



THE URBAN MEKONG CORRIDOR INITIATIVE CONNECTING RAPIDLY GROWING TOWNS AND CITIES FOR INCLUSIVE GREEN DEVELOPMENT

The Urban Mekong Corridor Initiative leverages critical urban, regional, and financial partnerships to foster collaborative approaches and develop dynamic economic clusters among select towns and cities in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).

It will pinpoint and enhance development catalysts to cultivate a more competitive, interconnected, and sustainable network of towns and cities.

This effort will ensure inclusive economic opportunities and public services for the urban poor and rural-to-urban migrants. It will also implement green growth strategies to establish livable cities for all residents.

Photo: Photo: Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, Wikimedia Commons.

About the Urban Mekong Corridor:



70 million people live in the Lower Mekong Basin. In 25 years, it will be **110 million**.



Phase I of the initiative will focus on Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Thailand, and Vietnam.



Urban GDP will surge to **70-80%** by 2050. (ADB)



By 2050, **64-74%** of the population will live in cities.

"HOW ASIA'S CITIES ARE DEVELOPED IN YEARS TO COME WILL BE THE DEFINING ELEMENT IN THE REGION'S LONG-TERM PROSPERITY AND STABILITY. IN SHORT, THE QUALITY AND EFFICIENCY WITH WHICH ASIAN CITIES ARE DEVELOPED WILL MAKE OR BREAK THE REGION." ADB, 2023



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
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and Cooperation SDC

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THE OPPORTUNITY

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) is a natural economic region interconnected by the Mekong River. It has six member countries: Cambodia, China, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The subregion is an important centre for agriculture, manufacturing, electrical energy, tourism, fishing, and commercial trading.

Approximately 70 million people live in the Lower Mekong Basin, and the population is expected to reach 110 million over the next 25 years. This growth is primarily the result of rural-to-urban migration, natural urban population growth, and the expansion of urban jurisdictions in the numerous towns and cities along the corridor.

While the GMS remains one of the least urbanised areas in the world, the number of people

migrating to cities is rising rapidly, with an urbanisation growth rate exceeding the global average. Today, only about 25 per cent of Cambodia's population and 38 per cent of the population of the Lao PDR live in cities. However, the pace and scale of rural-to-urban migration and urban population growth are expected to increase significantly. By 2050, it is projected that between 64–74 per cent of the subregion's population will reside in cities.

Urbanisation is producing substantial economic advantages for the region. Cities and towns are evolving into drivers of economic growth and hubs of culture and innovation. Despite the relatively low level of urbanisation in GMS countries, urban areas contribute significantly to GDP.

Most of the employment growth is also happening in towns and cities, underscoring the increasingly pivotal role urban centres will play in

national economic development over the next two decades.

Much of this economic growth, however, is unevenly distributed. Towns and regions with inadequate infrastructure and limited investment persistently experience high poverty rates, slow growth, and substantial out-migration to larger cities and neighbouring nations. Informal employment and housing are prevalent, with limited access to public services – a situation that increases residents' vulnerability to exploitation and displacement.

To ensure that opportunities are accessible to all residents, the GMS region requires comprehensive planning for economic and social equity as well as environmental sustainability.



Floating village in the Mekong River, Siem Reap, Cambodia. Photo: Devajyoti Sarkar, Wikimedia Commons.

THE APPROACH



The initiative's collaborative approach fosters robust regional partnerships among public, private, and civil entities to drive solutions tailored to the local context. Cities Alliance has spearheaded this approach for over 20 years across 88 countries and 176 cities, leveraging the collective expertise of its partnership to catalyse new urban thinking and solutions at the local and global levels.

It fortifies local systems, creating favourable conditions for all urban residents while reinforcing programme ownership and long-term sustainability. It also champions mentorship and forges twinning relationships with

pioneering cities within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region – thus creating an environment for incubating, replicating, and accelerating effective approaches. The ASEAN Mayors Forum, an accredited entity within ASEAN and hosted by UCLG ASPAC, will be a strategic platform for exchange and consultations.

This elevates the profile of leading inclusive and green cities across the ASEAN region, granting them greater visibility and exposure on regional and global platforms to highlight the pivotal role of cities as catalysts for innovation and solutions.

COMPONENTS

1. CONVENE



Establish an Urban Mekong Corridor Network

comprising government, business, and civil society stakeholders to promote connections among towns and cities along the corridor. The goal is to create new urban clusters, harness economies of agglomeration, and encourage cross-border cooperation. This entails crafting strategic corridor plans for medium and long-term initiatives centred on job creation, public services, investments, and green growth.

2. DESIGN



Prepare Urban-Cluster Action Plans with selected towns

and cities to foster partnership among urban stakeholders to:

- Enhance planning
- Share resources
- Boost corridor infrastructure capacity and services
- Exchange knowledge and information
- Undertake regulatory reform
- Shape policies more effectively

3. PILOT



Test High-Priority Project

approaches of the Urban-Cluster Action Plans. Approaches can address a range of areas, such as land-use planning, housing and addressing informal settlements, public services, renewable energy, waste management, infrastructure, and skills development.

They can also include promising economic frameworks for job generation, tourism, community and environmental services, and digitalisation.

4. SCALE



Connect Investors to the local level

by creating funding models and establishing connections with international development partners, financing institutions, and private sector focused on supporting local city initiatives.

The emphasis is on inclusive green economic growth and urban development that benefits all urban residents, independent of origin or gender.

FOCUS AREAS

This regional initiative takes a proactive approach to meeting the pressing need for city-level actions and commitments to promote inclusive green growth within four key areas, with a dedicated emphasis on gender considerations. The approach has been tested in various city initiatives implemented by Cities Alliance.



PLANNING

Natural urban population growth and rural-urban migration is leading to rapid increases in the populations of towns and cities, causing massive urban expansion. Local urban development planning offers a cost-effective way for cities to change the trajectory of their rapid growth toward inclusivity and environmental sustainability.



JOBS

Taking proactive measures to create employment and work opportunities for both the current urban poor and rural-urban migrants, as well as implementing future-ready strategies for those expected to migrate to urban areas in the coming decades. These opportunities need to be designed to be inclusive for men, women, and youth.



SERVICES

Sustainable and inclusive public services that prioritise accommodating the expected urban growth by 2050, with a commitment to ensuring equal access and benefits for all residents, regardless of their origin and gender.



ENVIRONMENT

Environmental Stewardship and Climate Resilience. Implementing resolute measures to combat environmental degradation and mitigate the negative effects of climate change by promoting circular economic growth and environmentally friendly urban development.

The Urban Mekong Corridor



THE MEKONG, POLLUTION, AND PLASTICS

The Mekong is the third-longest trans-boundary river in Asia and critical to transport, energy, biodiversity, aquaculture, and agriculture in the region.

It is also one of the most polluted rivers in the world. It is one of 10 major rivers that contribute to over 90% of plastic pollution in oceans, transporting tens of thousands of tons of plastic to waters and coastal areas across ASEAN countries.

While the UN Global Plastics Treaty will bring stronger legislation, the towns and cities along the corridor need to have the capacity and financing to enforce them and apply innovative approaches for waste management and behavioural change.

THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION PROGRAMME

In 1992, with assistance from ADB, the six countries of the Greater Mekong Subregion embarked on an economic cooperation programme designed to enhance economic relations between the countries.

The new GMS Economic Cooperation Strategy 2030 builds upon the strengths of the programme: Focus on connectivity and a project-led approach to development.

GMS 2030 provides a framework for the subregion to act collectively in its response to seven long-term, powerful local trends:

- Risk of pandemics
- Weaker global growth and the threat to free trade
- Persistent pockets of poverty and increasing in-country inequality
- Severe environmental challenges and threats from climate change, disaster events, and pollution
- Technological change and digitalisation
- Evolving demographics
- Rapid urbanisation

The Urban Mekong Corridor Initiative aims to build synergies with the enhanced spatial approach of the GMS 2030 supported by the ADB by focusing on an integrated network of economic corridors, dynamic border areas, and clusters of competitive cities that are well connected to rural areas.

GMS 2030 also emphasises environmental and social inclusiveness issues and prioritises cities located along the Mekong to address water pollution, including plastic pollution from source to sea through pollution control and waste.

This initiative is part of the Global Resilient Systems of Secondary Cities and Migration Dynamics programme supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) from 2018–2026. The programme supports initiatives designed by secondary city stakeholders to provide migrants and host communities with equal access to quality public services, labour market integration, and economic opportunities. It facilitates regional collaboration on urban planning and advocacy and fosters local partnerships among diverse city stakeholders and national and international actors to implement approaches that are locally relevant and work for all residents.

PARTNERS



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