



Book Review:

Louis Lebel, Chu Thai Hoanh, Chayanis Krittasudthacheewa and Rajesh Daniel (eds).
Climate Risks, Regional Integration and Sustainability in the Mekong Region.

Selangor, Malaysia and Bangkok, Thailand: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, and SUMERNET Secretariat, SEI-Asia, 2014. 405 pages.

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This book, published in 2014, is a collection of papers and research results of projects supported by SUMERNET over the years. The book comprises 3 parts. Part I, titled “Policy Think Pieces” covers issues of Energy, economy and climate change in the Mekong Region, Valuing ecosystem services in the Mekong Region, Transboundary flows of resources, people, goods, and services in the Mekong Region, and Urbanization and sustainable development in the Mekong Region. Part II consists of 11 reports of research results from the projects supported by SUMERNET in the network member countries, namely Cambodia, China (Yunnan Province), Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, and dealing with themes identified in Part I. Part III is a synthesis on lessons for regional and economic development and sustainability.

As a disclaimer, the reviewer wishes to say at the outset that a review like this cannot do complete justice to all the issues raised and dealt with in the book, so it has to be somewhat selective, and based on the reviewer’s area of interests and competences.

Overall, the Policy Think Pieces do a good job in outlining the main issues facing the GMS countries, namely the growing demands on resources driven by economic development as national policy goals,

increasing population pressures, as well as the actual patterns of development as chosen by the respective countries, in the context of high degrees of diversity in terms of development levels and resource endowment, as well as varying forms of governance, namely highly market oriented countries like Thailand and somewhat more centrally-planned economies in the rest of the group. Despite the differences, however, all countries profess the goals of sustainable development, so the issues are more to do with the differences in the means chosen to implement the policies than the ends of the policies themselves.

The Introduction sets the scene nicely. “A major challenge in the region is how to improve the livelihoods of those who depend heavily on natural resources. A combination of rapid economic development, demographic shifts, and rising living standards is posing a new set of challenges to meeting increased food and energy demands”(P.1). Development comes with a cost, as the introduction states, “the expansion and intensification of crop production have been accompanied by land degradation (p.1)... deforestation and a decline in water quantity and quality... rich biodiversity in the region has already been greatly affected by land-use changes and remains vulnerable to climate change”(p.2). Cross-border demand helps to “transmit pressure from one country to another”, for example, on “forests, fisheries, energy and mineral resources”; “international migration... contributed significantly to the integration of economies... movement of goods has been supported by connecting infrastructure.” In a sense, these issues are familiar ones for “frontier” regions which are drawn into the global economies through increased connectivity, as are the benefits and the trade-offs which are familiar to students of development. Thus the GMS is not an exception to the rule. But as the Introduction says, the book “brings together a new set of multi-country empirical case studies” conducted within the Mekong region. The book says that “it identifies several significant lessons for engaging with policy and planning processes in the region ...that support the pursuit of regional sustainability through the research efforts of a regional network”. This is the important contribution that the book aims to make to the literature on the subject.

In the Policy Think Pieces, the challenges are dealt with adequately. Li and Vijitpan identify, in the energy paper, the issues of low emissions, fast growth and low energy efficiency and the triple bottom line challenge. Looking at the national responses to date, the authors identify national strategies for sustainable supply of cleaner energy, focusing on enhancing energy access, developing renewable energy and improving energy efficiency. They call on the countries to aim for the “low carbon” path to economic development.

Janekarnkij and Polpanich’s paper on valuing ecosystem services raises the economic approach that is somewhat new to the region, even if it is well discussed in the global literature. This is a compact survey of the concepts and tools relating to ecosystem valuation that is a good introduction to the subject for non-economists.

The two other Policy Think Pieces, on transboundary flows (Lebel, Naruchaikusol and Juntopas) and urbanization (Middleton and Krawanchid) are state of the art surveys of the situation that nicely accompany the energy piece.

The real value of the book lies in the summary research reports, of which there are 11 papers, conducted by researchers based in the countries of the region, and taking a broad multidisciplinary perspective, for example *Transboundary fish trade in the lower Mekong basin: impacts on fisheries and rural employment in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Thailand, Contract farming for rice and sugar, and Greenhouse gas emissions from tourism service providers in Chiangmai, Thailand and Hue, Vietnam*. Readers will get a good introduction to the local context and issues from the papers.

Regarding findings, the reviewer wants to highlight two topics, on Urbanization and ecosystem valuation. On urbanization, which is a widespread phenomenon in the region now, the paper (Thongyou et al.) looks at the city of Khon Kaen in Thailand and Vang Vieng in the Lao PDR. Both places are fast growing medium size urban centres. The paper looks at the perception of the people in the “urban hinterland” about the changes brought about by the growth of the urban centres. The findings are no surprise: in Khon Kaen, favourable impacts are

identified as more opportunities for employment and improved access to social services such as health care and education. The unfavorable impacts range from “negative impact on youth: increasing premarital sex and cohabitation, etc... to drug addiction and gambling” (p.336). For Vang Vieng, favourable impacts are identified as “better educational opportunities and participation in local administration (village committee), while the unfavourable impacts are “negative environmental impacts - worsened air quality, quality of water resources and food supply”. The cause of the environmental impact was the rapid development ...of cement factories being set up near the town, (with the attendant) quarry blasting and stone grinding for the cement factories ...untreated wastewater from the town flowing into the river making it unsuitable for use for villagers living downstream, as well as untreated solid wastes polluting the river. The paper concludes, somewhat cryptically: “urbanization in the hinterland rings to the fore administrative ambiguities caused by overly decentralized local government structures and highly centralized city administration”(p.245). As for recommendation, it proposes that “urban centre and hinterland municipalities should work together to plan a more integrated and sustainable development of the ‘city region’, taking into account ‘conflicts between industry, tourism and environment”(p.246).

A more explicitly ‘economic’ approach is represented in the paper from Vietnam, on Evaluation of the impact of pilot payments for forest environmental services (PFES) in Lam Dong province, Vietnam. This paper reports on the project to get users of forest services to make payments into a fund that then pays out to the people who protect the forest, namely two power companies, water supply companies and income from ticket sales for forest visits. The recipients of the funds are the forest dwellers who are allocated forest areas to protect. The paper reports that forest dweller households obtain higher income, as expected, but also spend more time on forest protection, which counts as a cost to them, yet they receive a net positive income from the project. The paper reports, without figures, that “the area of forest invaded/encroached upon for other use has been reduced” and that “the quality

of forests has ... improved as a result of the PFES program”. However, on the question of environmental quality improvements, the paper notes with some scepticism that “it is unlikely that forest quality improvement can be detected in such a short period” and, referring to water quality issues, quoting the water company management as saying that “their main concerns were how the water quality of their catchment area was to be managed and evaluated, when water quality may be annually affected by many factors, both human-made and natural...and asked who would take responsibility if water quality worsened.”

Based on an admittedly selective reading of the book, the reviewer is really satisfied, that the book presents the case studies in a carefully researched manner, based on empirical evidence from the fields, and the discussions are thoughtful and critically analytical. In this sense, it is concluded that the book is a very useful addition to the literature on the issue of environment, development and sustainability, and a good starting point for researchers who want to work on the issues in the GMS.

