

## THE ROLE OF MEKONG RIVER BASIN DEVELOPMENT ON THAILAND'S ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

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### Abstract

The development of the Mekong River Basin is a critical issue with significant impacts on Thailand's economy and society. This research aims to analyze the role of Mekong River Basin development on Thailand's economy and society through qualitative research methods and the study of documentary data. The findings reveal that the development of the Mekong River Basin plays a crucial role in increasing income from agriculture and fisheries and in the development of infrastructure such as roads and bridges that facilitate trade and the transportation of goods in the region. However, the development also has negative impacts, including ecological changes, alterations in the livelihoods of local people, population displacement, and conflicts within Communities over the use of water and land resources. This study proposes guidelines for sustainable and effective Mekong River Basin development planning and implementation. Good development planning and local community participation will help maximize benefits and minimize potential conflicts. International cooperation within the Mekong River Basin will help maximize the benefits of regional development and mitigate the negative impacts on the environment and society.

**Keywords:** Development, Mekong River Basin, Impacts

### Introduction

The development of the Mekong River basin is a critical issue that profoundly impacts the economy and society of Thailand. The Mekong River is a significant water source that extends through several countries in Southeast Asia, playing a crucial role in agriculture, fisheries, energy production, and transportation. However, the development of the Mekong River basin has led to conflicts and significant impacts on both the environment and local communities. This research focuses on analyzing the role of the Mekong River basin development on Thailand's economy and society by considering both the positive and negative aspects arising from the development. The development of the Mekong River basin has been one of the key strategies of the Thai government over the past decades to stimulate economic growth and improve the quality of life for its citizens (Mekong River Commission, 2010; Phongpaichit, 2004). Investments in various projects, such as dam construction and other infrastructure projects, have continuously increased (Baird & Dearden, 2003). These developments have created opportunities for rural area development and enhanced Thailand's economic competitiveness on the global stage. However, rapid and poorly planned development may lead to negative impacts on the environment and the livelihoods of people in the Mekong River basin (Suhardiman & McCarthy, 2011).

The Mekong River, approximately 4,350 kilometers long, flows through six countries: China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The development in each country has diverse impacts. Dam construction in the upper reaches of the river in China affects water flow and causes flooding in downstream countries, impacting the ecosystem and fisheries in Thailand's Mekong River basin (McCargo, 2015). Thailand is one of the countries significantly affected by the development of the Mekong River basin. The development in the Mekong River basin not only impacts the economy but also affects the society and culture of local communities. Changes in the lifestyles and livelihoods of people in the Mekong River basin require careful consideration (Dore & Lebel, 2014). This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the role and impact of Mekong River basin development on Thailand's economy and society by using qualitative research to analyze data from various documents, including interviews with stakeholders and impact studies in the area (Interview with S. Somchai, 2023).

### Research Objectives

1. To study the role of the Mekong River Basin development on Thailand's economy by considering both positive and negative aspects arising from the development in this region.
2. To analyze the impact of the Mekong River Basin development on the society and culture of local communities in Thailand.

### Research Methodology

This research employs qualitative research methods, focusing on documentary research, which includes books, textbooks, theses, academic articles, journals, electronic academic documents, and relevant legal texts. The objective of this documentary research is to collect and analyze existing information on the development of the Mekong River Basin and its impacts on Thailand (Baird & Dearden, 2003; Phongpaichit, 2004; Suhardiman & McCarthy, 2011; McCargo, 2015; Mekong River Commission, 2010; Interview with S. Somchai, 2023; Dore & Lebel, 2014).

**1. Study from Books and Textbooks:** Relevant books and textbooks on the development of the Mekong River Basin will be studied to understand the history and development processes in the area. This also includes~ 3 ~ examining issues related to natural resource management and sustainable development (Baird & Dearden, 2003).

**2. Study from Theses and Academic Articles:** Theses and academic articles will provide in-depth information on the impacts of the Mekong River Basin development on Thailand's economy and society. Information from these sources will ensure a comprehensive and complete analysis (Phongpaichit, 2004; Suhardiman & McCarthy, 2011).

**3. Study from Journals and Electronic Academic Documents:** Journals and electronic academic documents are crucial sources that continuously update information. Data from these sources will aid in analyzing trends and changes occurring in the Mekong River Basin (McCargo, 2015; Dore & Lebel, 2014).

**4. Study from Relevant Legal Texts:** Studying relevant laws and policies concerning the development of the Mekong River Basin will help understand the operational frameworks and regulations affecting regional development (Mekong River Commission, 2010).

This research also involves interviews with individuals related to the development of the Mekong River Basin, including government officials, researchers, and local residents. These interviews aim to gather diverse and comprehensive information. They will help understand the perspectives and real experiences of those affected by the development. Collecting data from various sources and conducting in-depth analysis will enable this research to present comprehensive and complete

information on the role and impact of the Mekong River Basin development on Thailand's economy and society (Interview with S. Somchai, 2023).

## Research Findings

**Objective 1: To Study the Role of Mekong River Basin Development on the Economy of Thailand.** It was found that the development of the Mekong River Basin plays a crucial role in the economy of Thailand in various aspects. A clearly visible positive aspect is the increase in income from agriculture and fisheries in the Mekong River Basin area (Phongpaichit, 2004). The construction of dams and various hydropower projects has improved water flow control and water resource management, providing sufficient water for agriculture throughout the year and resulting in increased agricultural productivity. Additionally, the development of infrastructure such as roads and bridges has facilitated trade and transportation of goods in the region. The construction of new roads connecting the Mekong River Basin to major cities has made the transportation of goods and travel for people more convenient and faster, leading to the expansion of markets for goods and services in the region (Baird & Dearden, 2003). However, the development of the Mekong River Basin also has significant negative aspects. The impact of dam construction has caused changes in the ecosystem and the way of life of the people in the area. Changes in water flow have led to problems of flooding and water scarcity in some periods, affecting agriculture and fisheries in the area. Moreover, development has resulted in some people being displaced due to the construction of dams and other infrastructure projects. This displacement ~ 4 ~ has caused social and cultural problems, such as the loss of farmland and changes in the lifestyle that need to be adapted to (Suhardiman & McCarthy, 2011).

**Positive Aspects of Development.** The development of the Mekong River Basin has provided opportunities for economic development at both local and national levels. The construction of dams and hydropower projects has increased electricity production, supporting the expansion of industries and the development of new businesses that require large amounts of electricity. Additionally, the development of infrastructure such as roads and bridges has facilitated the transportation of goods and travel for people in the region, making trade and investment more convenient. The expansion of markets for goods and services in this region has also led to the creation of new jobs and increased income for people in the area (McCargo, 2015). The development of roads and bridges has had a highly positive impact on Thailand's economy. Roads that connect the Mekong River Basin to major cities have made the transportation of goods and travel for people more convenient and faster. Efficient transportation of goods helps reduce transportation costs and increases trade opportunities. Furthermore, road development opens new areas for development and investment, leading to the expansion of markets for goods and services in the region. The development of new roads also has an impact on rural development, helping local communities access markets and services more easily, resulting in economic development at the local level (Dore & Lebel, 2014).

**Negative Aspects of Development.** Despite the positive economic impacts of the Mekong River Basin development, there are also significant negative impacts. The construction of dams and hydropower projects has caused changes in the ecosystem and the way of life of the people in the area. Changes in water flow have led to problems of flooding and water scarcity in some periods, affecting agriculture and fisheries in the area. Moreover, development has resulted in some people being displaced due to the construction of dams and other infrastructure projects. This displacement has caused social and cultural problems, such as the loss of farmland and changes in the lifestyle that need to be adapted to (Suhardiman & McCarthy, 2011). The construction of dams in the Mekong River Basin has also resulted in changes to the river's ecosystem. Changes in water flow have caused the accumulation of sediments and harmful chemicals, affecting aquatic animals and vegetation in the river. This change has impacted fisheries in the Mekong River, reducing fish populations and making fishing more difficult. Additionally, dam construction has caused people in the area to face problems of flooding and water scarcity in some periods. Flooding damages

agricultural areas and reduces yields, while water scarcity affects agriculture and fisheries (Baird & Dearden, 2003).

**Objective 2: To Analyze the Social and Cultural Impacts of Mekong River Basin Development on Local Communities in Thailand.** The development of the Mekong River Basin has deeply affected the social and cultural aspects of local communities. On the positive side, it has opened up opportunities for local communities to develop and access better resources and services. The development of roads and other infrastructure has made it easier for communities to access education, healthcare, and other social services. However, a significant negative impact is the cultural change and lifestyle alteration in the communities. The displacement ~ 5 ~ of people has led to the loss of local culture and changes in the way of life. People have to adapt to new environments and different lifestyles (Phongpaichit, 2004).

**Positive Aspects of Development.** The development of the Mekong River Basin has opened up opportunities for local communities to develop and access better resources and services. The development of roads and other infrastructure has made it easier for communities to access education, healthcare, and other social services. Economic development at the local level has also resulted in increased income and improved quality of life for the communities. Moreover, development has provided local communities with opportunities to participate in the development and decision-making processes related to the use of resources in their areas. Community participation in the development process helps strengthen the community and promote social cohesion (Dore & Lebel, 2014).

**Negative Aspects of Development.** The development of the Mekong River Basin has also had significant negative impacts on the social and cultural aspects of local communities. The displacement of people has led to the loss of local culture and changes in the way of life. People have to adapt to new environments and different lifestyles. The displacement has also caused economic and social problems, such as job and income shortages and the loss of familiar social and cultural networks. Additionally, development has led to conflicts within communities regarding the use of water and land resources. These conflicts arise from the unfair use of resources and unequal distribution of development benefits, affecting community cohesion and sustainable development (Interview with S. Somchai, 2023).

**Conclusion.** The development of the Mekong River Basin has resulted in changes to the social structure of local communities. The development of roads and other infrastructure has made it easier for communities to access education, healthcare, and other social services. Economic development at the local level has also resulted in increased income and improved quality of life for the communities. Moreover, development has provided local communities with opportunities to participate in the development and decision-making processes related to the use of resources in their areas. Community participation in the development process helps strengthen the community and promote social cohesion. However, a significant negative impact is the cultural change and lifestyle alteration in the communities. The displacement of people has led to the loss of local culture and changes in the way of life. People have to adapt to new environments and different lifestyles. The displacement has also caused economic and social problems, such as job and income shortages and the loss of familiar social and cultural networks. Additionally, development has led to conflicts within communities regarding the use of water and land resources. These conflicts arise from the unfair use of resources and unequal distribution of development benefits, affecting community cohesion and sustainable development (Mekong River Commission, 2010). The development of the Mekong River Basin has also had significant negative impacts on the social and cultural aspects of local communities. The displacement of people has led to the loss of local culture and changes in the way of life. People have to adapt to new environments and different lifestyles. The displacement has also caused economic and social problems, such as job and income shortages and the loss of

familiar social and cultural networks. Additionally, development has led to conflicts within communities regarding the use of water and land resources. These conflicts arise from the unfair use of resources and unequal distribution of development benefits, affecting community cohesion and sustainable development (Suhardiman & McCarthy, 2011).

### **Discussion**

This research found that the development of the Mekong River Basin plays a significant role in Thailand's economy in various ways, both positive and negative. Analyzing the role of the Mekong River Basin development on the Thai economy reveals that these developments have impacted the increase in income from agriculture and fisheries. The construction of dams and hydropower projects has facilitated better water flow control and resource management, ensuring sufficient water for agriculture throughout the year, leading to increased agricultural productivity (Molle et al., 2009). The development of infrastructure such as roads and bridges also promotes trade and transportation of goods in the region, making the transportation of goods and travel more convenient and faster, contributing to the expansion of the market for goods and services in this region (Keskinen et al., 2013). However, at the same time, the development of the Mekong River Basin also has significant negative impacts. The construction of dams has caused changes in the ecosystem and the way of life of the local people. The alteration of water flow has led to flooding in some areas and water shortages at certain times, affecting agriculture and fisheries in the region (Ziv et al., 2012). Additionally, the development has resulted in some people having to relocate due to the construction of dams and various infrastructure projects. This relocation has caused social and cultural problems, such as the loss of agricultural land and the need to adapt to new ways of life (Rigg, 2006). Analyzing the impacts of the Mekong River Basin development on the society and culture of local communities in Thailand reveals that these developments provide opportunities for local communities to develop and access better resources and services. The development of roads and other infrastructure makes it easier for communities to access education, healthcare, and other social services (Hirsch et al., 2006). However, a significant negative impact is the cultural and lifestyle changes within the communities. The relocation of people has led to the loss of local culture and changes in lifestyles, with people needing to adapt to new environments and different ways of living (Rigg, 2006). The development of the Mekong River Basin has also led to conflicts within communities over the use of water and land resources. These conflicts arise from the unfair use of resources and the unequal distribution of benefits from development. These conflicts affect community harmony and sustainable development (Grumbine & Xu, 2011). This research found that the development of the Mekong River Basin has both positive and negative aspects that need to be carefully considered. Development in this region requires good planning and the involvement of local communities to ensure sustainable development and reduce negative impacts on Thailand's economy and society (Molle et al., 2009).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The development of the Mekong River Basin has significant and multifaceted impacts on Thailand's economy and society. This research has comprehensively examined both the positive and negative aspects of such development. The positive impacts include the enhancement of agricultural productivity and fisheries, which have contributed to increased income for local communities. The construction of infrastructure such as roads and bridges has facilitated trade and transportation, boosting regional economic activities and connectivity. These developments have not only improved local livelihoods but have also integrated the region more closely with national and international markets. However, the negative impacts of Mekong River Basin development are substantial and cannot be overlooked. The construction of dams has led to profound ecological changes, disrupting the natural flow of the river and affecting the biodiversity of the region. These ecological changes have, in turn, impacted the livelihoods of communities that depend on the river for fishing and agriculture. The relocation of people due to development projects has caused significant social and cultural disruptions. Displaced communities often face challenges in adapting

to new environments, leading to issues such as loss of cultural identity, community fragmentation, and social instability.

Furthermore, the development has led to conflicts within and between communities over the use of water and land resources. These conflicts are often rooted in the unequal distribution of benefits and the adverse impacts borne by local communities. The tension over resource use not only disrupts community harmony but also poses challenges to sustainable development. The lack of adequate consultation and participation of local communities in the planning and implementation of development projects exacerbates these conflicts. In summary, the development of the Mekong River Basin presents a complex interplay of benefits and drawbacks. While it has the potential to drive economic growth and improve livelihoods, it also poses significant risks to the environment, social cohesion, and cultural integrity of local communities. Therefore, it is crucial to adopt a balanced approach that maximizes the benefits of development while mitigating its negative impacts.

### **Recommendations**

**Capacity Building and Education.** Investing in capacity building and education is essential for empowering local communities to actively participate in development processes. Training programs on sustainable agricultural practices, fisheries management, and environmental conservation can enhance local resilience and adaptive capacity. Education initiatives should also focus on raising awareness about the environmental and social impacts of development projects, fostering a culture of sustainability and stewardship among community members.

**Community Participation and Consultation.** Ensuring the active participation of local communities in the decision-making process is crucial for the sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin. Development projects should incorporate mechanisms for meaningful community consultation, allowing local voices to be heard and considered. This participatory approach not only enhances the legitimacy of development projects but also helps in identifying and addressing potential conflicts early in the planning stages. Community involvement is essential in designing projects that are culturally appropriate and socially acceptable.

**Conflict Resolution Mechanisms.** To address the conflicts arising from resource use and development impacts, it is recommended to establish conflict resolution mechanisms that are accessible to local communities. These mechanisms should be impartial and equipped to handle disputes effectively. By providing a platform for dialogue and negotiation, these mechanisms can help in resolving conflicts amicably and promoting social cohesion. Additionally, strengthening local governance structures can enhance the capacity of communities to manage resources sustainably and resolve conflicts internally.

**Environmental and Social Impact Assessments.** One of the primary recommendations of this research is the necessity for thorough environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) prior to the implementation of development projects in the Mekong River Basin. These assessments should be comprehensive, taking into account the cumulative impacts of multiple projects on the environment and local communities. The findings of ESIAs should be made publicly available to ensure transparency and to facilitate informed decision-making.

**Infrastructure Development and Maintenance.** While infrastructure development is vital for economic growth, it is equally important to ensure that such developments are sustainable and resilient. Infrastructure projects should be planned with a long-term perspective, considering factors such as climate change and potential environmental impacts. Maintenance of existing infrastructure is also crucial to prevent deterioration and to ensure continued benefits for local communities.

Sustainable infrastructure development can significantly contribute to regional connectivity and economic integration, fostering broader development goals.

**Policy Recommendations.** Policymakers should develop and implement policies that support sustainable development in the Mekong River Basin. These policies should promote integrated water resource management, environmental protection, and social equity. Incentives for sustainable practices, such as eco-friendly agriculture and responsible fisheries, can encourage local communities to adopt practices that align with sustainability goals. Additionally, policies should facilitate regional cooperation and coordination among Mekong River Basin countries, fostering a collaborative approach to development and resource management.

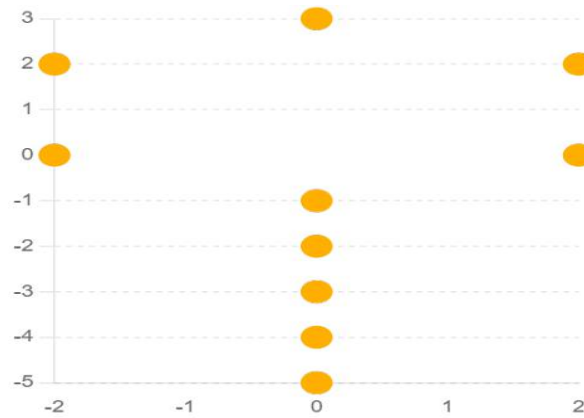
**Research and Monitoring.** Continuous research and monitoring are vital for understanding the long-term impacts of development projects in the Mekong River Basin. This research recommends conducting in-depth studies on various aspects such as fisheries, agriculture, tourism, and the overall socio-economic dynamics of the region. Establishing monitoring systems can help in tracking environmental changes, assessing the effectiveness of mitigation measures, and providing data for informed decision-making. Collaborative research involving local communities, academic institutions, and international organizations can generate valuable insights and guide future development planning.

**Sustainable Water Resource Management.** Effective water resource management is critical for the sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin. Development projects, particularly those involving hydroelectric power, should be designed to optimize water use efficiency and sustainability. Coordination among the countries sharing the Mekong River is essential to ensure that water resources are managed in a way that benefits all stakeholders and minimizes negative environmental impacts. International cooperation and agreements can help in harmonizing water usage policies and practices, thereby reducing the risk of conflicts over water resources.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, the development of the Mekong River Basin presents both opportunities and challenges for Thailand's economy and society. To harness the benefits and mitigate the negative impacts, it is essential to adopt a holistic and participatory approach to development. Thorough environmental and social impact assessments, active community participation, sustainable water resource management, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms are key to achieving sustainable development in the region. By integrating these recommendations into development planning and implementation, it is possible to promote economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social well-being in the Mekong River Basin. Continuous research, monitoring, and adaptive management will further enhance the capacity to address emerging challenges and ensure a resilient and prosperous future for the region.

### **New Knowledge**

This research has developed new knowledge regarding the roles and impacts of Mekong River Basin development on Thailand's economy and society. The research found that the development of the Mekong River Basin has both positive and negative impacts that need to be carefully considered. Good development planning and local community participation are crucial to ensuring sustainable development and mitigating negative impacts. The new knowledge obtained from this research can be applied to future planning and implementation of Mekong River Basin development. Local community involvement and development planning that takes environmental and social impacts into account will maximize benefits and reduce potential conflicts. This research also suggests approaches for sustainable and efficient water resource management and infrastructure development in the Mekong River Basin. Cooperation between countries in the Mekong River Basin will maximize regional development benefits and minimize negative environmental and social impacts, as shown in Flowchart 1.



**Flowchart 1: The development of the Mekong River Basin and its impacts on Thailand's economy and society.**~10~

The flowchart illustrates the new knowledge and guidelines derived from the research on the development of the Mekong River Basin and its impacts on Thailand's economy and society. The chart consists of several interconnected nodes representing key points and their relationships. Here's a detailed description:

1. **Research Findings**, Positioned at the top center, this node indicates the main outcomes of the research.
2. **Positive Impacts**, Located to the top left of the main findings, this node represents the beneficial aspects of the Mekong River Basin development.
3. **Negative Impacts**, Positioned to the top right of the main findings, this node signifies the adverse effects of the development.
4. **Good Development Planning**, This node is directly below the "Positive Impacts" node, indicating the importance of planning for positive outcomes.
5. **Local Community Participation**, Placed directly below the "Negative Impacts" node, highlighting the role of community involvement in mitigating negative impacts.
6. **Sustainable Development**, Located in the center below both "Good Development Planning" and "Local Community Participation," showing that both aspects contribute to sustainability.
7. **Reduce Negative Impacts**, Positioned directly below "Sustainable Development," indicating that sustainable practices help in minimizing adverse effects.
8. **Maximize Development Benefits**, Also directly below "Sustainable Development," suggesting that sustainable practices can enhance positive outcomes.
9. **Guidelines for Sustainable Management**, This node is below "Maximize Development Benefits," indicating that sustainable management practices are crucial.
10. **Cooperation between Countries**, Placed at the bottom of the flowchart, showing that regional cooperation is essential for maximizing benefits and minimizing negative impacts.

Arrows connect these nodes to indicate the flow of influence and relationships between the concepts, emphasizing the interconnected nature of the research findings and recommendations.



The flowchart underscores the importance of comprehensive planning, local participation, sustainable practices, and international cooperation for the effective development of the Mekong River Basin. This flowchart visualizes the new knowledge and guidelines derived from the research on the development of the Mekong River Basin and its impacts on Thailand's economy and society. The key points are connected to show how they relate to each other, emphasizing the importance of good development planning and local community participation in achieving sustainable development and maximizing benefits.

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