

### Special Article

## Leveraging the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) for Digital Transformation and Improving MSME Resilience in Cambodia

SOK Kha\*

Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) have always been the backbone of the Cambodian economy, accounting for 99 per cent of the total business entities and contributing over 70 per cent to employment and 60 per cent to the gross domestic product.<sup>1</sup> They play critical roles in creating livelihood opportunities, innovation, expediting sustainable development of the country, and realising the vision of Cambodia's Industry Development Plan (IDP 2015-2025) and the country's vision to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050.

Recognising the significance of MSMEs, the government has launched MSME support policies and initiatives one after another. Cases in point include the tax incentives scheme established in 2018, the customs-related support scheme in 2019, the Entrepreneurship Fund in 2019 to cultivate entrepreneurial culture and promote the capacity of potential SMEs and innovative start-ups, and the SME Bank in 2020 to increase access to financing for Cambodian small businesses with preferential conditions. Also affiliated with the government, Khmer Enterprise and Techno Start-up Centre, and other support institutions have been established to catalyse the support for entrepreneurs and MSMEs to

grow in both scope and scale. Various digital solutions for further improving business environments for MSMEs are also rolled out. KhmerSME, for example, provides a wide range of information useful for MSME businesses including related laws and regulations, business networking, access to finance, service providers, training opportunities, regional and international markets trends and opportunities, etc. CamDX provides a one-stop service platform for accessing public services including online business registrations, where MSMEs can benefit in terms of cheaper fees, less redundant data entry and more simplified procedures, greater transparency, and better accessibility.

That said, Cambodia's MSMEs continue to contend with multiple challenges, including credit constraints and the lack of capacity, particularly regarding business development and insufficient marketing and strategic management skills, and access to market opportunities of high value. They are further augmented when considering business regulatory issues including complicated and time-consuming licensing and certification, informal practices, tax administration, and customs rules and procedures. These challenges have undermined the resilience of MSMEs to external shocks and uncertainties,

<sup>1</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia. 2018. Annual Report, 2018. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Industry and Handicraft.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501271512/pm-hun-sen-encourages-smes-to-boost-agro-industrial-processing-and-exports/>

such as those brought forth by the Covid pandemic. Generally, the negative impacts of Covid were more serious for those MSMEs led by women, youth, and groups in vulnerable conditions, with many of them experiencing cashflow pressures, reduced customer foot traffic, and interrupted supply chains. While the stimulus and liquidity injection support to MSMEs as the emergency response to Covid was rolled out, the informality challenge disconnects the majority of MSMEs from these various government supports.

That said, the government continues to display high commitments and strong political support for further improving the environments conducive for MSMEs, building their capacity to recover and grow in the post-pandemic. At his meeting with approximately 5000 MSME owners in April 2003, Prime Minister Hun Sen encouraged his ministers and relevant stakeholders to work jointly and harder to help address challenges faced by MSMEs, strengthen their efficiency, and build stronger resilience of these businesses.<sup>2</sup>

The good news is that the interest of various key stakeholders is high. Multiple discussion platforms were organised for government, private sector actors, and development partners to jointly discuss and collect inputs for policy response in support of MSMEs in the context of Cambodia's post-COVID recovery. They included the 'Towards a Post Covid-19 Recovery and Resilience' conference by the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) and the policy workshop on 'Strengthening National Capacities for Enhancing MSME Resilience and Building Forward Better to Implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Cambodia' by the MISTI, were already organised.

One common understanding from these discussions was that MSMEs must make more use of technology, transform the business into a digital format wherever applicable, and seize growing opportunities arising from digitalisation, e-commerce, and broader market access. The rise of the new generation of family businesses where sons and daughters are more tech-savvy and familiar with the digital world presents big future potentials in this regard, but the lack of knowledge among the current generation of MSMEs remains the issue. This situation has brought forth new areas for demand-driven capacity development and can be one of the

priorities under Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) activities between Cambodia and India.

The bilateral cooperation between Cambodia and India has been strong. The Quick Impact Projects already showcased one welcome effort, which benefits Cambodia in terms of women's empowerment and skills development related to digital education, among others. It is worth noting that Cambodia has always been impressed and inspired by India when it comes to India's world-class ICT industry. The India-Cambodia Umbrella Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2019 and the subsequent MoU between MISTI and the Embassy of India on 'Enrichment in Science, Technology and Innovation' in 2022 laid down the foundation for moving forward the cooperation in the area of ICT and digitalization.

India and Cambodia may consider undertaking the Japanese JICA expert model by bringing in long-term Indian experts to advise various related government ministries and agencies on various technology-related matters. ICT policy and infrastructure development present future opportunities for both countries to level up their cooperation for further progressing technological and digital advancement and adaptation in Cambodia. This can be made possible by improving the affordability and uptake of internet connectivity, online payment gateways, and smartphone-based value-added services for Cambodian people and businesses. Capacity-building programs in support of MSMEs, including expert training and targeted mentorship program in digital literacy and digital transformation as well as support for building stronger tech start-up activities can also be considered. In so doing, ensuring good collaboration and harmonization with the existing and emerging technical assistance programs in this sector by other Cambodia's partners like the EU, UN, ADB, is encouraged. This way, India can amplify the impacts of their support, avoid duplications, create synergies, and thus sustainability. ■

---

**Sok Kha** serves as the Trade Facilitation Advisor of ASEAN-EU project ARISE Plus (Cambodia), Technical Lead of SeT4SME of the Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation & Research Fellow of Asian Vision Institute.

Views expressed are of the author's. Usual disclaimers apply.

## Promoting MSME Digitalisation in MGC Countries

Pankaj Vashisht and Tuhinsubhra Giri\*

The world has been going through a remarkable phase of economic transition. The phenomenal growth in computing power over the last two decades has led to several technological breakthroughs. Innovations such as e-commerce platforms, digital payment systems, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, the Internet of Things (IoT), 3D printing, quantum computing, etc. have taken the world by a storm. These technologies have unleashed a massive social and economic restructuring which is dismantling the old business models rapidly. The ongoing digital transition is fundamental enough to transform the way goods and services are produced, ordered and delivered to the customers.

The growing digitalisation is offering unprecedented opportunities to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME). It is providing innovative solutions for several traditional constraints MSMEs have been facing for a long. For example, fintech innovations are helping MSMEs to overcome the financial constraint by improving access to collateral-free loans. Similarly, e-commerce platforms have the potential of allowing MSMEs to access a wider customer base without spending a huge amount on logistics. The next-gen technologies also have the potential to facilitate MSME integration in Global Value Chains by simplifying the cumbersome custom procedures (WTO 2018). However, gains for MSMEs from the ongoing wave of digitalisation are not automatic. In fact, given the prevailing digital divide and lack of capacity, MSMEs are often most disadvantaged and vulnerable to shock emanating from digital transition. There is consensus that if left to the market alone, instead of gaining, MSME may lose due to the rapid digitalisation of society. Given the fact that the offtake of digital technology so far has remained heavily in favour of big firms, this fear is not unfounded. Since MSMEs are at the forefront of employment generation in most economies, the lack of digitisation among MSMEs threatens to accentuate the economic inequalities, making the digital transformation socially more painful.

Like other developing countries, MSME serves as the backbone of the economies in Mekong Ganga Co-operation (MGC) countries. Besides contributing significantly to employment generation and poverty reduction, MSMEs have also been served as a breeding ground for innovations, entrepreneurship and empowerment in MGC countries. Although the definition of MSME differs throughout MGC countries, available information suggests that MSMEs account for more than 95 per cent of all businesses, more than one third of Gross Domestic Products (GDP) and around two thirds of employment in the majority of MGC nations (López González, 2017). In India, MSMEs account for nearly 30 per cent of GDP and 48 per cent of exports, providing employment to over 110 million people (Ministry of MSME, GOI). Similarly, in Thailand, MSMEs comprise 99 per cent of all businesses, employing around 80 per cent of the workforce (Office of SMEs Promotion, Thailand).

The available evidences suggest that MSMEs in MGC countries are still lagging behind in terms of digitalization. Evidence suggests that though MSME's awareness about digital technology has increased after covid pandemic, predominating majority MSMEs in the region, especially in the Least developed countries are still not using any digital tools or are at a very basic level of digitalization (ASEAN et al. 2019, DAI 2022). Moreover, they have not developed any strategy for digitisation in the near future which did not augur well for the overall development of these economies. The lack of digitalization among MSMEs in MGC countries can be attributed to capacity constraints (lack of information & skill to identify digital solutions), lack of finance, trust deficit in digital tools and poor digital infrastructure.

MSME in MGC countries needs support for digitisation on three fronts. First, there is an urgent need to address the skill and informational gap. Second efforts are required to make digitization affordable. Third, efforts are required to boost digital infrastructure. Given the expertise in digital technologies and its experience in improving and

### Table 1: Number of MSMEs and Employment in MGC members

MGC Countries	Number of MSMEs (in Lakhs)	Share of MSMEs of all firms (%)	Employment in MS- MEs (in lakhs)	Share in GDP (%)
Cambodia (2019)	4.6	90	12	58
Laos (2006)	1.14	90	-	16
Myanmar (2015)	1.14	-	-	30-53
Thailand (2018)	30.78	99.8	139.5	45
Vietnam (2019)	7.45	98	-	47
India (2021-22)	633	96	1109.9	30
Total	678.11	-	1261.4	-

*Sources:* Lao National Chamber (2020), Myanmar (2018), Thailand (2019), Pisei (2019), Vietnam (2020), Ministry of MSME, India (2021-22).

making digital infrastructure affordable, India can help MGC countries on several of these fronts. With several digital interventions and innovations such as Goods and Service Tax Network (GSTN), e-way bills, MSME Udyog Aadhar, Government e-Marketplace (GeM), India has successfully improved digital infrastructure to democratize business prospects, making it simpler for MSMEs to use digital technologies. Similarly, Unified Payment Interface (UPI) has revolutionized digital payment which has benefited MSMEs, especially Micro enterprises immensely. Some of these intervention/experiences are worth replicating in other MGC countries. Given this, MGC countries should consider cooperating in the MSME sector to promote digitalisation. Specifically, the following steps could be considered. First, in order to bridge the information gap, MGC countries, with India's expertise can consider launching an integrated Multilanguage online platform to increase digital awareness among MSMEs. Second, a capacity-building program to encourage MSME training and up-skilling with an emphasis on strengthening management skills and support for building a start-up ecosystem should be initiated. Third, MGC countries should consider establishing / supporting MSME-specific open-source software / digital solutions initiatives. Lastly, a line of credit can be utilized to build /improve digital infrastructure in the LDC of the region. These measures if implemented can boost digitalisation and resilience of MSME in MGC countries. ■

### References

- ASEAN, ERIA, SPIRE, and Mitsubishi Research Institute, Inc. 2019. Study on MSMEs Participation in the Digital Economy in ASEAN: Nurturing ASEAN MSMEs to Embrace Digital Adoption, ASEAN.
- India Council for Research on International Economic Relations. 2022. MSME Go Digital: Leveraging Technology to Sustain during the Covid-19 Crisis.
- Lao National Chamber of Commerce & Industry. 2020. SMEs in Laos.
- López G, J. 2017. Mapping the participation of ASEAN small- and medium-sized enterprises in global value chains, OECD Trade Policy Papers, No. 203, OECD Publishing, Paris.
- Malaysia SME Corporation. 2018. SMEs Are the Backbone Of The Economy.
- Myanmar Ministry of Planning and Finance. 2018. Myanmar Statistical Yearbook 2018, Nay Pyi Taw: Central Statistical Organization.
- Pisei, H. (2019). Ministry: SMEs Vital to Economy, but 95% Not Registered, Phnom Penh Post.
- Thailand Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion. 2019. White Paper on SME, Bangkok: OSMEP.
- Vietnam Ministry of Planning & Investment. 2020. Improving Access to Resources Critical for SME Development: Ministry, Media Release.
- World Trade Organization. 2018. World trade report 2018: The future of world trade: How digital technologies are transforming global commerce, October.

**Pankaj Vashisht**, Coordinator, AIC at RIS and **Tuhinshubra Giri**, Consultant, AIC at RIS  
(Views are authors own. Usual disclaimers apply)

### Virtual Meeting between Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and H.E. Hun Sen, Prime Minister of Cambodia

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi held a virtual meeting today with H.E. Hun Sen, Prime Minister of Cambodia. The two leaders held discussions on the entire range of bilateral issues, including cooperation in the fields of trade and investment, human resource development, defence and security, development cooperation, connectivity, post-pandemic economic recovery and people-to-people ties. They expressed satisfaction at the pace of bilateral cooperation. PM Hun Sen emphasised the importance that Cambodia attaches to its relations with India. Prime Minister Modi reciprocated the sentiment and stressed Cambodia's valued role in India's Act East policy. The leaders reviewed the robust development partnership between both countries, including capacity-building programmes and Quick Impact Projects under the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation framework. Prime Minister Modi also highlighted the historical and civilizational links between the two countries and expressed his happiness at India's involvement in the restoration of Angkor Wat and

Preah Vihear temples in Cambodia, which depict the cultural and linguistic connect between the two countries. Prime Minister Hun Sen thanked India for providing 3.25 lakh doses of Indian-manufactured Covishield vaccines to Cambodia under Quad Vaccine Initiative. The two leaders complimented each other on the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Cambodia being celebrated this year. As part of these celebrations, Prime Minister Modi invited His Majesty the King of Cambodia and Her Majesty Queen Mother to visit India at a mutually convenient time. The two leaders also exchanged views on regional and global issues of shared interest. Prime Minister Modi congratulated Cambodia on assuming the Chairmanship of ASEAN and assured India's full support and assistance to Cambodia for the success of its Chairmanship. ■

(Excerpted from Ministry of External Affairs, 18 May 2022)  
© Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

### Training on Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments for MGC Members

A twelve-day capacity-building training on preservation of historical and cultural monuments; and exchange of delegations in collaboration was organised from 6th March 2023 to 17th March 2023 at the National Museum Institute, New Delhi wherein two participants from each MGC Countries except for Myanmar Participated. The valedictory session was attended by Sh. Harsh Chirania, Under Secretary, Indo-Pacific Division of MEA on 16th March 2023.

The sessions deliberated upon the historical context of the monuments, preservation strategies, along with conventions and ethics associated with the restoration of architectural heritage. The learning outcomes included but not limited to the following:

- knowledge of the principles and methodologies pertaining to protection of cultural heritage;
- knowledge of skill-based techniques for the

documentation and analysis of built heritage;

- knowledge of skill-based techniques for the preservation and management of sites of historical and cultural importance;
- Opportunities to share and exchange knowledge of heritage protection based on professional experiences in the field and to build heritage protection networks in the region.



Source: Indo-Pacific Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

### Keynote Address by Minister of State for External Affairs, Dr. Rajkumar Ranjan Singh at the Conference on “Connecting East: Confluence of IPOI and AOIP Visions”

India and ASEAN share civilizational contacts which are deep-rooted and abiding. Our geo-strategic location linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans has helped to strengthen our relations. The maritime routes to South East Asia allowed for the intermingling of our cultures. These trade routes linked ancient India with southern Burma, central and southern Siam, lower Cambodia and southern Vietnam, to the archipelago of Sumatra, Java and Bali and numerous other urbanized coastal settlements.

ASEAN region's immense wealth in the form of historical monuments and civilizational heritage stands witness to our common cultural connect. Our shared priority for the preservation and restoration of this historical treasure is directly reflected in our cultural cooperation. The ancient socio-cultural relations and linkages have also found contemporary expression in the form of the Mekong

Ganga Cooperation, a sub-regional mechanism aimed at reviving cooperation between the peoples of the Mekong and Ganga river basins in the fields of tourism, education, culture and people-to-people contacts.

Speaking of the contemporary era, India and ASEAN have an enduring, multifaceted Strategic Partnership. In the last 30 years since we established a formal relationship, from a Sectoral Partnership in 1992, our relationship has evolved into Strategic Partnership in 2012, encompassing areas ranging from Agriculture to Space with several multi-layered dialogue mechanisms. ■

Dr. Rajkumar Ranjan Singh, Minister of State for External Affairs, Government of India (Excerpted from Ministry of External Affairs, 01 September 2022)

© Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

### Joint Statement on ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Further expand existing projects with ASEAN, including under the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), such as the Centres of Excellence in Software Development and Training (CESDT); scholarship schemes under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), ASEAN-India Science & Technology Collaboration and Nalanda University; and explore Quick Impact Project (QIP)s under the Mekong Ganga Cooperation forum;

Promote the revival of tourism and related industries which have been severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, through effective implementation of the ASEAN-India Tourism Work Plans;

Enhance exchanges and cooperation in the areas of culture, education, media and academia by further expanding the existing cooperation under initiatives such as Doctoral Fellowships in India for ASEAN,

ASEAN-India Network of Universities, ASEAN-India Youth Summits and hackathons, and continue to work on activities such as the ASEAN Culture Heritage List;

Establish and strengthen the institutional linkages between corresponding institutes of India and ASEAN under all the pillars of cooperation;

Promote complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including through cooperation with the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (ACSDSD);

Explore potential synergies with sub-regional frameworks, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Indonesia-Malaysia- Thailand Growth

*Continued on page 13...*

### Fourth Mekong River Commission Summit held in Vientiane, Lao PDR

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) is an intergovernmental organisation that works with the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam to manage the shared water and related resources of the Mekong River for the sustainable development of the Mekong region. It was founded by the Mekong Agreement of 1995, building on previous cooperation through the Mekong Committee established in 1957. Hence with more than 65 years of experience, the MRC serves today as a unique platform for water diplomacy and regional cooperation in which member states share the benefits of common water resources. It also acts

as a regional knowledge hub on water resources management that helps to inform decision-making processes based on scientific evidence. Overall, the MRC is an established organisation with a clear mandate, procedures, strategies, guidelines and knowledge products that help ensures the Mekong is utilised for the countries' benefit and the people's well-being. The MRC Summit is convened every four years, bringing together political leaders to address the prevailing challenges and opportunities facing the Mekong Basin. It is an opportunity for the Heads of Governments of the four MRC Member

*Continued on page 13...*

### Eradication of Malaria and other Vector Borne Diseases for Mekong-Ganga Cooperation countries

Eradication of Malaria and other Vector Borne Diseases for Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Countries  
Organisers & Host: Indo-Pacific Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; ICMR- National Institute of Malaria Research, Delhi  
24-26 April 2023

The "workshop- cum- training on eradication of communicable and non-communicable diseases with high incidences," for MGC Countries was organised with the objective to train the national program officials and medical and paramedical staff in different aspects including surveillance, diagnosis, monitoring therapeutic efficacy of antimalarials, vector surveillance, and insecticide resistance monitoring of vector bore diseases, particularly malaria dengue and chikungunya. 15 participants from five MGC countries participated. The participants were program manager for malaria in their respective countries. Among many other sessions, "Digital Surveillance and GIS in VBDs" was covered as the new-age criterion for diseases prevention and cure.

Almost all participants were in view that they have gained knowledge from the training and it was very good (87-93 per cent) as per the content. The participants (100 per cent) also appreciated

the knowledge of faculties and were satisfied with the quality of content in their presentations. The participants also gave feedback on the less duration of the training as only three days were not sufficient for field-oriented training. ■



Source: Indo-Pacific Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

### India, Vietnam Holds 3rd Maritime Security Dialogue

The 3rd India-Vietnam Maritime Security Dialogue was held on May 31, 2023, in New Delhi. Senior officials from both sides and Services concerned with maritime affairs participated in the Dialogue. The two sides discussed ways to sustain a secure maritime environment conducive to inclusive growth. They also reviewed maritime cooperation initiatives and avenues of reinforcing international and regional mechanisms for comprehensive maritime security. ■

(Excerpted from the *newsonair.gov.in*, June 1, 2023)  
© *newsonair.gov.in*

### India to Provide \$1 billion loan to Cambodia Under Mekong-Ganga Cooperation

According to Kao Kim Hourn, Minister Attached to the Prime Minister of Cambodia, informed that India has committed to provide \$1 billion in loans to Cambodia under the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, during a virtual meeting between Hon'ble Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia.

Mr Hun Sen appreciated India for its active contribution to the Mekong region and assistance extended to Cambodia through Quick Impact Projects under Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative in the field of agriculture, environment, health, rural development, education, women's rights enhancement, and culture. ■

(Excerpted from the *Khmer Times*, May 19, 2022).  
© *Khmer Times*

### India's External Affairs Minister co-chairs 12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Meeting

India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar co-chaired the 12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) meeting in Bangkok along with his Laos counterpart PDR Saleumxay Kommasith. MGC is one of the oldest mechanisms of the lower Mekong region and is guided by India's Act East Policy.

In the meeting, the Minister prioritized the implementation of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and decided to establish a Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Business Council to take forward economic cooperation and expand the ambit of exchanges in agriculture, science and technology and water resource management. The meeting also explored new areas of development partnership, including through Quick Impact Projects and taking forward culture and tourism, and deepening museum-based cooperation.

Dr. Jaishankar also met his Myanmar counterpart H.E. U Than Swe, with the discussions centered on connectivity initiatives, especially about the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway. Over 1,300-km-long highways are currently in

the making, and, once opened, they will boost the trade ties between Myanmar and Thailand, while also harnessing the potential in the travel and tourism space. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway holds the promise of expanded connectivity and regional integration. India has also proposed to extend the road to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. They also underlined the importance of ensuring peace and stability in the border areas. Discussions took place on expediting the conclusion of the Motor Vehicles Agreement between the three countries, India, Myanmar and Thailand.

During this meeting, Dr Jaishankar also raised the human and drug trafficking issues. As an immediate neighbour, India is concerned about the humanitarian situation in Myanmar. Proposed people-centric initiatives aimed to address the pressing challenges. India supports the democratic transition process in Myanmar and highlights the need for the return of peace and stability. ■

(Excerpted from *bignewsnetwork.com* 16 July 2023)  
© *bignewsnetwork.com*



### Cambodia Collaborates with India to Restore Ta Prohm's East Gate

The restoration project of Ta Prohm Temple's east gate in Siem Reap province, conducted by the APSARA National Authority, in collaboration with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), is about 70 percent complete, as informed by the Head of the restoration team from ASI.

According to the Head, experts are currently working on the roof of both sides of the gate, which would be completed, and later proceed to the installation of another central roof, which is the final restoration step. He also added that although the restoration team has already installed new stone, they need to learn more about the construction of the east gate of the Ta Prohm Temple after restoration to see how strong it is. As they are constantly monitoring

when repairing the stones, there may be some issues. The restoration of Ta Prohm's East Gate focused on carvings, replacing lost and damaged stones, as well as roof stone trimming and sealing the roof from seepage, he added.

According to a news release of the APSARA National Authority, the main challenge of the east gate of Ta Prohm is the structure of the whole thing because the big trees' roots move the foundation from the original location, causing the stone wall to tear apart and may collapse ■

Excerpted from *Khmer Times*, May 26, 2023

© *Khmer Times*

### Indian Embassy inaugurates IT Centre gifted to SBU

India under the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation initiative funded to set up of the IT Centre at the Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University (SBU). The inaugural event at the university in Phnom Penh was presided over by Dr Devyani Khobragade, Ambassador of India to Cambodia, and attended by Pen Vibol, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Cult and Religion.

The fully equipped SBU IT Centre will boost the learning capacity of users in digital and information technologies. SBU vice-chancellor, the Venerable Yorn Seng Yeat, expressed his gratitude for the generous gift from the Indian government, which will take the university's curriculum to higher levels.

"The IT Centre is very important for students, both monks and laypeople, as well as SBU staff, to gain more knowledge on technology because every student needs to learn not only their majors but also digital technology and computer skills. All of these are very important for research and working in ministries and other institutions," he said. Ambassador Khobragade celebrated the long history of Cambodian-Indian relations, which have relied upon a number of factors including Buddhism. "I hope the IT Centre will benefit students' education and research, as the Indian Embassy wants to see more improvement in Cambodia," she said. ■

(Excerpted from the *Khmer Times*, 23 February, 2023)

© *Khmer Times*

### India Plans to Build Road Connectivity to Cambodia

Mr. Eang Sophalleth, Assistant to the Cambodian Premier, revealed that India is intending to strengthen and expand the cooperation with Cambodia in road connectivity from India to Cambodia by crossing Myanmar and Thailand. The plan was revealed by visiting Dr. S. Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs of India when he paid a courtesy visit to Hun Sen, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia. India also wanted to boost cooperation with Cambodia in the ASEAN and Mekong-Ganga frameworks on the areas of economics, tourism, national defence, mine clearance, investment, community development and temple restoration.

The Prime Minister pushed for the bilateral free trade agreement and investment protection agreement and asked the Indian side to consider establishing direct flights between the two nations to boost tourism and elevate the Mekong-Ganga cooperation to the summit level. ■

(Excerpted from the *Khmer Times*, 5 August, 2022)

© *Khmer Times*

### ASEAN, India Strengthen Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

ASEAN and India reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthen their comprehensive strategic partnership at the 25th ASEAN-India Senior Officials' Meeting (AISOM).

The senior officials exchanged views on the developments in ASEAN and in India and reviewed cooperation between both sides. The meeting noted the steady progress in the implementation of the ASEAN-India Plan of Action (POA) (2021-2025) and looked forward to the finalization of the Annex to the ASEAN-India POA (2021-2025) to ensure that their partnership becomes substantive and mutually beneficial in the coming years.

The meeting also discussed ways to further strengthen cooperation in several areas of mutual interest including maritime activities, transnational crimes, cyber security, science and technology, transport and connectivity, digital economy, fintech,

tourism, agriculture, environment, sustainable development, and public health. Furthermore, both sides also exchanged views to step-up efforts to enhance people-to-people contacts through exchange programmes involving youth, students, media and artists, scholarships programmes, and capacity building and training courses.

Both sides expressed shared interest and aspiration in ensuring regional peace, security and stability, and acknowledged the need to exert efforts to materialise the implementation of the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the India-Pacific for Peace, Stability and Prosperity in the Region. ■

(Excerpted from the *asean.org*, March 7, 2023)

© *asean.org*

### Fourth ASEAN-India Workshop on Blue Economy

Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India in partnership with Coordinating Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Investment, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Indonesia; in collaboration with the ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), RIS, and the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) jointly organised the 4th ASEAN-India Workshop on the 'Blue Economy' on the theme "Advancing Partnership for Sustainability" on 15-16 December, 2022 in New Delhi. The Joint Statement on ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (adopted on 12 November, 2022 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia) envisions Blue Economy and Maritime Cooperation as the key areas for cooperation.

Mr. Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East) addressed the workshop as India and ASEAN take steps to enhance Blue Economy cooperation as Comprehensive Strategic Partners. In his Keynote address, Secretary (East) highlighted the importance of sustainable development, connectivity, Science and Technology, and safety and security to further this cooperation. In order to facilitate an in-depth discussion on the Blue Economy, with the aim of identifying specific areas where ASEAN and India can meaningfully

cooperate and work together, the conference held four sessions on Sustainable Exploitation and Harnessing of Marine Resources, Combating Marine Debris, Promoting Coastal and Marine Tourism and Sustainable Maritime Connectivity. The workshop welcomed the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and ASEAN's proactive initiative to establish an ASEAN Network for Combating IUU Fishing (AN-IUU) and the contribution that the adoption of the Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris and the ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris will have on efforts in this regard. Discussions also explored useful capacity-building activities, guest lectures and exchange of visits to discuss further, specific areas of cooperation in the context of the Blue Economy between ASEAN and India, through related agencies such as the National Maritime Foundation, the Phuket Marine Biological Center, the ASEAN Center for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (ACSDDSD) and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre). ■

(Excerpted from *indmissionasean.gov.in*, 15-16 December 2022)

© *indmissionasean.gov.in*

### **An Indian Innovator Won a competition at the 3rd ASEAN India Grassroots Innovation Forum in Cambodia**

Ms Shalini Kumari from Patna in Bihar, India received first prize in the Grassroots Innovation Competition at the 3rd ASEAN India Grassroots Innovation forum for her innovation 'Modified walker with adjustable legs'.

The technology which was transferred to the industry, Vissco Rehabilitation Aids, a leading manufacturer of orthopaedic products in the country, is available for purchase through Brick and Mortar stores and also through marketplaces like Amazon India for purchase by common people of the country.

Ms Shalini Kumari received the prize from H.E Dr. Hul Seingheng, Cambodia COSTI Chairman and Director General, General Department of Science, Technology & Innovation under the Ministry of Industry Science, Technology & Innovation (MISTI), Kingdom of Cambodia. She has won the cash prize of USD 1,500 by virtue of being the winner of the first prize. The three-day 3rd ASEAN India Grassroots Innovation Forum organized by the ASEAN Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation

(COSTI) in partnership with the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India and the National Innovation Foundation (NIF) - India at Phnom Penh, Cambodia in the presence of H.E. Kitti Settha Pandita Cham Prasidh, Hon'ble Minister of Industry, Science, Technology and Innovation, Kingdom of Cambodia. The forum consisted of a Grassroots Innovation Competition, a Student Innovation Competition, Panel discussions, Keynote speeches and an exhibition of innovations consisting of participants from India and the ASEAN Member States (AMS).

Ms Shalini Kumari was first recognized by the National Innovation Foundation (NIF) - India, an autonomous body of the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India through IGNITE Competition in the year 2011 for the same technology. ■

(Excerpted from the *PIB Delhi*, 22 December, 2022)  
© *PIB Delhi*

### **Shri Sarbananda Sonowal receives the First Indian Cargo Ship at the Sittwe Port**

Union Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways and AYUSH Shri Sarbananda Sonowal and Deputy Prime Minister and Union Minister for Transport & Communications Admiral Tin Aung San, of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar jointly inaugurated the Sittwe Port in Rakhine State, Myanmar today. During this event, they received the first Indian Cargo ship which was flagged off from Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port, Kolkata.

The operationalisation of Sittwe Port would enhance bilateral and regional trade as well as contribute to the local economy of the Rakhine State of Myanmar. The greater connectivity provided by the Port will lead to employment opportunities and enhanced growth prospects in the region.

In his remarks at the inauguration ceremony, the Minister highlighted the close historical, cultural and economic ties between India and Myanmar, particularly the Rakhine State of Myanmar. He reiterated India's longstanding commitment towards

the development and prosperity of the people of Myanmar through developmental initiatives such as the Sittwe Port.

This project was conceptualized to provide an alternative connectivity of Mizoram with Haldia/ Kolkata/ any Indian ports through the Kaladan River in Myanmar. The project envisages highway / road transport from Mizoram to Paletwa (Myanmar), thereafter from Paletwa to Sittwe (Myanmar) by Inland Water Transport (IWT) and from Sittwe to any port in India by maritime shipping.

Sittwe Port has been developed as a part of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) funded under grant in aid assistance from the Government of India. Once fully operationalized the waterway and road components of KMTTP will link the East coast of India to the North-eastern states through the Sittwe port. ■

(Excerpted from the *pib.gov.in*, May 9, 2023)  
© *pib.gov.in*

### Highlights from 12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting

#### Major Outcome:

- Joint Statement of the 12th MGC FMM with its two Annexes
- Concept Paper on the Revitalisation of the MGC Lead Country Mechanism in ten areas of cooperation of the MGC
- Concept Paper on the Establishment of the MGC Business Council.

### Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand attended the 12th Mekong - Ganga Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting (MGC FMM) in Bangkok

On 16 July 2023, H.E. Mr. Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, attended the 12th Mekong - Ganga Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting (MGC FMM) in a hybrid format in Bangkok. The meeting was co-chaired by H.E. Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India, and H.E. Mr. Saleumxay Kommasith, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Lao PDR.

The Meeting reviewed the progress of the MGC over the past 23 years and discussed ways forward for the MGC cooperation. The Meeting also emphasised the significance of synergy between the MGC and other sub-regional and regional cooperation frameworks, particularly the Ayeyawady - Chao Phraya - Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and ASEAN.

The Meeting expressed support to the "READY" approach as proposed by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand to advance the MGC towards the future.

The R stands for Resilience, E for Environmental Sustainability, A for Adaptation and D for Diversification of economies, and Y for the MGC Year of Exchange in 2025 on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the establishment of MGC. The "READY" approach aims at strengthening the MGC in the post-pandemic economic recovery, enhancing readiness for future challenges and raising awareness about the MGC among MGC countries, particularly the younger generation.

During the Meeting, the Foreign Ministers of MGC countries adopted the Joint Statement of the 12th MGC FMM with its two Annexes, which are the Concept Paper on the Revitalisation of the MGC Lead Country Mechanism in ten areas of cooperation of the MGC and the Concept Paper on the Establishment of the MGC Business Council. These two Annexes were developed based on Thailand's proposal at the 11th MGC FMM in 2021. Thailand is the Lead Country in Tourism and Co-lead Country with Myanmar in Public health and Traditional Medicine. ■

Excerpted from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, 18 July 2023

© Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand

### India and its partner countries decide to establish Mekong Ganga Cooperation Business Council to expand exchanges in agriculture & water resource management

External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar today co-chaired the 12th Mekong Ganga Cooperation meeting in Bangkok, Thailand along with his Lao PDR counterpart Saleumxay Kommasith. In the meeting, Dr Jaishankar prioritised the implementation of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. They decided to establish a Mekong Ganga Cooperation Business Council to take forward economic cooperation and expand the ambit of exchanges in agriculture, science and technology and water resource management. The meeting also explored new areas of development partnership, including through Quick Impact Projects and taking forward culture and tourism, and deepening museum-based cooperation. Earlier in the day, the External Affairs Minister held a meeting with Thailand's

*Joint Statement on ASEAN-India Comprehensive...  
Continued from page 6*

Triangle (IMT-GT), Singapore-Johor-Riau (SIJORI) Growth Triangle, Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia- Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), and Mekong sub-regional cooperation frameworks, including Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Ayeyawady Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), and to support ASEAN and India's efforts in promoting equitable development by aligning sub-regional growth with the comprehensive, mutual growth and development of ASEAN and India; and Continue to work together on regional and global issues of common concern while endeavouring to strengthen our partnership through the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which shall contribute to further strengthening ASEAN-India relations through strategic cooperation for peace, stability and prosperity in the region. ■

(Excerpted from Ministry of External Affairs, 12 November 2022)

© Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai. He also met his Myanmar counterpart U Than Swe on the sidelines of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation meeting. Their discussions focused on connectivity initiatives that have a larger regional significance.

Dr. Jaishankar stressed the importance of expediting projects that have faced challenges in the recent past, especially the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway. Dr. Jaishankar also flagged concerns about human and drug trafficking and urged stronger cooperation among relevant parties for the early return of trafficked victims. ■

*Excerpted from AIR News 16 July 2023  
© All India Radio*

*Fourth Mekong River Commission Summit...  
Continued from page 7*

Countries to revisit the commitments made four years earlier and agree on strategies for the future and beyond. Three summits have been held to date - the first in 2010, hosted by the Kingdom of Thailand in Hua Hin, and the second in 2014, hosted by the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam in Ho Chi Minh City and the third in 2018, hosted by the Kingdom of Cambodia in Siem Reap. Ministerial representatives from MRC Dialogue Partners, China and Myanmar, participated in the three Summits. The fourth Summit, which focuses on the theme 'Innovation and Cooperation for a Water Secure and Sustainable Mekong', will be hosted by the Lao People's Democratic Republic and held on 5 April 2023 following a preparatory Ministerial Meeting on 4 April and an International Conference of Stakeholders on 2-3 April 2023. The venue for all events was Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR. ■

(Excerpted from Mekong River Commission Secretariat, 4-5 April 2023)

© Mekong River Commission Secretariat

## Towards Resilient Agricultural Value Chains in the Mekong

Agricultural trade has been playing an increasingly important role in shaping the growing relationship between the so-called CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam), Thailand and China. With the exception of Thailand, agricultural trade dominates bilateral trade between each of the CLMV-T countries and China. With both the population and the poor of the CLMV-T predominantly rural, agricultural development and trade have an important role to play in inclusive growth and social upliftment. Together with China, the five Southeast Asian countries constitute the Greater Mekong Subregion, which accounts for about a fifth of the world's population and GDP.

Agriculture has made a larger contribution to poverty reduction than other sectors. Despite its falling share in GDP, it continues to be a foundational sector for social stability in the CLMV-T countries. For example, many Southeast Asians relied on agriculture to stay afloat during Covid-19 pandemic-imposed movement controls. In Thailand, for instance, migration to rural areas increased by 50 per cent between 2019 and 2020 as workers returned to their farms to escape factory closures and the tourism slump due to lockdowns. This reverse migration has been a feature of every major economic crisis in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. This is another reason to ensure the continued sustainability and viability of rural-based agriculture.

What are the main obstacles limiting agricultural trade between the CLMV-T and China? A recent ISEAS publication addresses these questions through detailed case studies of key agricultural export commodities, identifying specific impediments along the agricultural value chain (AVC) and the non-tariff measures (NTMs) and barriers (NTBs) that interfere with cross-border trade.

A key impediment is NTMs – especially technical barriers to trade (TBT) and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) requirements – that are enforced arbitrarily and often implemented in a discretionary manner that turns them into NTBs. NTMs such as TBTs and SPS requirements are designed to protect

the health and safety of consumers, but they can be used (or abused) to protect domestic producers in the importing country. The situation is made worse by a lack of publicly available information on relevant NTMs. When information is not the problem, capacity constraints at the regulatory and firm/ farm levels create difficulties in complying with technical and product standards.

Apart from the trade policy and domestic capacity challenges, the sustainability of the agriculture sector in the region is intertwined with climate impacts. Climate change and the associated warmer summer months are already affecting agriculture regions. This has led to lethal heat waves, heat stress and drought. The increased frequency of storms intensifies flooding and destruction of food growing regions and infrastructure. These will reduce yields and labour productivity. In the longer-term, sea-level rise and salinity creep would devastate fertile food regions and deltas. Among the CLMV-T countries, Myanmar and Thailand are in the top 10 countries most at risk of being impacted by climate change, according to the Global Climate Risk Index, and Cambodia and Vietnam are in the top 20. The Mekong Delta, for example, is projected to reach a tipping point to land infertility by 2050.

The agriculture sector in the CLMV-T countries is not only a victim of climate change but also a contributor to it. Globally, the agriculture sector and land use change and forestry alone contribute 18.4 per cent to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, this share is much higher in Myanmar (80 per cent), Cambodia (70 per cent) and Lao PDR (50 per cent). The main sources are land use change, methane gas from livestock and rice cultivation, nitrogen oxides from fertilisers, and energy use on farms and fertiliser production systems.

So, how can the policy, capacity and sustainability challenges be overcome?

First, there is a clear need to improve the governance environment of cross-border trade as well as improve domestic capacity. Regulatory systems should be aligned with the World Trade

Organization agreements on SPS requirements and TBTs. Regulatory frameworks that are harmonised with international guidelines/standards, or those in bilateral or regional agreements, should be adopted.

Second, increased investment in human capital and skills development along the entire AVC is required to enhance compliance and, where necessary, accredit third-party laboratories that can handle testing procedures and conformity assessments. If trade facilitation and cooperation on NTMs could be increased through regional initiatives, the need for enhanced governance and compliance capacity could be significantly reduced. This is particularly important given that it is often difficult to enforce protocols with cross-border GMS trade, even for the formal components. Capacity development also takes time, and therefore simplifying rules and cooperating with NTMs for mutually beneficial outcomes is what is required in the short run.

Third, with the sustainability framework in mind, stakeholders need to think about both the complementarities and the trade-offs between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of AVCs. Strategies that address these three dimensions simultaneously could translate into crop diversification, R&D and innovations, investment in post-harvest and physical infrastructure and logistics to reduce food losses. Farmers should be given technical advice on how to adapt to and mitigate climate change through improved agricultural

extension services and climatology information and advisory services. The private sector should be leveraged to support farmers in terms of product standards and choices as well as training.

With increasing consumer awareness about the urgency to address climate change globally, including in Southeast Asia and China, sustainability standards have become a new form of competitiveness. Farmers could get higher prices from their certified produce by pursuing more sustainable agricultural practices. Sustainability certification and Payments for Environmental (or Ecosystem) Services (PES), for example, could provide a way to boost farmers' competitiveness and income, and towards more inclusive and sustainable agricultural practices. By increasing standards and improving competitiveness from both the economic and sustainability points of view, the CLMV-T countries could further diversify their export products and markets, increasing the resiliency of the agriculture sector. Then, they could move to the next level of looking for markets with a greater demand for premium agricultural products, such as organic and fair-trade, that create a higher value supply chain and higher incomes for farmers. ■

Excerpted from [www.fulcrum.sg](http://www.fulcrum.sg) on February 9, 2023, authored by Jayant Menon, Elyssa Kaur Ludher and Maria Monika

## Mekong River Sand Mining is a Crumbling Castle

Sand is the most mined resource worldwide, yet not many are aware of the global environmental crisis stemming from over-extraction. River sand is the main ingredient of concrete – a core resource in construction. While the building boom and rapid urbanisation in developing countries create unprecedented demand for river sand, the sector remains unregulated and unsustainable.

Southeast Asia is no exception. River sand mining is present in most ASEAN countries. Yet the issue is especially alarming in the five ASEAN countries along the Mekong River – Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. River sand in the region is extracted faster than it can naturally renew,

with the demand in Asia forecast to rapidly rise.

River sand over-extraction leads to river erosion and degradation as well as huge floods that are forecast to destroy the biodiversity and livelihood of millions in Southeast Asia. With the consequential disruptions in fishing and agriculture, contamination of freshwater and air, and collapsing infrastructure along the crumbling river banks, the prospects are grim. The issue of over-extraction only becomes visible once serious damage has already been done.

The greatest demand for sand comes from Singapore. Its biggest sources are Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Vietnam. Several ASEAN countries banned sand exports and

applied restrictions on extracting in the past. But this only drove sand miners to neighbouring countries and kept the threat in the region. The case of the Mekong illustrates the nature of the risk – even if sand mining is unsustainable in one country along the Mekong, it impacts the whole river and all those living near.

The transboundary nature of the threat requires a transboundary policy solution. ASEAN needs a harmonised policy approach to eradicate unsustainable river sand mining in Southeast Asia.

The long-term solution to eradicate unsustainable river sand mining is the promotion of sustainable alternatives that are cost-effective and on par with minimal commercial standards. Such alternatives are manufactured sand and recycled quarry dust.

All ASEAN countries should levy a coordinated universal tax on river sand mining outputs and exports. The output and export tax would serve as a two-fold targeting mechanism to advance more sustainable alternatives.

First, the taxes would drive up the cost of river sand. The construction industry would be more inclined to adopt sustainable alternatives as river

sand will no longer have a significant cost advantage.

Second, the taxes would create government revenue. Part of the tax revenue should be used to establish an environmental trust fund for research related to sustainable alternatives and environmental practices. In practice, this could be an environmental restoration program designed and implemented as part of the permission to extract. The tax would reflect the duty of the sand miners to moderate or potentially reverse their effect.

Since a core part of the sand mining problem is the widespread ignorance towards its existence, special emphasis should be put on awareness campaigns. The work of brave journalists and activist groups – such as Mother Nature Cambodia – remains indispensable. Raising awareness of the threats of sand mining through educational and training programs should be a priority for ASEAN countries since the expected growth in sand demand means the issue is here to stay. ■

Excerpted from [www.eastasiaforum.org](http://www.eastasiaforum.org) 2 March 2023, authored by Lilla Szabó, TIU  
© *East Asia Forum*

## India Urges Bay of Bengal and ASEAN Countries to Go Big on Connectivity, Food Security

On Sunday, while co-chairing the 12th Foreign Ministers' Meeting of Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Mechanism in Bangkok along with Laos Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith, India's EAM specifically urged for prioritizing the implementation of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.

"Expedite the conclusion of the Motor Vehicles Agreement between the three countries," tweeted Jaishankar calling for the early conclusion of discussions on the pending bilateral Motor Vehicles Agreement to facilitate cross border movement of vehicles.

Established in the year 2000, the Mekong Ganga Cooperation, an initiative by six countries – India and five ASEAN countries, namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam for cooperation in tourism, culture, education, as well as transport and communications, remains one of the oldest sub-regional cooperation organisation.

With both the Ganga and the Mekong – which flows from its source on the Tibetan Plateau in China

through various Southeast Asian countries – being civilizational rivers, the MGC initiative aims to facilitate closer contacts among the people inhabiting these two major river basins. It remains one of the oldest mechanisms of lower Mekong region and is guided by India's Act East Policy.

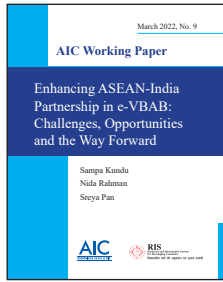
New Delhi has funded, completed and continues to finance several MGC Quick Impact Projects in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and also implemented several community development projects under the Rakhine State Development Programme (RSDP) and Border Area Development Programme in Myanmar.

Looking at the northeast as the gateway to south and Southeast Asia, India is pushing for an early completion of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and its extension to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam which can become a vibrant economic growth corridor.

Excerpted from [www.indianarrative.com](http://www.indianarrative.com) on July 17, 2023, authored by Ateel Sharma.  
© *India Narrative*



## Enhancing ASEAN-India Partnership in e-VBAB: Challenges, Opportunities and the Way Forward



This study is a background analysis to map the opportunities India has in telemedicine and tele-education in the ASEAN region. If implemented, expansion of e-VBAB in ASEAN can serve two purposes for India: first, it will strengthen ASEAN-India partnership under ASEAN's objectives of achieving success in Industrial Revolution 4.0; and second, it secures India's position as one of the Indo-Pacific leaders in tele-medicine and tele-education through development partnership.

## Thirty Years of ASEAN-India Relations: The Stock-taking of Outcomes for 1992-2022

This working paper is an attempt to narrate and explain the 30 years of India-ASEAN relations in a nutshell. The Introduction of the working paper offers an insight into the features of India's Act East Policy (AEP) and the importance of the ASEAN region in India's external relations with the Indo-Pacific countries. The introduction section also discusses the objectives, research questions and the framework of the study. The framework provides clarity about the paper's focus on Culture, Connectivity and Commerce (3Cs) in ASEAN-India relations based on institutional mechanisms and multilateral cooperation.

## Assessing ASEAN-India Future Cooperation Opportunities through the Sustainable Development Framework

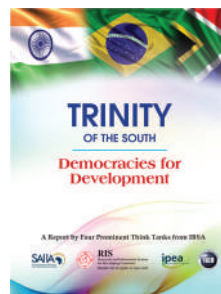
This paper argues that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined by the United Nations can serve as a framework to identify the future of India-ASEAN key cooperation focus areas. Based on ASEAN and India's respective SGD scorecards, both parties must cooperate to address common weaknesses such as biodiversity and environmental protection and health and well-being. Both must also leverage their SDG strengths by promoting and exporting their expertise for strategic gains. India should leverage its climate pledges and achievements. Meanwhile, ASEAN must proactively promote their experiences and expertise in enhancing quality education.

## Towards Indian G-20 Presidency, Delhi Process VI, RIS, 2023



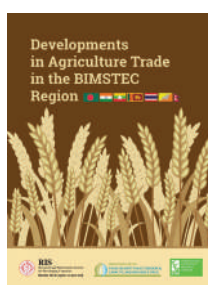
The Delhi Process VI conference focused on the theme "Exploring New Development Paradigms and Growth Strategies: Partnerships in Times of Transition and Contestations" held on 27- 28 August 2022 in preparation towards India's impending G20 Presidency. This report summarises the conference as proceedings.

## Trinity of the South Democracies for Development, RIS, 2022



The report has collection of research studies undertaken by the eminent policymakers, academicians and RIS research team which focus on issues such as IBSA and global geo-strategies, triangular cooperation in IBSA trade, climate change, health and biodiversity cooperation, social inclusion, IBSA Fund, among others. Cross-cutting emphasis has been placed on the post-pandemic world order, macroeconomic challenges and economic cooperation, South-South Cooperation and State-Civil Society partnerships, why the world needs IBSA and what IBSA has achieved in the past.

## Developments in Agriculture Trade in the BIMSTEC Region, RIS, 2022



This study examines some of the pressing issues in the BIMSTEC region. It presents some broad macroeconomic developments concerning the agricultural trade sector. The nature of trade liberalisation and tariff regimes in the agricultural sector are discussed as well. The pattern of regional trade in agriculture is analysed. The dynamics of trade in the food sector are examined. The broad conclusions and policy recommendations of the study are also presented.

### AIC Commentaries

(May 2022-July 2023)

#### ASEAN-India@30

##### **ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2022: Outcomes and Way Ahead by Prabir De and Tuhin Subhra Giri, November 2022**

Under the Chairmanship of Cambodia, the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits and other related summits were held in the second week of November 2022 in Phnom Penh. ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit was also held back to back. In the light of these developments, this commentary highlights the major outcomes for India. This also underlines the importance of ASEAN-India partnership in the emerging Indo-Pacific.

##### **Toward ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership by Chintamani Mahapatra, September 2022**

It has taken almost three decades for India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to aspire to develop a comprehensive strategic partnership that can enhance economic, political, cultural and even strategic cooperation between India and ASEAN and also contribute towards maintaining a rules-based order, peace and stability in the larger Indo-Pacific region. This commentary discusses the current contour of the relations and presents a set of recommendations to strengthen the comprehensive partnership between ASEAN and India.

##### **ASEAN-India Cooperation in the Next 30: Towards Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Muhammad by Waffaa Kharisma and Sampa Kundu, July 2022**

The rise in popularity of the Indo-Pacific as a geo-strategic construct has put both ASEAN and India in prime position as important actors in the region. Despite the gaps between their expectations, along with the differences in their approaches and priorities in dealing with common security challenges, the existence of good foundation of relations and real strategic drivers between ASEAN and India can only mean that the potential to advance relations exist with full vigour. Investing more in solving regional security issues where both are stakeholders, whilst

upscaling their defence diplomacy interactions and practical cooperation can be the way forward. In this given background, this commentary seeks to present the perspectives of ASEAN and India on security and defence partnerships in the Indo-Pacific in the form of a debated narrative.

##### **ASEAN-India Partnership to Strengthen Global Health by K. Srinath Reddy, June 2022**

The opportunities for expanding the scope and scale of partnerships between India and ASEAN in the health sector are many. Together, they can work to improve global health and reduce health inequities. Combined, they account for over a quarter of the global population. As the future of global health moves from a platform of shared vulnerability to a pedestal of shared values, ASEAN-India collaboration can provide the model for principled partnerships to safeguard the health and wellbeing of people across the world.

##### **Ways to Strengthen ASEAN-India Relations at Its 30th Anniversary by Gurjit Singh, May 2022**

ASEAN and India complete 30 years of their dialogue relations in 2022, which coincides with India's 75th year of Independence. The 30th Anniversary is a good time to deepen the partnership. The dynamic change in global and regional strategic and economic complexities requires closer and more frequent collaboration. This commentary discusses the current contour of the relations and presents a set of recommendations to strengthen the ASEAN-India partnership.

#### Trade, Connectivity and Economic Diplomacy

##### **The Bay of Bengal as Zone of Peace and Prosperity by Sanjay Pulipaka, May 2023**

Bay of Bengal connects India and Southeast Asia. The region is undergoing impressive economic transition with renewed focus on cross border connectivity which augurs well for the region. However, challenges continue to exist. This commentary discusses the current state affairs in the region and presents a set of recommendations to ensure that the Bay of Bengal emerges as a Zone of Peace and Prosperity.

### **Global Quest for Supply Chain Diversification: Is India Gaining from It? By Pankaj Vashisht and Oorja Tapan, January 2023**

A new geopolitical construct – “Indo-Pacific” - has gained prominence in policy circles. Though Indo-Pacific is predominantly a geopolitical construct, it also has a strong economic underpinning which revolves around economic rebalancing or reducing trade dependence on China. This commentary looks into the economic aspects of the Indo-Pacific strategies of leading global players and tries to examine whether or not India is gaining from it.

### **India-Japan Relations and Its Prospects for Regional Connectivity by Makoto Kojima, December 2022**

India and Japan share strong cultural and civilizational links. The year 2022 marks the 70th anniversary of the establishment of India-Japan official diplomatic relations. Japan is now the largest bilateral development partner for India. This commentary deals with overview of Japan-India relations and discusses its prospects on India-ASEAN regional connectivity. It also underlines the importance of ASEAN-India-Japan partnership in the emerging Indo-Pacific.

### **India-Singapore Fintech Corridor: A Gateway for Deeper India-ASEAN Financial Relations by Priyadarshi Dash, Siddhi Sharma, Sukhmani Kaur, October 2022**

Fintech applications in financial services and other sectors of the economy in emerging markets and developing countries offer promising development outcomes in the future. Besides facilitating faster and more convenient retail payment solutions, fintech innovations are being viewed as effective instruments for ensuring financial inclusion and enhancing the financial literacy among the common people. Ongoing efforts by India and Singapore for comprehensive collaboration in the fintech sector with possible replication in other ASEAN countries open up avenues for higher trade, investment and people-to-people relations among India, ASEAN and Indo-Pacific nations.

### **G20 and ASEAN-India Cooperation for Equitable Global Sustainable Development by Nitya Nanda, August 2022**

The G20 was established to deal with global recovery in the aftermath of the financial crisis. The issues of

recovery are still important in the post-pandemic period, but, the G20 now has become a forum for discussing broader global sustainable development issues. India's views on these issues are quite similar with those of the ASEAN in general and Indonesia in particular. Given this, the fact that Indonesia is the current Chair of the G20 and India is slated to take over from Indonesia later this year, provides these two countries opportunities to shape the global agenda and make it equitable and sustainable.

## **Indo-Pacific and Others**

### **42nd ASEAN Summit: Outcomes and Future Outlook by Premesha Saha, July, 2023**

The 42nd ASEAN Summit took place at Labuan Bajo in Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara from May 10-11, 2023. The summit witnessed significant progress on economic and institutional issues. However, progress on critical security issues like the South China Sea dispute and the Myanmar crisis remained elusive. This commentary argues that though efforts to strengthen the institutional capacity of the ASEAN are commendable, ASEAN will need to take a bolder approach to deal with the security issues like the South China Sea dispute and the Myanmar crisis in the upcoming summits.

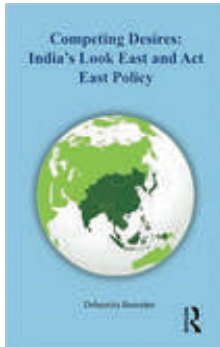
### **Cultural Diplomacy: Tapping Potential of Traditional Sports by U Thuta Aung, June, 2023**

Cultural diplomacy and people-to-people (P2P) connect are important tools for strengthening ties between two regions. Given the common socio-cultural ethos, cultural diplomacy and people to people connect holds immense potential to boost ASEAN-India relations. This commentary looks into the components of traditional sports as part of cultural diplomacy and P2P cooperation between ASEAN and India and recommends ways to promote it.

### **Ways Forward for India and ASEAN in Indo-Pacific by Ian Hall., February 2023**

In 2022, relationship between ASEAN and India has been upgraded to the comprehensive strategic partnership. India's ties with several Southeast Asian states are now much stronger. Yet despite this progress, it is clear the India-ASEAN strategic partnership has not delivered all that it could. This commentary presents pathways for deeper India-ASEAN ties.

### Competing Desires: India's Look East and Act East Policy



Debamita Banerjee  
Publisher : Routledge; 1st edition  
2023

ISBN-10 : 1032535954

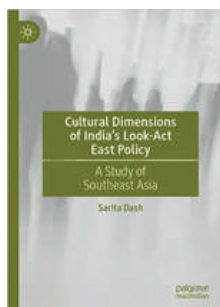
ISBN-13: 978-1032535951

India's Look East policy opened up a new strategic dimension to Indian foreign policy. India had significant cultural and diplomatic linkages with the Southeast Asian nations. But

India's non-aligned diplomatic position created a distance between India and Southeast Asia. The adoption of the Look East Policy led to the establishment of economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia. The policy was revised in the form of the Act East Policy in 2015 in the face of China's increasing influence in South and Southeast Asia which posed a threat to India's security. Moreover the Sino-Pakistan liaison necessitated the strengthening of India-Southeast Asia relations.

This book is an attempt to trace the development of the Look East Policy, its transition into Act East Policy and its aftermath. These changing parameters will show the decisive impacts on the transformative phases of India's foreign policy.

### Cultural Dimensions of India's Look-Act East Policy: A Study of Southeast Asia Sarita Dash



Publisher : Palgrave Macmillan;  
2023

ISBN-10 : 9811935289

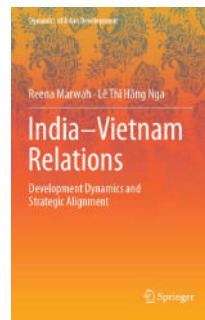
ISBN-13 : 978-9811935282

Tracing the cultural interactions between South and Southeast Asia since prehistoric times, the book critically scrutinizes the current cultural diplomacy initiatives of India's Look-Act

East Policy. Reminding the need to look at culture as a two-way process and the need to re-define the understanding of culture in its Space Age setting, the author emphasizes on India realising its unique multicultural potentiality to broaden the outlook

and parameters of cultural diplomacy to suit the unfolding World Order in the region. The nature and composition of the demography of Southeast Asia and its Indian diaspora calls for a balanced approach in covering the land and maritime sectors, the book further observes. Adopting a peoples-centric approach, the author argues for cultural interactions to go beyond the union government and its agencies and advocates for the role of state governments, non-governmental actors, and other community initiatives as well.

### India-Vietnam Relations: Development Dynamics and Strategic Alignment (Dynamics of Asian Development) January 2023



Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga, Springer Verlag, Singapore; 1st ed. 2021 edition (latest edition 6 January 2023), ISBN-10 -9811678243, ISBN-13 : 978-9811678240

This book provides an in-depth analysis of the close cultural links between India and Vietnam. It

discusses the issues of trade negotiations under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Indo-Pacific construct. Issues such as strengthening the economic partnership, contemporary development challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, including weakening supply chains, and geo-strategic tensions are explored in this book. It enriches understanding of the potential of the two countries to develop as manufacturing hubs for the region and beyond. Given the more aggressive posturing by China in 2020, the concluding chapter includes the policy prescriptions with a futuristic vision, for India and Vietnam to catalyze their strategic and bilateral partnership. Well researched and analytical, the book draws extensively from several interviews of experts, diplomats, journalists, businesspersons, and members of the diaspora. It is a must read for students, researchers, think tanks, area study centers, and all institutions engaged in Asian studies, encompassing narratives extending from the developmental to political, from the bilateral to the multilateral and from the geo-economic to the geo-strategic.

## Statistical Indicators

### Socio and Macro Indicators of MGC Countries, 2020

Indicators	India	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Vietnam
Population, total (million)	1407.56	16.59	7.43	53.80	71.60	97.47
GDP (current billion US\$)	3176.30	26.96	18.83	65.09	505.95	366.14
GDP per capita (current US\$)	2256.6	1625.2	2535.6	1209.9	7066.2	3756.5
GDP, PPP (current billion US\$)	10193.6	79.4	64.0	238.3	1343.3	1138.0
Agriculture, forestry, and fishing, value added (% of GDP)	16.8	22.8	16.1	23.4	8.5	12.6
Industry (including construction), value added (% of GDP)	25.9	36.8	34.1	35.0	34.8	37.5
Services, value added (% of GDP)	47.5	34.2	38.8	41.5	56.7	41.2
Trade (% of GDP)	45.3	132.2	..	53.1	116.7	186.5
GDP growth (annual %)	8.7	3.0	2.5	-17.9	1.5	2.6
Gross capital formation (% of GDP)	31.2	26.6	..	30.8	29.1	33.5
Gross domestic savings (% of GDP)	29.3	27.2	..	34.1	29.8	35.0
Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)	5.1	2.9	3.8	..	1.2	1.8
Annual freshwater withdrawals, total (billion cubic meters)	647.5	2.2	7.4	33.2	57.3	81.9
Water productivity, total (constant 2015 US\$ GDP per cubic meter of total freshwater withdrawal)	4.1	10.9	2.5	2.5	8.0	3.8
Renewable internal freshwater resources, total (billion cubic meters)	1446.0	120.6	190.4	1002.8	224.5	359.4
Total natural resources rents (% of GDP)	2.0	0.7	3.0	5.6	1.7	3.4

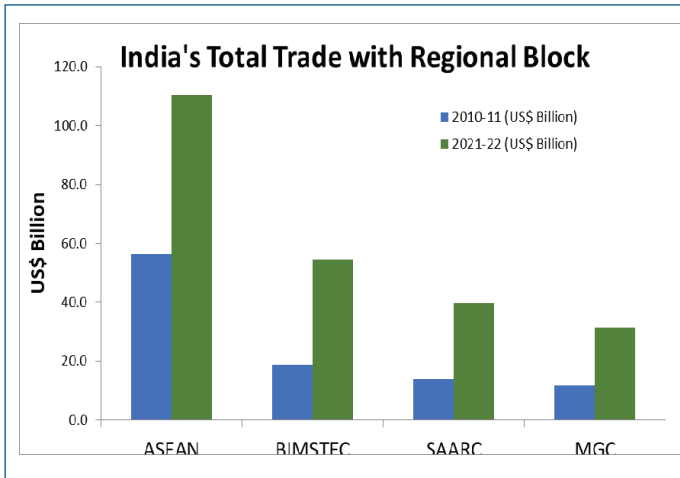
Source: World Development Indicators (WDI), The World Bank, Washington, D.C.

### Intra-regional Trade

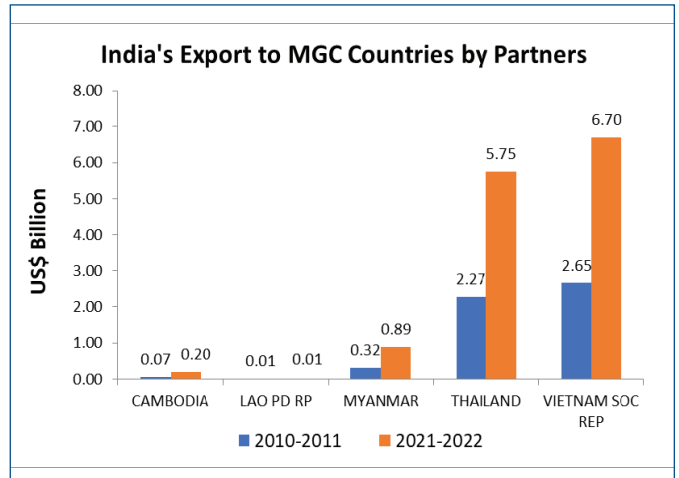
Year	ASEAN		SAARC		BIMSTEC		MGC	
	Value (US\$ Billion)	Share (%) of Total World Trade	Value (US\$ Billion)	Share (%) of Total World Trade	Value (US\$ Billion)	Share (%) of Total World Trade	Value (US\$ Billion)	Share (%) of Total World Trade
2010	495.6	24.7	32.0	4.5	49.6	4.8	56.2	5.0
2022	858.5	21.9	13.6	1.3	67.0	5.4	42.5	3.5
CAGR (%)	4.7		-6.9		2.5		-2.3	

Source: Calculated based on ITC Trade Statistics Database and WITS Database.

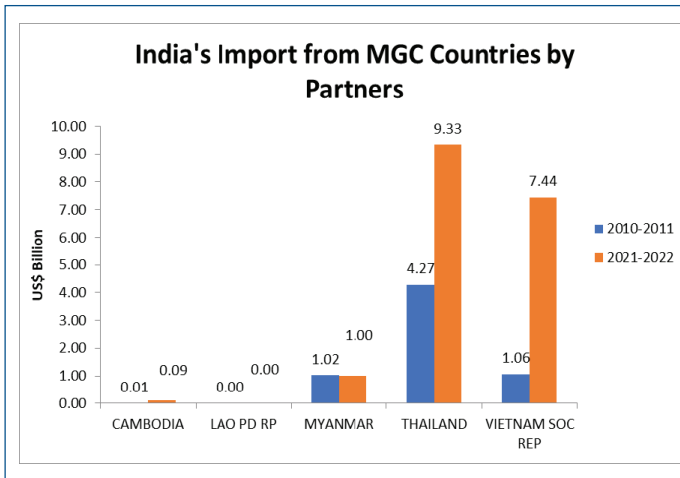
# Statistical Indicators



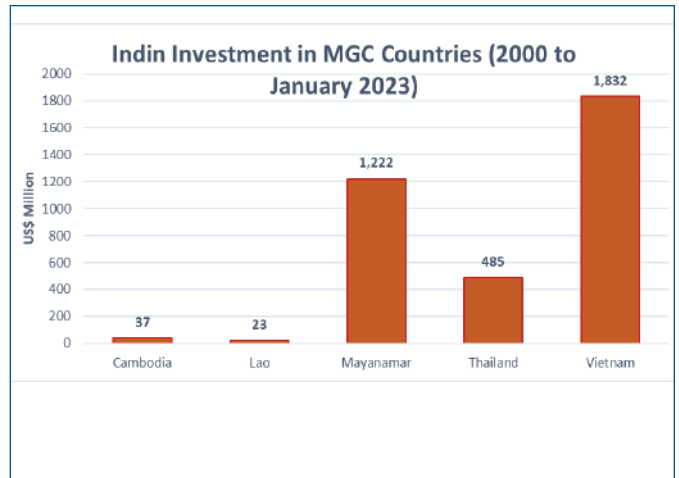
Source: Export Import Data Bank, Government of India



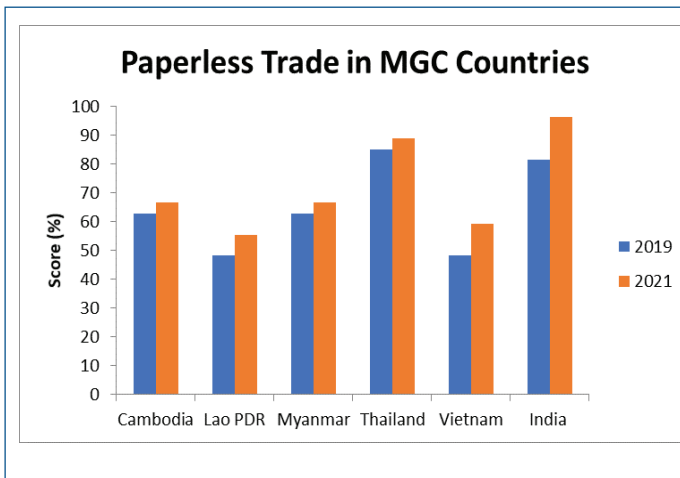
Source: Export Import Data Bank, Government of India



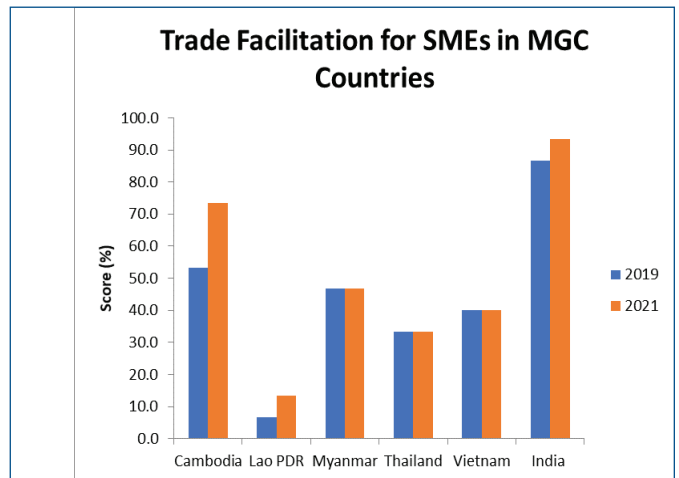
Source: Compiled from UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation



Source: Compiled from UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation



Source: Compiled from UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation



Source: Compiled from UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation

## Views of India's Quick Impact Projects in CLMV\*



Quick Impact Project (QIP) was announced by India in 2017 under the framework of MGC and since then, India has completed many projects in CLMV. The focus of QIPs is to help the countries in completing school buildings, old age homes, water supply systems and other community related activities. These are proposed to help the communities directly.



Tuyen Quang- Khuoi Soan Primary School in Lam Binh district, Vietnam was close to completion by the end of 2022.(2) Located in Vietnam's Quang Tri Province, district Hai Lang District, Hai Truong Kindergarten was close to completion by the end of 2022.



Handover ceremony of Establishment of Fertilizer Analysis Laboratory at Department of Agricultural Land Management, Vientiane, Laos. The handover ceremony was held on Apr 12, 2022 with the attendance of Laotian Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Phet Phomphiphak and the Indian Ambassador to Laos Dinkar Asthana.



In Lao Cai province, Vietnam, the Truong Chai Kindegarten was provided assistance in building classroom, dining room and ancillary building in 2021-22.



Nghe An Green Library was built for Kim Lien Commune in Nam Dan District, Vietnam in 2021-22.



Indian MoS, MEA, Dr. Rajkumar Ranjan Singh participated in the handover ceremony of Promotion of Green Cardamom Cultivation in Paksong District, Champasak Province, Laos, on June 29, 2022.



Groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of a drinking water facility at a school in Pha Oh Temple, Luang Prabang Province, Laos was held on 31 January 2022. This will provide clean drinking water to 500 students of the school.



Groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of a Healthcare Centre in Viengxay Village, Attapeu Province, Lao PDR was held on 30 November 2022. This will provide better healthcare facilities to the remote villages, especially to the pregnant women as the center will have a child delivery room. This is one of the 11 QIPs India has taken in Laos

\* Note: We appreciate and thank Sh. Harsh Chirania, Under Secretary, I.P Division, MEA, GOI and Sh. Puran Patwari, Consultant, I.P Division, MEA, GOI for providing the necessary information and photos of the QIP projects and MGC training programmes undertaken by India.



# Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief

## *An RIS Publication on Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)*

The *Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief* seeks to disseminate the policy-related research, news, viewpoints, and information about resources among the policy circles and think-tanks to promote the cause of deeper cooperation between India and Mekong countries. Views expressed by the authors in this policy brief are their personal, and do not represent the views of AIC or RIS. The information contained has been compiled from various sources, as cited, purely for education and dissemination, and not for commercial purposes. The copyrights of the material included remain with the original sources. *Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief* is available from AIC or RIS or can be downloaded from [www.ris.org.in](http://www.ris.org.in).

### About RIS

Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) is a New Delhi-based autonomous policy research institute that specialises in issues related to international economic development, trade, investment and technology. RIS is envisioned as a forum for fostering effective policy dialogue and capacity-building among developing countries on global and regional economic issues. The focus of the work programme of RIS is to promote South-South Cooperation and collaborate with developing countries in multilateral negotiations in various forums. RIS is engaged across inter-governmental processes of several regional economic cooperation initiatives. Through its intensive network of think tanks, RIS seeks to strengthen policy coherence on international economic issues and the development partnership canvas. For more information about RIS and its work programme, please visit its website: [www.ris.org.in](http://www.ris.org.in)

### About AIC

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) using existing resources at New Delhi. AIC was set-up at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC undertakes policy research, advocacy and networking activities with organizations and think-tanks in India and ASEAN, with an aim to promote the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership. For more information please visit <http://aic.ris.org.in>

*Contact us at:*



## RIS

**Research and Information System  
for Developing Countries**

विकासशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली

## AIC

ASEAN-India Centre at RIS

Core IV-B, Fourth Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110 003, India

Ph.: +91-11-24682177-80, Fax: +91-11-24682173-74

E-mail: [dgoffice@ris.org.in](mailto:dgoffice@ris.org.in); [aic@ris.org.in](mailto:aic@ris.org.in), Website: [www.ris.org.in](http://www.ris.org.in)

Editorial  
Team

Editor: Dr Pankaj Vashisht, Associate Professor and Coordinator,  
ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) at RIS

Managing Editors: Dr Beena Pandey, Assistant Professor, RIS; Dr. Sampa Kundu, Consultant, AIC;  
Dr Tuhinsubhra Giri, Fellow, AIC