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## Book Reviews

Shrestha, Omkar Lal, and Aekapol Chongvilaivan (eds) (2013), *Greater Mekong Subregion: From Geographical to Socio-economic Integration*

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), ISBN: 978-981-4379-68-7, 270 pages

Early on, the edited volume raises the expectations of the reader, who expects that a coherent and holistic description of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) will follow. In their preface, the editors point to the pressing themes and define the direction taken by the book's contributors: The GMS has provided infrastructure development and improved the economic conditions of the area, but it has neither leveraged the social circumstances of its citizens nor delivered the expected economic growth. However, some of the authors neglected to describe these discrepancies. Furthermore, the book fails to provide balanced insight into the subject, which has to be credited to the fact that the editors were not able to organise the contributions in such a way as to produce a coherent publication.

The book opens up with the chapter by co-editors Shrestha and Chongvilaivan, which highlights the socio-economic development of the GMS over time, not only discussing the economic indicators and goals of the GMS project but also mentioning the social challenges. Chapters 2 through 7 cover most of the member countries and analyse cooperation and integration in East Asia. The one country not covered in detail is Vietnam, and the Guangzhou Autonomous Region (PR China) is mentioned only in the context of Yunnan Province (PR China). Chapters 8 through 11 focus on the economics of the area, including trade and investment, financial cooperation, the logistics sector in Thailand and regional energy-sector integration. The book's final chapter, a particularly interesting contribution, analyses the social impacts of developing economic corridors in the region.

General publications about the GMS are rare and in most cases come in the form of journal articles. Therefore, this book's attempt to present a cohesive narrative of the socio-economic integration of the region is very appealing. One notable publication along these lines, in article form, is Verbiest's (2013) recent "Regional Cooperation and Integration in the Mekong Region". Two other oft-referenced articles that apply a more general perspective are Than's (1997) "Economic Cooperation in the Greater Mekong Subregion" and Krongkaew's (2004)

“The Development of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS): Real Promise or False Hope?”. The majority of publications on the GMS are more focused on particular issues of the area and cover topics raised in this book and others. This is one reason why this book seems so promising to a potential reader. While it does provide a good overview of the region, its limitations become obvious early on. The country-based analysis provides knowledgeable insight, as some chapters present solid qualitative data on the recent development. In the case of Myanmar, to be fair, change happened too quickly to be covered in this volume. On the upside, it should also be mentioned that each country is represented under a different theme; this provides a level of detail on specific aspects that experts may not yet be aware of, and for newcomers it introduces the diversity of the region. The second half of the book, comprising the more technical chapters, helps the reader to better understand particular issues of the area.

The strength of the volume is that it is data-driven to a large extent. Most chapters present detailed insights into key economic indicators of the region as a whole or its pertinent countries, including GDP growth, trade figures, foreign direct investment, the structure of the domestic economy and development indicators such as the HDI. In this way, the book is a reliable source, and it is difficult to single out a particular chapter in this regard, as this is the case for the country and regional chapters as well as for the technical ones. Larry Strange’s contribution about Cambodia is less focused on data, as he places more emphasis on the narrative, thereby contributing one of the book’s strongest chapters. Applying a historical perspective as well as analysing current development and challenges, he manages to present a holistic view, linking Cambodia’s past with current opportunities and a list of tasks for the country. In so doing, Strange presents the complexity of regional integration schemes for the CLMV countries with an emphasis on the benefits.

There are other examples of coherent narratives in the book – for instance, the first chapter, by Shrestha and Chongvilaivan. Guangsheng Lu’s chapter also does an excellent job of providing a clear narrative, as his analysis embeds the role of the Yunnan in the context of strengthening relationships between China and Southeast Asia. In the technical section, Jayant Menon and Anna Cassandra Melendez do a great job linking data, general FDI and trade trends as well as trade agreements to the challenges of advancing a common trading bloc within the Mekong region. In his chapter on financial integration, Ulrich Volz does not put quantitative data at the centre of his analysis but instead builds upon recently revealed knowledge about financial markets in the context of

developing economies to ground his recommendations. The final chapter, by Yongping Zhai and Anthony J. Jude, covers the energy sector, successfully merging a data-centred approach with an underlying narrative and making the case for the importance of low-carbon emissions and how improving the environment in this way can be achieved through the tools provided by the GMS. Overall, my impression is that the very specific topics of some chapters may be beneficial as they provide a lot of details; on the other hand, this specificity contributes to the lack of a coherent theme throughout the volume.

In addition to the weakness of the volume in terms of its lack of cohesiveness, the analyses within fall short even when authors present useful data, and some chapters seem thrown together helter-skelter. The chapter by Oudet Souvannavong is too descriptive, as it mainly presents various key economic indicators. His analysis, on the other hand, is limited to infrastructure development, SMEs and a few other topics handled cursorily. Shifting the balance and providing a more in-depth analysis of the socio-economic effects rather than only mentioning the economic circumstances would have improved this chapter. Narongchai Akrasanee's chapter is surprisingly short, with only five out of ten pages containing written content. It also lacks subheadings, which would have improved the structure of the chapter, and employs very colloquial language. The chapter starts off with a long preface about the historic circumstances of the region and more particularly of Thailand, but the author suddenly switches to topics related to the economics of the area; after less than a page, the readers find themselves at the beginning of the conclusion. This chapter lacks a clear structure driven by a defined argument. Akrasanee probably aims to highlight the "in-between" role of Thailand – not only on the map and in terms of the challenges which arise from that situation, but also in terms of being the leading economy of the GMS and balancing this with the future development of ASEAN. However, without fully developing any of these thoughts, this contribution misses an opportunity to add significance to the discourse.

Another example of weak editing is the chapter on the logistics industry in Thailand, by Narong Pomlaktong et al., which is too long and provides various details that seem to be detached from the bigger picture of the logistics sector in Thailand and the GMS. The editors could have improved the volume by adding a chapter about Vietnam or finishing off the first half of the book with the chapter by Vo Tri Tranh, which presents the GMS in the context of ASEAN and East Asian integration in general. Along those lines, the editors should have encouraged Vo Tri Tranh to reflect on the other contributions as well. Beyond that, the

book would have been better as a whole if the editors had provided more guidance to the authors in regards to chapter structure and length and highlighted the weaknesses of their contributions. Especially in terms of social challenges, the book is limited to the – albeit very well written – chapter by Chris Lyttleton. While Lyttleton’s contribution is a great way to finish off the book, I would have wished to see more analysis of the links between economics and social challenges and development in the volume’s earlier chapters as well. The current trend of focusing on human security is neglected. As the title of the book includes “socio-economic”, one would think that the links between the economics of the subregion and the impact on, for example, human security would be elaborated more fully.

Finally, those expecting a recurrent or cohesive theme will be disappointed. The preface points towards one, but the execution in the chapters is weak. This is probably because the book is based on papers presented at a conference in 2010 and, for some reason, the organizers, editors and publishers were not able to create a well-orchestrated publication based upon the submitted papers. The quality of the volume could have been easily improved if the contributions had been of a similar length and if certain key questions had been dealt with in every chapter. In the end, the book will be valuable as a jumping-off point for those who are interested in or currently working on the GMS. Furthermore, some of the more detailed topics will be useful for experts in similar fields; generally speaking, however, this book leaves the reader with the feeling that there is work left to be done by the editors.

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