEZ Plc., Phnom Penh, Cambodia, stressed that the success of the SEZ has been its strategic location along the important trade route linking Bangkok through a progression of manufacturing centers to the international shipping ports of Ho Chi Minh City. The zone has attracted new investors as they moved out of China in search of cheaper labor and an efficient location that is well integrated in regional value chains. The SEZ is able to provide a concentrated geographic area in which the reforms can be tested. At the moment, the SEZ is in the process of expanding to accommodate new foreign investors coming out of China and into the ASEAN region.



C GMS' Priority Sector (Agriculture)

C1. Inclusive, Climate and Economic Resilient Agriculture Sector in the GMS



The agri-food sector in the GMS is characterized by smallholders and informal sector players who are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, which were aggravated by the pandemic. This session focused on looking forward to strengthening the inclusive climate and economic resilience of small farmers in the GMS by addressing gaps to minimize food losses, and improve the productivity, quality, safety and market access for agri-food in and from the Mekong region.

To kick-off the session and set the context for the discussion, Dr. Rico Ancog, Dean of the School of Environmental Science and Management at the University of the Philippines Los Baños and the Head of the Ecosystem Services and Environmental Policy (ESEP) Research Laboratory of SESAM, provided an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the agri-food sector in the GMS. He identified systemic and structural limitations of the agriculture sector in the GMS region pre-pandemic including the following: (1) poverty, food insecurity, environmental damage, biodiversity loss, and climate change; (2) climate-induced disasters; (3) lack of infrastructure (cooling, storage, value addition); (4) lack of technical knowledge for

This session focused on looking forward to strengthening the inclusive climate and economic resilience of small farmers in the GMS by addressing gaps to minimize food losses, and improve the productivity, quality, safety and market access for agri-food in and from the Mekong region.

value addition; (5) food insecurity as reported in the 2022 Global Hunger Index; and (6) limited safety nets. Dr. Jun Acedo, Professor at the University of the Philippines Los Banos, zeroed in on the impacts of COVID-19 in the GMS region including the decrease in countries' GDP. He elaborated on food loss reduction for sustainable food systems in the GMS, the increase in poverty, food insecurity, and food loss which was worsened by movement restrictions. It was noted that the progress of the region has been scaled back due to the effects of the pandemic and climate

change while some progress was made in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) specifically on nutritious and safer food targets.

Lastly, Dr. Manoluck Bounsihalath, Director of the Center for Agriculture and Forestry Information and Knowledge, Lao PDR's National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute, NAFRI, gave a presentation on the practical considerations and success factors in building the resilience of small farmers.



THEMATIC BREAKOUT SESSION ROUND II



A

Inclusive and Resilient Society

A2. Strengthening the Creative Economy and COVID-19 Recovery

The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of life and posed challenges to countries all over the world, especially the creative industries where more than 30 million people, most of them young, are working. Fostering creative industries strategically for an inclusive and sustainable recovery will have long-term benefits, including but not limited to, an increase in quality of life and the stimulation of innovation leading to a more resilient economy with improved ability to adapt in the face of challenges. The session explored how the creative economy contributes to livelihoods and income-generating opportunities as part of subregional cooperation and integration as well as in accelerating COVID-19 recovery. Examples and the agenda for near future cooperation could be discussed.

Kicking off the session, Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn, Executive Director of Mekong Institute, highlighted the importance of the creative economy and its potential contributions to the post-pandemic recovery. Although the creative economy is known to be a key source of employment opportunities where livelihoods have been significantly impacted, in the context of GMS countries, it was found that little attention has been paid to regional economic cooperation in this sector. Hence, the question was how the creative economy could be a topic that offers an opportunity for these countries to utilize regional cooperation frameworks and build long-term resilience. Ms. Katalin Bokor, an Economist with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), gave a presentation on “Strengthening the creative economy and the COVID-19 recovery.” She started by explaining the concept and definition of the creative economy and presented a survey conducted by UNCTAD which shows how various countries apply different approaches to support their creative economy. Many countries implemented a recovery plan during the COVID-19 pandemic that saw responsibilities handed over across multiple ministries and agencies. She pointed out that it is necessary for policy makers to identify main trends as they can assist the creative industry such as in practical training and



export promotion. By looking at the global picture, it can be seen that developing economies are exporting and trading more in creative goods compared to developed economies. Globally, China is the largest creative goods exporter. However, when it comes to creative services, developing countries tend to face several hurdles to participate in the services trade. She went on to reveal the factors behind this, citing the lack of fundamental skills and infrastructure to become competitive players in creative services, facing services trade restrictions, and access to the most important creative services markets which remain governed by commitments in the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). To overcome the challenges in several dimensions, she suggested supporting creative economies through new and emerging technologies, promoting an enabling environment by creating funding programs and fiscal incentives, encouraging governments to work with international organizations, and measuring the trends of international trade to support policymakers.

Mr. Benjamin Milton Hampe, the Project Director of KONNECT-ASEAN, the ASEAN Foundation, was next to speak, presenting "An ASEAN-KOREA Approach to Arts Sector Development". The focus of his session was arts and culture and he began by introducing the KONNECT-ASEAN project. In 2017, the project was designed for the purpose of touring art exhibitions and showcasing these in Southeast Asia and Korea. After the outbreak of COVID-19, physical events were shifted to hybrid and online events to ensure artists and art workers were able to receive an income. The project has been developed by the KONNECT-ASEAN team across the ASEAN region through the exchange of historical and contemporary ideas. In the context of the ASEAN creative economy, he pointed out key concepts, namely added value, human creativity, and sustainable, equitable and inclusive development, intangible assets, and tangible assets. He went on to share the potential areas for ASEAN-ROK cooperation in the creative economy. These include riding the digital wave, leveraging collaborations with the ASEAN-Korea Centre and the ASEAN Culture House, discussions on the promotion and development of cultural creative industries (CCIs), and development of a regional database to capture CCI contributions

and their impact on cultural dimensions. The KONNECT-ASEAN program pillars have been developed with the aims of deepening understanding between ASEAN cultures leading to a stronger ASEAN identity in the region. As such, the program has expanded to include publications, public programs, residencies, and education projects. The presentation noted the instrumental role that the creative economy could play in an "ASEAN Culture of Prevention" towards a Peaceful, Inclusive, Resilient, Healthy and Harmonious Society, by promoting greater cross-sectoral and cross-pillar cooperation.

The last presentation was provided by Ms. Montinee Yongvikul, the Director of Creative City Development, Creative Economy Agency (CEA). Her talk was titled "Creative District: Renewed economic and social driving force after COVID-19," and she began by giving a broad picture of global consumer trends that have shifted to digital and home-centric lifestyles as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to her, some urban consumers now prefer to move to rural locations which could lead to economic activity expansion. Ms. Montinee cited various case studies of accomplished businesses and events that were organized and run by creative people and explained how these created economic and social impacts in rural areas. Creative hubs, she noted, can be a tool to inspire the local people and drive them to take action to shape the future of their local area. However, there is a concern as to how the cities keep these talents as COVID-19 has been a key factor in influencing relocation decisions. To support the creative hub, CEA has introduced five creative district strategies to create a driving force in support of sustaining the creative hub, namely strategic planning and development, creative placemaking, strengthening creative business, district branding, and co-creating a creative community.

The session ended with a discussion between the speakers and the participants on strategies to enhance the capacity of stakeholders to add value to the local economy and strengthen local government to co-create with the local community in formulating innovative policies.

B Seamless Connectivity

B2. Staying Ahead in Digital Acceleration

The session highlighted the importance of digital acceleration in the region to achieve economic recovery. The focus was also on emerging digital technologies and e-commerce which are becoming another engine in driving post COVID-19 recovery.

To start the session, Mr. Sajib Azad, Policy Expert at the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), talked about key strategic approaches and experiences from the UNCDF project aimed at promoting and shaping digital economies in Asia. Currently, UNCDF is implementing several projects in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar to equip digital payment ecosystems with a focus on offering payment services to farmers and businesses involved in agricultural value chains. This has been done by providing practical ways to build synergies among Micro Finance Institutes, Fintech, Mobile wallets, and Agritech. Emphasis was being placed on key strategics interlinked with partnerships with private and public stakeholders to support and unlock market constraints and leverage innovation, technologies aimed at empowering MSMEs and women's economics in operationalizing their digitalization and contributing to enhancing post COVID-19 recovery and achieving the SDGs.

Prof. Mr. Jian Wang, Chair Professor of International Business and E-Business, Center for International Business Studies, University of International Business and Economics (UIBE), gave a presentation on "Perspective of Cross-border e-commerce development in GMS". He provided an overview of the global market transformations which present various opportunities to SMEs. These are: i) Opportunities for SMEs through inclusive trade, and cross border e-commerce; ii) Platform Economy (from efficiency to effectiveness); and iii) the pandemic as the accelerator (from cross-border e-commerce to digital trade). At the same time, it also has a few implications for the GMS countries for which further work will be required. These are i) Trusted environment (e.g., accessibility, e-payment, platform governance); ii) Efficient and harmonized system (e.g., trade fa-



cilitation, interconnectivity, stability, predictability, consistency, PPP); and iii) Legal environment (e.g., consumer protection, cross-border data flow, privacy, cross border cooperation)

To complement the discussion, Ms. Xin Yi Lim, Executive Director of Sustainability and Agricultural Impact of Pinduoduo Inc., spoke about how farmers can benefit from agritech solutions in her presentation “Rural E-Commerce Model - case of Pinduoduo”. She presented an example of a Pinduoduo platform which helps farmers to plan their production and logistics. While engaging farmers in the digital tool, their digital literacy is also improved. The platform has mobilized more than 100,000 youths to date.

Mr. Chonladet Khemarattana, President, the Thai Fintech Association (TFA), elaborated on fintech innovations and growth drivers, highlighting the rise of digital payments and tools that assist MSMEs in lowering export costs and shortening transaction times. He cited as an example the Bank of Thailand’s new

financial landscape which facilitates digital leveraging of technology and data to drive innovation and empowers entrepreneurs and startups to participate in digital finance and services to stabilize local economies and accelerate recovery.

Tiat Jin (TJ) OOI, Lead Consultant of the E-S-I Knowledge Lab, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), gave a presentation on the strength of collaboration between all stakeholders in the entrepreneurship, startups and innovation ecosystems.

Key points were the prospects of emerging digital technologies for MSMEs in the region, and the concurrent challenges they faced, and how the digital start-up ecosystem in the region can be enhanced in light of its potential as an economic recovery engine. He ended his talk by presenting recommendations for both the public and private sectors as the region steers towards post pandemic recovery in the midst of economic uncertainties.



C GMS' Priority Sector (Tourism)

C2. Delivering Sustainable Growth in the Tourism Sector

Tourism development to advance trade and facilitation, especially in meeting the fast-rising and highly competitive tourism inbound market, remains ever more relevant in the post COVID-19 world. Smart tourism tools, techniques, and technologies through learning exchanges, structured learning visits, information sharing, and adaption of best practices were discussed. Such investments are geared toward expanding small entrepreneurial businesses and deepening cultural interconnectedness and appreciation among and between cities in the Republic of Korea and the Mekong region countries.

Mr. Sa-nga Sattanun, Program Manager, Trade and Investment Facilitation Department, MI, started the session by providing an overview of sustainable tourism. He explained the 3 main elements in accordance with the goals of sustainable tourism studied by UNWTO, namely economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Social development refers to local control, community well-being, cultural richness, and social equity while economic development focuses on tourism, economic vitality, local prosperity, and employment quality. Lastly, the environmental aspect looks at physical integrity, biodiversity, and environmental priorities. Aside from sustainable tourism, there are 2 other integral parts, namely fulfillment and resource efficiency.

Ms. Catherine Germier-Hamel, CEO, Destination Mekong, began her presentation on tourism by comparing it with “Cinderella”. According to her, once a destination becomes popular, it will often lead to less responsible tourism. Irresponsible tourism can cause depletion of tourism resources and assets, losses of authenticity of culture and tradition, overtourism, tourism leakage, and misleading information from negative influencers. During the pandemic, several losses affecting industries across the globe were observed and addressed during the recovery period. Examples are job and business losses, knowledge and skills degradation, and lack of connection and inspiration. Although the term “sustainable tourism” is vague in terms of the implementation stages, not



least because it is a western concept, Ms. Catherine said that it could be localized to the Mekong region to make it more applicable and adapted to the Asian context. To do this, stakeholders in the industry need to be engaged and take action on pushing forward tourism to reach a sustainable stage. On the topic of tourism branding and marketing, developing accessibility, attractiveness, and irresistibility can help in building trust and engagement among travelers. The purpose of branding and marketing is to extend the life cycle of the destination. To end her presentation, she proposed some recommendations to help vitalize local economies within tourism industries and gave a brief introduction to Destination Mekong, a public-private-partnership (PPP) initiative in the GMS countries. By concentrating on the human beings and labor market in the tourism sector, Destination Mekong has adopted innovation and technologies to create additional values.

Mr. Joomphol Phongnailert, Senior Manager - North-eastern Regional Office, Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), pointed out the benefits of using MICE to boost the national economy. MICE business drivers in 2023 were elaborated through 4 main models, namely Bio-Circular-Green (BCG), tech and innovation, health, and Thai soft power. “Soft power”, she explained, refers to 5Fs—food, film, fashion, fighting, and festival. To facilitate MICE in Thailand, the speaker stressed the importance of living up to global standards and safety in providing the service to build the trust of foreign visitors. To date, more than 10 MICE cities have been promoted

throughout Thailand as well as 12 targeted industries along the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC).

Dr. Michail Toanoglou, Professor of Hospitality & Tourism Management and an Expert in Sustainable Destination Management & Branding, Jeonju University School of Tourism & Culture, South Korea, explained the roles of technology, innovation and a value centric and holistic approach, which help in enhancing tourism to be better, faster, and ever more efficient. He added that the process requires good monitoring, setting of KPIs, synergies of stakeholders in terms of information and knowledge sharing. Sustainability concepts from INSTO and UNWTO were also presented. In conclusion, he stressed the importance of developing smart tourism, the need to reach holistic and inclusive stages, exploring regenerative ways of tourism, and finally becoming sustainable and resilient.

Mr. Gerrit Kruger, Chief Marketing Office, Destination Mekong, reiterated the need to transition to sustainability and resilience in tourism through the use of smart technologies. He presented various roles that each stakeholder can play in leveraging sustainable tourism and stressed the role of the communities which might face a lack of access to some technologies in achieving this. But technology is not the only main factor in attaining sustainable tourism. He ended his presentation by proposing further development of mobile applications, active participation of communities, and promotion of small businesses in the communities.



PANEL DISCUSSION: “ACCELERATING RECOVERY FROM COVID-19”



Moderated by Mr. Suriyan Vitchitletkarn, Executive Director, MI, panelists included representatives from the thematic sessions who provided a recap of key discussions or recommendations, cross-cutting linkages between the topics or sectors, and what remains to be done in the post COVID-19 world.

The speakers were Dr. Wongsas Laohasiriwong, Dean of Faculty of Public Health, Khon Kaen University, Dr. Julian Clarke, Specialist, Trade and Investment Facilitation (TIF) Department, MI, Mr. Sa-nga Sattanun, Program Manager, TIF Department, MI, and Dr. Rico Ancog, Dean of the School of Environmental Science and Management at the University of the Philippines Los Baños and the Head of the Ecosystem Services and Environmental Policy (ESEP) Research Laboratory of SESAM.

After welcoming the participants to the plenary session, Mr. Suriyan introduced the objective of the session. Dr. Julian Clarke was the first to present his recap of the B.1 session on “Boosting Logistics and cross-border trade (Moderator: Dr. Julian Clarke)” and the B.2 session on “Staying Ahead of Digital Acceleration (Moderator: Ms. Hao Wen)”.

He highlighted the benefits that come with digital trade in bringing together services and goods in new ways. E-commerce creates new opportunities for buyers and sellers. The online shopping experience, for example, is appealing for the customer and also appealing to the vendors, especially small and medium enterprises that have easy access to new export markets. Commercial platforms such as WeiBo and

Lazada provide an online shopping experience that combines a service – an e-commerce transaction – with a goods transaction in the form of customer delivery. Traditional barriers to market entry have been eliminated by e-commerce. Today, there is no longer a pressing need for service providers to relocate to other countries to obtain a share in the market, nor to hire foreign employees.

On the topic of connectivity, he said that digital trade enhances connectivity in the real world, too. The rise in e-commerce has created a highly efficient and cheap logistics industry. New connectivity infrastructure—for example, the new high speed railway linking Thailand to Yunnan, China—will at the same time provide access to the goods market and access to new markets for e-commerce vendors. Technological innovation in the areas of cold storage increases the reach of rural enterprises, creating real income in the agriculture sector, while technological innovation in the trucking industry leads to environmentally friendly modes of transport that are welfare enhancing. There is now an invisible value chain emerging in e-commerce – the provision of intermediate services to large multinationals – as much as there is in trade in goods. Policymakers and analysts need to account for these emerging trends when formulating policies in favor of investment, or in favor of SME development, technical vocation and training, and market access.

Dr. Wongsas Laohasiriwong summarized the session “Strengthening Health and Society Resilience” by saying that although the world has experienced other pandemics, e.g., SARS and H1N1, the outbreak of

COVID-19 drew societies' attention to the importance of human health alongside animal health and environmental health. In the GMS, the readiness or preparedness of the healthcare system was somewhere between "average and poor" as indicated in Global Health Security Index (GHSI) and Human Development Index (HDI). Among the countries, Thailand is in a better position, including in healthcare expenditure. Nonetheless, the country still needs to improve in many areas such as in the proportion of health workers to populations. In Lao PDR, to address the health equity issues, the government is improving the Universal Health Coverage, particularly with a focus on the accessibility in rural areas.

She also spoke of another prominent trend which came with the pandemic: the acceleration of applications such as AI and the use of Nano technologies in the healthcare sector. That said, she noted that gaps still exist in accessing tele-health and tele-medicine and that efforts must continue to be made to tackle this. Finally, there is a need to approach the health sector in a holistic manner by considering animal health and environmental health alongside economic recovery. The BCG economic model will help facilitate the development of the one health approach. But it is also crucial to improve intersectoral collaboration in research and development, capacity building programs and resource and information sharing through

the public-private partnership approach.

Dr. Rico Ancog shared the summary and highlights of the discussion during the breakout session entitled "Inclusive, Climate and Economic Resilient Agriculture Sector in the GMS." The sessions effectively identified lessons and recommendations for building back better from the 3Cs and for achieving an inclusive climate- and economic-resilient agriculture sector. The lessons and recommendations that were raised and discussed during the session included: (1) the region should focus on innovations for transformational change in terms of policy, society, technology, and institutions; (2) the application of a value-chain or Nexus approach should be prioritized; (3) employment in the agriculture sector should be mainstreamed among the youth; (4) policies and interventions must respond to small farmers' needs (suitable crop varieties, quality seeds/agri-inputs, early warning, diversification, financing); (5) strengthening partnerships with local governments; and (6) scaling up cross-border sharing and exchange of timely and useful information among key stakeholders.

Building on the discussions and as a way forward, the session identified the following areas that should be the focus of the Mekong Institute in contributing to achieving an inclusive, climate and economically resilient agriculture sector in the GMS:

- **Sustainable Food Systems.** This entails crafting and advocating for small-farmer responsive policies for resilient and climate-smart agriculture. The focus must also be on transformational change and innovation to produce nutritious, affordable, and safer food.
- **Value Chain Development.** Capacity development of stakeholders on value addition and preservation should be prioritized. The promotion of climate-resilient crop varieties and seeds is also beneficial.
- **Postharvest Management.** The focus should be on food loss reduction using the value chain/nexus approach.
- **Climate-smart Agriculture.** Adoption of the early warning system and information technology and promotion of climate-resilient crop variety and seeds are critical aspects of sustainable and climate-smart agriculture.
- **Food Safety and Market Access.** It is important to strengthen the capacity of key players in complying with food safety standards (GHP, GAP, HACCP, and organic agriculture) to gain local and international market access.



Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn, the moderator and also the representative from the session on “Strengthening Creative Economy and the COVID-19 Recovery” gave the summary, pointing out that until today, there had been no definite definition on what creative economy means. This is due to the fact that the concept is contested when involving various industries related to creativity. However, what is important is that creative industries have contributed significantly to improving the livelihoods of societies. It is recommended that the GMS develops a platform where the stakeholders could discuss how design and creativity could best interconnect and give value-added to support the economic sector.

Mr. Sa-naga Sattanun gave a recap of the impacts of tourism globally during the COVID-19 pandemic, naming the 3 key impacts in relation to sustainable

tourism, as economic, social, and environmental. He again made the point that sustainable tourism is a collective journey while business model, lifestyle, and people engagement are important factors. Also, it is important to take note of the role that marketing and branding can play in making destinations more accessible and attractive. MICE tourism in Thailand, which TCEB promotes, is a good way of using the meeting and exhibition industry to promote tourism. Moreover, TCEB has also adopted BCG model, technology and innovation, health, and Thai soft powers to help promote tourism. The 5Fs (food, film, fashion, fighting, and festival) under Thai soft power were articulated as a tool to attract foreign tourists. While the use of technology was described, it is not a solution but rather an enabler to provide support to local communities and advance social inclusiveness.

Agenda for Action Exercise

The moderator invited the audience to ask questions or add any additional points contributing to the call for agenda actions through a small exercise dubbed “Agenda for Action”. Participants had 5 minutes to discuss in groups and come up with one agenda for action where government, private sector, or development organizations or even individuals should address the issue or contribute to the efforts. MI would collect these proposed ideas to identify future or potential areas for collaboration. The collected ideas from participants are shown below:

Agriculture

- Strengthening agriculture sector
- Focus on postharvest and food processing
- Sustainable growth in agriculture including digital acceleration
- Changing mindset of the farmers and helping them to understand more about plant technique and postharvest technology
- Food innovation for food safety and security assurance

Connectivity

- Coordination of cross-border value chains and domestic linkages to enable resilience in supply chains

COVID-19

- Public health COVID-19
- Looking for innovations to prevent COVID-19
- Develop/ strengthen national One Health platform

Digitalization

- Digitalization (digital health, e-commerce, accessibility)
- Digital acceleration for SME enterprises (Upskill related to production process, marketing, and online platform)
- Providing training on digital literacy in SMEs

Others

- We need people's solidarity and cohesion

Also, one participant shared his reflection and idea as follows:

- Enhancing and assisting regional mechanism or a mechanism to demonstrate the value of collaboration
- MI is well-positioned to be a platform for knowledge sharing such as the Mekong Forum and also a platform for capacity building in the region
- International organizations are keen to look into how they can support assisting the regional mechanism for regional corroboration and collaboration

WRAP-UP AND CLOSING

Mr. Suriyan Vitchitletkarn, Executive Director, MI



We need to recognize and see the value of existing regional cooperation and how we can help enhance the capacity of translating ideas and policies into implementation.

First, I would like to recall what we discussed in the morning together with the original idea of why the Mekong Forum 2022 was conceived. The GMS is growing very quickly because of its strategic location and the interest in development partners and the private sector. The potential of GMS is that the subregion can connect the rest of ASEAN with Asia and the world. Growth in GMS has been disrupted by COVID-19. It reminds us that we should not just respond and look into recovery but find a way to quickly accelerate recovery, learn from it, and transition to a resilient economy. In that way, we will be more prepared and minimize impacts from extreme shocks in the future. We can recover, rebound and be resilient.

Second, if you look into high-level policy statement action plans, Mr. Ramesh, ADB has outlined one example of the GMS Economic Cooperation Program. If you look into the other Mekong plus cooperation frameworks, you will see elements where leaders have highlighted the need to support accelerated recovery. Policies and action plans are there. The issues are how well the policies and action plans are translated into implementation, identifying implementation issues and challenges, and looking at how we address these issues. Recovery could be accelerated and rebound in less time. We can transition to future resilience.

Third, Mekong Institute together with its partners are looking into a broad spectrum of topics. Three sub-themes have been introduced, namely Inclusive and Resilient Society, Seamless Connectivity, and Priority Sectors. These are only possible entry points and common elements that allow us to take up some very focused concrete initiatives. As a result, we can showcase how existing policies and action plans could be translated into implementation.

We have heard from this afternoon's panel discussion the possible elements and entry points. We will not simply take each entry point as a stand-alone project or activity. We will take it as a common element that shapes how best we can reach out to Mekong countries and communities so that we can combine the effects of economic

development and recovery. I will not touch upon any details here because we still need to digest and collect more thoughts from the sessions.

Fourth, I would like to take one or two points of cross-cutting points from the sub-theme. The first point I heard from the report-back session is that that regardless of what we would like to do in the future, we should not undermine a strong and resilient economy. It needs to line up with a very healthy society and community of the GMS. Public health should not be taken for granted. It is not only the work of the Ministry of Public Health but also a societal issue and concern. We should find a way to work together. A resilient economy and future should have a strong foundation of public health cooperation and initiatives. The second point is that if you combine stakeholders in agriculture and tourism, it could represent 80% of people involved in every corner of the communities of the GMS or Mekong subregion. The issue is how we can support them by not only addressing the COVID-19 recovery but also issues and challenges faced by the two sectors. If we can help the two sectors, the majority of people will be better off. They could co-create and co-shape how the supply chain will be developed. The last point is the manner in which we can support the two sectors and other sectors involved through seamless connectivity. This is how we can better work together through the comparative advantage of individual Mekong countries of GMS. Each country brings expertise, resources, and comparative advantages through seamless logistics, cross-border trade, and digitalization. This will be an entry point where we can support the two priority sectors and other sectors so that we can grow and prosper together.

We cannot do this by leaving it to the government or the private sector. We also need to tap into the academic sector, civil society, and the community. Partnership is the key. It is not a partnership

among stakeholders. We need to recognize and see the value of existing regional cooperation and how we can help enhance the capacity of translating ideas and policies into implementation. We can see how ideas that have been properly packaged could be driven for future implantation through partnership and the existing regional cooperation framework.

That said, Mekong Institute has been privileged to be able to work with all of you, development partners, governments, representatives from the private sector, and academic institutions. There is much remaining to be done. It is only with your active engagement that we can help each other to formulate good ideas and translate these into actions. We can address the implementation issues and refine policies. We all can benefit from such policies and support from the development partners.

Mekong Institute has a flagship program in place. One component is economic resilience in the GMS and the GMS Knowledge Network and we will try to use this initiative as a mechanism of socializing your suggestions and recommendations. Hopefully, we can come back to you with possible support so that we can bring your ideas into implementation.

I would like to invite every one of you to give a round of applause. First to the cohost of this event which is the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau, TCEB, please give a big hand to TCEB. The second is for our partners – the Khon Kaen Chamber of Commerce and the Thailand Creative Economy. Third is to the resource persons, speakers, and all ladies and gentlemen on the stage. Lastly, every one of you who have spared your precious time to be with us, hear new ideas, share your thoughts, and hopefully be part of translating the ideas into implementation.



Mekong Institute

123 Mittraphap Rd., Muang District, Khon Kaen
40002, THAILAND

Tel. : + 66 (0) 4320 2411

Fax. : + 66 (0) 4320 3656

Email : information@mekonginstitute.org