

The Post-Pandemic Recovery of Mekong Countries under the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC): Challenges and Priorities

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Abstract

Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) is the most significant sub-regional organization for sustainable socio-economic progress of the six countries in the Mekong region. MLC became an efficient regional cooperation mechanism within five years. During the COVID-19 pandemic all MLC countries were confronted with the impacts of the pandemic including severe social and economic challenges. MLC countries recognized the need to cooperate for a smooth and speedy recovery. It is interesting to find out the challenges of MLC countries achieving a sustainable recovery in the post-pandemic era under the framework of Mekong Lancang Cooperation (MLC). With this question in mind, the objectives of the paper are to evaluate challenges of the recovery in MLC countries and to explore priority areas of cooperation under the MLC mechanism. The findings pointed out that MLC countries have five major challenges from the pandemic. Priority areas are agriculture, healthcare, tourism, trade, manufacturing industry, poverty reduction and MSMEs, which are needed to be solved with concrete plans and resources for achieving the speedy recovery.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, development, Mekong countries, post-pandemic recovery, MLC

Introduction

Mekong -Lancang Cooperation (MLC) is one of the most dynamic sub-regional mechanisms in the Mekong region. It aimed to enhance cooperation for socio-economic progress and development strategies of among countries in the Mekong region. The six countries in the Mekong region are Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam and they established the MLC in March 2016. They are called MLC countries and are working actively for the achievement of sustainable development by collective strength under the Mekong Lancang Cooperation framework. MLC broadens its activities from a period of rapid expansion to a period of all round development within five years. Since 2020, the COVID - 19 pandemic has caused major economic, political, and social impacts worldwide. These impacts threaten the welfare of people and the national economy has been slowed down. Like most countries in the world, MLC countries have been confronted with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic including economic recession, unemployment and various socio-economic problems.

The challenges of the pandemic undermined not only the development of individual countries but also the momentum of cooperation in the Mekong-Lancang sub-region. It is important to forge the community to have more resilience with a concrete recovery plan. Besides, leaders of MLC called for the need for the MLC countries to work closely in order to rebuild a better region in the post-COVID period.

It is interesting to find out the challenges of MLC countries to achieving a sustainable recovery in the post-pandemic era under the framework of MLC. With this question in mind, the objectives of the paper are to evaluate the challenges of the recovery in MLC countries and to explore priority areas of cooperation under the MLC. It is composed of four parts. The first part evaluates the impacts of COVID-19 in the MLC countries. Challenges for the recovery are analyzed in the second part. The MLC's coordination and plans for the post-pandemic recovery are assessed in the third part. The fourth part highlights recommendations for MLC coordination.

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Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Mekong Countries

The COVID-19 pandemic has had short-term and long-term impacts on global healthcare, the economy, society and sustainable development in every region and country. The United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (2020) forecasted a negative world GDP growth of 3.2 percent in 2020. Global output was expected to contract in 2020, and recovery in 2022 is uncertain amid a series of waves of the pandemic. Like all countries in the world, MLC countries have been confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic since January 2020. The pandemic continued for long enough to cause grave implications for the welfare of people and national development. Table (1) shows total confirmed cases and deaths in MLC countries up to August 23, 2022.

**Table (1) Total Confirmed Cases and Deaths in MLC Countries
(From January 3, 2020 to August 23, 2022)**

Country	Total Confirmed Cases	Total Deaths
Cambodia	137,448	3056
China	6,163,563	24,499
Laos	213,264	757
Myanmar	614,696	19,437
Thailand	4,637,199	32,081
Vietnam	11,386,016	43,106

Source: **World Health Organization**, August 23, 2022 <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country>

In order to contain the spread of the epidemic, Mekong countries have imposed anti-pandemic measures including restricting movements, social distancing rules, contact tracing and testing, as well as aggressive public awareness campaigns. These measures have been carefully tightened or loosened depending on public health risk assessment and plans to tackle their economic condition. The COVID-19 pandemic caused socio-economic impacts although the scale of impacts varied slightly among countries.

Cambodia has experienced the impacts of the pandemic when the country was under restriction of lock-down, social distancing and the closure of schools and offices in January 2020. Within a year, Cambodia's economy has contracted 3.1 percent. The rising unemployment rate became 3.2 to 4.4 percent in 2020 comparing from 0.7 percent in 2019.¹ The economic slowdown affected falling wages, job suspensions, and layoffs. The poverty rate became higher in 2020, at 17.6 percent.² Key sectors including agriculture, textile, tourism, and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) have been affected seriously by the pandemic.

Lao PDR has a contraction of the economy of 0.5% in 2020. The Lao Kip (LAK) is expected to deteriorate further in 2021 to 9,750 LAK to the dollar due to the rising fiscal deficit, declining exports, and falling FDI inflows. Supply chain disruption and limited global

¹“UNDP Launches 2021 COVID-19 Economic and Social Impact Assessment in Cambodia “, UNDP, 29 September 2021, <https://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/>.

²UNDP, *COVID-19 economic and Social Impact Assessment in Cambodia*, (Phnom Penh: UNDP, 2020), <https://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/home/library/covid-19-economic-and-social-impact-assessment-in-cambodia.html>

demand seemed to cause a decline in the export-oriented sector.¹ The disruption in the economy led 361,000 people to fall back into poverty, a rising approximately 5.2 percent of the national poverty rate. Agriculture, tourism, SEZ and MSMEs are the most affected sectors. More than 60 percent of enterprises in Laos are MSMEs in the informal economy and they did not have access to the stimulus plans.² The workers most affected were cross-border migrants and those in the informal sector.³

Likewise, Myanmar's waves of COVID-19 imposed impacts on its economy. The World Bank estimated an 18 percent contraction of Myanmar economy. In July 2021, Kyat depreciated around 23 percent against the US dollar.⁴ Some business firms were closed and most of them were from small and medium sized business.⁵ The UN forecasted 23.5 percent increase in extreme poverty in the country in 2020. Myanmar's economy has been hit by reduced income, rising prices, low remittance, unemployment, difficulties in logistics and limited exports and investment.⁶

The Bank of Thailand's forecast suggested the largest contraction with 8.1 percent in the Thai economy in 2020. GDP was declining by 4.3 percent while exports contracted in May 2020 with 23 percent. Indeed, the poverty rate was likely to increase to 9 percent nationally. The Royal Thai Government reacted promptly and was one of the first countries to announce financial measures to mitigate the impact on businesses and households due to the lockdown. Employment became fell by 8 percentage points in urban areas and the capital city. The manufacturing, tourism, service and industry sectors were considerably hit by the pandemic.⁷

Vietnam's economy did not contract much in early 2020 due to effective pandemic control, emergency response policy and a smooth trend of exports. However, the pandemic severely continued in 2021 and its economy has been suffered through various sectors. The manufacturing sector was affected by disruption to supply chains and weak global demand. The tourism industry, which accounted for roughly 10 per cent of the GDP in 2019, was seriously hit. Agriculture, tourism and hospitality and the service sectors suffered most by labour shortages and supply chain and logistic issues. Moreover, 80 percent of MSMEs were suffered substantial loss of income. The GDP for the first six months of 2020 grew by only 1.81 percent compared to 6.77 percent in the same period in 2019. Its inflation increased by 2.81 percent which caused higher prices of food and foodstuffs.⁸

MLC countries have strived to control the outbreak and mortality rate, while severe economic and social consequences are apparent. Meanwhile, the burden of COVID-19 has fallen most heavily on vulnerable groups of people including the poor, ethnic minorities, the elderly, children, migrants, and disabled people. They have experienced economic contraction,

¹World Bank, *Monitoring COVID-19 Impacts on Households in Lao PDR (Phone Survey Round 2)*, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021).

²UNDP, *Socio-economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Lao PDR*, (Vientiane: UN, December 2020), 47-51.

³Oxfam, *Covid-19 Impact Assessment: Socio-Economic Impacts on Returnee Migrant Workers in Lao PDR*, (Vientiane: Oxfam, January 2021), <https://laos.oxfam.org/latest/policy-paper/covid-19-I>

⁴“Press release :Myanmar Economy Expected to contract by 18 Percent in FY2021”, World Bank, 23 July, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/07/23/myanmar-economy-expected-to-contract-by-18-percent-in-fy2021-report>

⁵Asian Foundation, *COVID-10 Impact on Business: Second Survey*, (Yangon: Asia Foundation, 2020), 4.

⁶UN, *A UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-economic Response in COVID-19 in Myanmar*, (Yangon: UN, June 2020), 21.

⁷ UN, *Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in Thailand*, (Bangkok: UN, October 2020), 8-17.

⁸UN, *UN Assessment on economic Impacts of COVID-19 and Strategic Policy Recommendation for Vietnam*, (Hanoi: UN, August 2020), 28-31.

low GDP growth, rising poverty, unemployment, food security, growing consumer prices and social issues.

Challenges of MLC Countries for the post-Pandemic Recovery

The socio-economic impacts of the pandemic have become a serious challenge for all people in MLC countries. The short-term economic impacts brought about increased levels of poverty, food security, unemployment and income loss. Besides, long-term implications are likely to hamper national development, industrial advancement and prospects for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The pandemic is affecting the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest. Rising price of food and food stuff worsened vulnerable people. Moreover, primary healthcare, social safety net, and social welfare became weak with shortages in resources and funding. National goals of SDGs and poverty reduction plans have been almost stalled. Inclusive and rapid recovery is vital for all MLC countries and their long-term progress. The challenges of the pandemic create more burdens for all governments, which already have existing issues.

Among various impacts from the pandemic in the sub-region, the first major challenge for the recovery is to revive the economy by promoting trade, and investment and improving the financial sector. Policies are needed to adjust appropriately to the severe economic impacts of the pandemic. The second challenge is to revive key sectors for economic stability and all-round development. It is important to improve especially manufacturing, agriculture, trade, textile, transportation, tourism, industry and the service sector. Textiles, tourism, manufacturing and agriculture are usually key sectors for all countries. Specific policies should be focused on realize the immediate revival of these sectors which also promote employment opportunities and income. The third major challenge is the need to support the facilities and infrastructure of the healthcare system. Governments inevitably prioritize health spending amid a widening budget deficit and debt level. To prevent another outbreak, it is essential all countries to upgrade universal health service coverage, laboratories, equipment, skill training, and public health information systems.

Another challenge is to alleviate poverty. Poverty is a key issue for national development and the realization of SDGs targets. To reduce the poverty rate, governments need to improve the job market, social protection system, and welfare of vulnerable groups. The pandemic severely affected poor and vulnerable groups by disrupting income sources, rising food and medical expenses, and limiting access to financial assistance. By solving these issues, prospects for achieving SDGs and all-round development of the sub-region are likely to be realized smoothly. The fifth challenge is to support MSMEs and informal businesses. MSMEs in the garment, manufacturing, tourism, and service industries are indispensable for economic growth and recovery in the post-pandemic era. They are the majority of business firms in all Mekong countries and the pandemic imposed a severe impact on them. Most firms have experienced a reduction in demand, disruption of supply, labour issue and financial concerns.

The governments of MLC countries have implemented economic stimulus packages, relief programmes for businesses and vulnerable groups, tax incentives and social welfare plans. However, their efforts alone could not settle all issues due to the deep scope and limited resources of the pandemic. They urgently need to solve major challenges as priority areas for the post-pandemic recovery. The analysis on challenges pointed out that key priority areas for MLC countries for the post-Pandemic recovery are agriculture, healthcare, tourism, trade, manufacturing industry, poverty reduction and MSMEs.

The post-Covid-19 economic recovery for MLC countries needs to improve these priority areas seriously. Outcomes would depend on the effectiveness of their national economic adjustment as well as on the level of regional integration. Solutions to these challenges need to be multifaceted, and well-coordinated.¹ The pandemic is not only a serious health crisis but also an unprecedented threat to the welfare of citizens beyond domestic sources and the government's efforts. Various scholars and reports highlighted that inter-governmental coordination in the region is essential for tackling a sustainable and smooth recovery.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about negative challenges but could have potential for MLC. The prospect of a greater role for regional cooperation is possible. Various scholars and reports highlighted that inter-governmental coordination in the region is essential for tackling various challenges. Challenges are so deep and extensive that closer interactions under regional cooperation could be an instrument for the post-pandemic recovery. Consequently, the awareness of the Mekong-Lancang community is likely to increase due to the role of MLC in the recovery.²

Coordination and Plans for the Post-Pandemic Recovery under the MLC

The post-pandemic recovery needs domestic coordination and regional cooperation to address regional and domestic socio-economic challenges. All countries in the MLC are able to work within its scope for the recovery since the MLC mechanism constitutes an essential part of the overall solution. There are some reasons why MLC can coordinate with the post-pandemic recovery.

Firstly, the MLC has outlined mechanisms that strengthen dialogue and coordination. MLC countries can work and cooperate easily to prepare for the recovery plan. Secondly, it prioritizes actual development needs of the country concerned, and implement socio-economic plans, complementing to national development goals.³ The outcomes in the past proved that MLC is the most promising regional institution to realize interactions for the resilient and inclusive recovery.⁴

Thirdly, the framework of MLC is extended to priority areas as the 3+5 +X framework in 2018. Its five priority areas are connectivity, production capacity, cross-border economic cooperation, water resources, agriculture and poverty reduction. Besides, more fields could be explored based on the needs and circumstances of MLC countries.⁵

Fourthly, MLC has implemented a unique project-based mechanism. It is complementary to the development strategies of the respective members and other regional and sub-regional arrangements. Under the Special Fund and other arrangement under MLC, projects are proposed and implemented by MLC countries. During four years, the MLC Special Fund has supported more than 540 projects in member countries including agriculture,

¹Dr. Vannarith Chheang, "The Mekong Region in the Wake of COVID-19: Challenges and Prospects", Asian Society, Policy Institute, 21 December 2020. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/mekong-region-wake-covid-19-challenges-and-prospects>

²"ASEAN social entrepreneurship: path to resilient post-COVID-19 recovery", ASEAN, October 14, 2021, <https://asean.org/asean-social-entrepreneurship-path-to-resilient-post-covid-19-recovery/>.

³Mekong Lancang Cooperation National Coordination Unit (Myanmar), *Mekong-Lancang Cooperation*, (Nay Pyi Taw: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020), 10.

⁴"Progress of Report of the Year 2018 on Implementing the Five-Year Plan of Action on MLC (2018-2022)", MLC, 2019

⁵MLC National Coordination Unit (Myanmar), *Mekong-Lancang Cooperation*, 10.

poverty alleviation, women, education, youth, environment, tourism, health, and transportation sectors.¹

MLC and its leaders have discussed applicable plans for the post-Pandemic recovery under the changing circumstances of the pandemic through meetings and summits since early 2020. At the Fifth MLC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Laos on February 20, 2020, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the positive results of MLC paved the way to engage in a period of all-round development and needed to enhance cooperation in seven aspects. These aspects included combating the pandemic, agricultural cooperation, the ML Economic Development Belt (MLEDB), and exchanges with other mechanisms.²

At the sixth MLC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in June 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed future areas of cooperation for the MLC, including strengthening cooperation in fighting against the pandemic, promoting recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, working on water resources, advancing local pragmatic cooperation, pushing forward amity between the people, and improving cooperation mechanisms.³

Moreover, leaders at the 3rd MLC Summit in 2020 showed their commitment to address the impacts brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and to promote the post-pandemic socio-economic recovery. They emphasized the realization of the MLEDB as a new source of growth in the economic downturn of the pandemic.⁴ Certainly, the MLEDB initiation is likely to stimulate trade, logistics, connectivity, and development plans for MLC countries in the post-pandemic era.

Furthermore, the sectoral working groups have discussed the promotion of the sector concerned. As an example, the Mekong Lancang Investment seminar was held in September 2021 virtually to set prioritized investment sectors in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic and post- COVID-19. Meanwhile, the MLC has stressed the need to enhance exchanges with other mechanisms at the Fifth Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2020. It aims to coordinate actively with ASEAN, ACMECs, GMS and other regional organizations for the implementation of priority areas for the post-pandemic recovery. The coordination of MLC in the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) would be crucial. Five strategies and areas of ACRF are beneficial for the post-pandemic recovery of MLC.⁵ Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) seems to contribute to MLC countries for both trade and services. Its key elements would be essential for the recovery.⁶

Positive achievements of the MLC mechanism in the past five years highlighted that its commitments and coordination were truly effective for all participating countries. MLC would facilitate a promising approach for post-pandemic recovery. In addition, its existing priority areas are similar to those of MLC countries, which are manufacturing industry, agriculture,

¹“Remarks by Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar H.E. Mr. Chen Hai at the signing ceremony of the Agreement of Cooperation on Projects of the 2021 LMC Special fund”, Chinese Embassy in Myanmar, 10 August 2021, http://mm.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxw/202108/t20210810_8906444.ht

²“Wang Yi Elaborates on Priorities for Future Lancang-Mekong Cooperation”, MOFA China, February 21, 2020, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1748369.shtml

³“Lancang-Mekong Cooperation foreign ministers discuss COVID-19 recovery”, *Xinhua*, June 9, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-06/09/c_139996983.htm

⁴“Interview: 3rd LMC summit shows leaders' commitment to address impacts caused by COVID-19: Cambodian official”, August 24, 2021, *Xinhua*, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/24/c_139313756.htm

⁵ASEAN, *Implementation Plan: ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework*, (Jakarta: ASEAN, 2020), 5-24, <https://asean.org/book/asean-comprehensive-recovery-framework-implementation-plan/>

⁶Shandre Muga Thangavelu, Shujiro Urata, and Dionisius A. Narjoko, “Policy Brief: Impacts of RCEP on ASEAN and ASEAN LDCs in the Post-pandemic Recovery”, ERIA, July 2021, <https://seads.adb.org/report/impacts-rcep-asean-and-asean-least-developed-countries-post-pandemic-recovery>.

healthcare, tourism, trade, poverty reduction, MSMEs, and transportation, for a speedy recovery.

Recommendations

With objectives for the sustainable post-pandemic recovery and speedy progress in priority areas, six recommendations are highlighted for the cooperation of member countries under the MLC framework. Recommendations are as follows:

Reviewing national policies and enhancing policy consultations: All MLC countries need to review their economic and financial policies in line with economic bottlenecks resulting from the pandemic and priority sectors. Regular policy dialogue among members can be organized with working groups, think tank forums and policy-makers under the coordination of the MLC.

Assessing existing projects and implementing development projects in priority areas: MLC countries are carrying out projects under MLC and regional mechanisms. Their priority areas are nearly the same and they are able to take lessons from the previous projects. Then they can discuss the pros and cons of existing projects, new project proposals, feasible types of projects and cost-effective implementation of development projects in priority areas.

Strengthening cooperation and sharing information for public healthcare: The healthcare sector has become a priority for all countries to prevent another outbreak and to upgrade weak healthcare services. MLC should organize dialogue on public health policy and support each other for skill training, and information sharing .

Energetic cooperation for production capacity, tourism, trade, Investment and MSMEs policy: Extensive cooperation for production capacity of agro-based industry, and garment can be done between member countries while they can consult each other for policies and campaign for tourism and service industry. Moreover, trade and investment policies and feasible participation in other mechanisms and regional free trade areas can be discussed among them. Besides, MSMEs are the majority of business firms in all MLC countries and needed support for their survival .

Enhancing digitalization and the green economy :The pandemic contributed to emerging digital platforms for marketing and business. Recovery could be a potential chance for digitalization of the economies of MLC countries.

Promoting Public-Private Partnership (PPP): PPP is essential for all MLC countries not only for economic progress but also for community. Their role plays a significant role for employment, corporate social responsibilities and even health emergency. Joint efforts between the government and private sector should be promoted in the MLC. PPP, which includes CSOs, conglomerates, the business community, and the community, is definitely an instrument for the robust recovery.

Conclusion

Like all countries in the world, MLC countries have been combating the pandemic while facing its severe impacts. Their national development objectives and SDGs were undermined by these impacts which became major challenges for economic progress and the welfare of their people. Their economies have been contracting which has led to economic disruption, unemployment, poverty, and social issues. The analysis pointed out that MLC countries have five major challenges from the pandemic. The five challenges are to revive the economy by promoting trade, and investment and improving the financial sector, boosting key sectors, healthcare, poverty reduction and supporting MSMEs.

It is very important for these countries to realize sustainable and speedy post-pandemic recovery. Inclusive and sustainable recovery is essential to maximize the all-round development of MLC countries. If they had faced these challenges for a long time, they would have a gravely long and painful recovery. Priority areas are needed to be solved with concrete plans and resources for achieving a fruitful recovery. They are agriculture, healthcare, tourism, trade, manufacturing industry, poverty reduction and MSMEs. The scope of priority areas is so broad that the national government alone is not able to achieve them in time. All member countries can join hands under regional cooperation especially under MLC. With experience and positive outcomes, MLC has an excellent framework and priorities to effectively carry out priority areas of the post-pandemic recovery. By taking recommendations and tackling challenges jointly, countries in the MLC mechanism are able to achieve beneficial outcomes towards an inclusive and sustainable post-pandemic recovery which can rebuild a “stronger, smarter and greener economy”. Then, a community share future of peace and prosperity would be realized among MLC countries.

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