



Sustainable Mekong

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USAID promotes environmental and social safeguards for large-scale infrastructure and agriculture planning and development in the Lower Mekong Basin.

THE CHALLENGE

Rapid economic growth in the Lower Mekong Sub-region over the past two decades has reduced poverty rates, but has also accelerated an infrastructure development trajectory that, if unchecked, will cause irrevocable harm to the region’s natural resources and environmental health.

New investments—especially in large-scale infrastructure and agriculture—can have significant social, environmental, and economic impacts over the short and long term. Without sound social and environmental safeguards, projects such as the hydropower dams in the Lower Mekong River Basin will disrupt the river’s major fisheries and degrade the food security, livelihoods, water availability, and transportation options for approximately 60 million people in the sub-region. Similarly, the conversion of natural forests into oil palm, rubber, timber and other commercial agricultural commodities, as well as for the development of roads, dams, mines and pipelines, threaten biodiversity in the Lower Mekong countries.

USAID’S RESPONSE

USAID is working with the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) partner countries to develop a regional approach to sustainable environmental management and strengthen capacity to manage shared water resources. To help the Mekong shift its development trajectory toward sustainable, green growth, USAID is supporting three new complementary programs, Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong, Mekong Partnership for the Environment Project, and SERVIR Lower Mekong.

Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong: SIM is a new mechanism that will provide LMI partner governments with rapidly deployable technical assistance from the U.S. Government’s premier scientists and engineers to mitigate potential negative social and environmental consequences from large infrastructure projects. As part of the Lower Mekong Initiative, SIM can offer countries 21st Century innovations as alternatives to traditional infrastructure development in order to address sustainability challenges. SIM technical assistance offerings could include:

- Peer review consultations on infrastructure assessments such as environmental and social impact assessments, hydrological modeling, climate change vulnerability, siting proposals, etc.
- Technical training for decision makers on environmental and social impact assessments and public participation processes
- Analyses of innovative alternatives to traditional infrastructure development designs



Nam Theun 2 hydropower dam on the Mekong River tributary in Lao PDR

Photo: Jim Holmes, ADB, Greater Mekong Sub-region Atlas of the Environment, 2nd Edition

USAID assists the Lower Mekong Basin countries to assess the economic, environmental, and social impacts of development projects.

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Mekong Partnership for the Environment: MPE, a new four-year \$15 million program, works to advance informed multi-stakeholder dialogues in Lower Mekong countries of the anticipated social and environmental costs and benefits of regional development projects. By strengthening technical capacity and regional networking of regional stakeholders in infrastructure planning and investment, the program aims to increase the social and environmental soundness of development projects in the region. MPE objectives include:

- Increasing the capacity of civil society to influence development decisions that have significant anticipated social and environmental impacts
- Strengthening regional platforms for multi-stakeholder participation in development decision-making
- Increasing public access to quality, timely information on environmental and social costs and benefits of development projects

SERVIR Lower Mekong: SERVIR is a global program jointly supported by USAID and the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration. USAID is currently developing a new SERVIR Lower Mekong activity to enhance climate change adaptation and landscape management in the Lower Mekong through the increased application of geospatial analysis. The program will support a locally-based regionally-focused institution, which will become part of a global network of SERVIR hubs. By building and institutionalizing technical capacity of government decision makers and key civil society groups, SERVIR Lower Mekong will help countries integrate geospatial analysis into their decision-making. It will also serve as a regional platform to develop and share user-tailored geospatial data products and services and to increase access to geospatial data and information for decision-making.

As key components of the Lower Mekong Initiative, the Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong, the Mekong Partnership for the Environment, and the SERVIR Lower Mekong programs contribute toward a multinational effort initiated by former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2009 to foster integrated sub-regional cooperation and capacity building among Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and now Burma, in the areas of education, health, environment and water, and connectivity.

PARTNERS

U.S.-based and local institutions (to be identified), Asian Development Bank Greater Mekong Sub-region; Asian Environmental Compliance and Enforcement Network; ASEAN; Mekong River Commission; U.S. Army Corp of Engineers; U.S. Department of the Interior; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; U.S. Geological Survey; U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration; World Bank; civil society, private sector, academic institutions, donors and other regional organizations.