

Community Based Ecotourism for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Mekong Region

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Tourism Development Efforts

In 1992, with Asian Development Bank's (ADB's) assistance, the six Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries entered into a programme of sub-regional economic cooperation, designed to enhance economic relations among them. Tourism is one of the 11 flagship programmes in the ten-year strategic framework of the GMS Economic Cooperation Programme. This programme aims to utilise tourism to reduce poverty and contribute to the conservation of cultural and natural resources.

In the 2nd GMS Summit held in Yunnan, China, in July 2005, the GMS leaders identified tourism as one of the key sectors for further cooperation among their countries. The leaders welcomed the recommendations of the GMS Tourism Sector Strategy Study to support a more holistic and coordinated approach to tourism development in the sub-region. The overall goal of the Strategy is to contribute substantially

towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of poverty alleviation, gender equality and empowering women and sustainable development in the sub-region by 2015. Its primary objective is to develop and promote the GMS as a single tourist destination offering a range of good quality and high-yielding sub-regional products to global markets that distribute the benefits of tourism widely and makes substantial contributions to poverty reduction, empowerment of women, and sustainable development, while minimising any adverse impacts. Among the six GMS countries, Thailand has most rapidly adopted all kinds of tourism to the tourism industry since 1995, and is going very well in the sense of acceptability of all stakeholders and community development. The table 1 also verifies the above statement.

Of the total tourist arrivals of approximately 17.82 million in the GMS sub-region in 2004, those coming to Myanmar account for about

Table 1: Tourism as Percentage of GDP, Exports, and Total Employment, 2006

	Myanmar	Thailand	Cambodia	Vietnam	China	Lao PDR
Tourism Economy GDP (% of total GDP)	4.3	14.3	19.6	10.9	13.7	9.3
Tourism Exports (% of total Exports)	3.3	10.6	19.5	3.5	3.6	20.6
Tourism Economy jobs (% of total employment)	4.0	10.7	15.4	8.7	10.2	7.3

Source: World Travel and Tourism Council

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four percent (lowest in the GMS countries) both in 2003 and 2004 and Thailand has largest share (65 percent) in 2004 (Table 2).

CBET and Sustainable Tourism

In general, Community Based Ecotourism (CBET) is tourism that is managed by the community for the tourist destinations. With general tourism, tourist visits are often marketed and organised by private travel companies and government protected areas and the bulk of the profits go to the private companies and government enterprises. In contrast, CBET is managed and run by the community itself, management decisions are made by local people and profits directly go to the community.

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled, while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems (World Tourism Organisation).

According to the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism, ecotourism embraces the principles of sustainable tourism. The following principles distinguish it from the wider concept of sustainable tourism:

- contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage;
- includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation contributing to their well-being;
- interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to the visitor; and
- lends itself better to independent travellers, as well as organises tours for small sized groups.

In May 2000, as part of the side events on the 8th session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable

Development (UNCSD), a group of indigenous peoples' organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other members of the civil society defined ecotourism as sustainable tourism, which follows clear processes, such as:

- ensuring informed equal, effective and active participation of all stakeholders;
- acknowledging indigenous peoples' communities rights to say "no" to tourism development-and to be fully informed for effective and active participation in the development of tourism activities within the communities, lands, and territories; and
- promoting processes for indigenous peoples and local communities to control and maintain their resources. (<http://www.uneptie.org/PC/tourism/ecotourism/home.htm#whatisecotour>)

Orams (1995) defined ecotourism as travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objectives of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas.

A Tool for Sustainable Development

Ecotourism goes beyond prevailing notions of "the overlap between nature tourism and sustainable tourism" to encompass the social dimensions of productive organisation and environmental conservation. Ecotourism does more than create a series of activities to attract visitors, offering them an opportunity to interact with nature in such a way as to make it possible to preserve or enhance the special qualities of the site and its flora and fauna, while allowing local inhabitants and future visitors to continue to enjoy these qualities. They also establish a durable productive base to allow the local inhabitants and ecotourist service providers to enjoy a sustainable standard of living while offering these services.

Table 2: Tourist Arrivals in the GMS Countries

Countries	1995	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Cambodia	219,680	466,365	604,919	786,524	701,014	1,055,202
Lao PDR	346,460	737,208	673,823	735,662	636,361	894,806
Myanmar	208,228	438,480	475,106	487,490	597,015	656,910
Thailand	6,951,566	9,578,826	10,132,509	10,872,976	10,082,109	11,600,000
Vietnam	1,351,296	2,150,100	2,330,050	2,627,988	2,428,735	2,927,876
Yunnan, China	596,942	1,001,144	1,131,303	1,303,550	1,000,101	1,100,994
Total	9,604,837	14,139,883	15,074,597	16,543,912	15,053,930	17,820,816

Source: PATA, TAT, ASEAN, and Country Report

In the GMS, ecotourism has been incorporated into regional development, particularly in Mekong Tourism Development Plans. The experiences of Thailand show a significant change in ecotourism practices towards development of community-based tourism. Lao PDR and Cambodia have been envisaged as playing an important role in ecotourism. The other GMS countries accept ecotourism as one segment in their development of tourism for a global market. There is no doubt that the region is rich in historical and cultural resources. There are many structures and monuments from past civilisations which have been declared World Heritage Sites by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The region contains many ethnic groups: 135 in Myanmar, 68 in Lao PDR, 54 in Vietnam, 26 in Yunnan, 20 in Thailand and 10 in Cambodia (Mattsson 1999).

The GMS countries are very similar in their natural environment and cultural features. Most tourist destinations are located in the rural areas where community livelihood is closely tied with Mekong and other rivers. Buddhist and river cultures are reflected in everyday life and in the man-made environment. The richness of Mekong civilisation has become an attractive tourist resource. The sub-region receives the greatest share of tourists in Southeast Asia. Thailand seems to be the only country that has experienced continuous tourism growth, and is continuously developing a tourism industry. This is because Thailand has had the most social, economic and political stability in the past and has had the opportunity to develop tourist infrastructure.

During the Cold War period and their rule by socialist and communist parties after 1975, China, Lao PDR, Vietnam and Cambodia imposed strict controls on the lives of their people and on the movement of foreigners. However, China gradually introduced market-oriented reforms and decentralised economic decision making in 1978. Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Cambodia took up membership of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995-1998, which created a favourable environment for the development of tourism in these countries.

Development Efforts of the CBET

Cambodia

Cambodia is one of the fastest growing tourist destinations. Cambodians are very proud of their rich cultural heritage, particularly Angkor Wat, which is one of the Eight Wonders of the World and also included in the United Nations heritage site. After the civil war period, in 1998, the Government paid much attention to tourism by setting up the General Department of Tourism directly under the Council of Ministers. The Department is concerned about a

participatory planning and implementation process and is engaged in building the capacity of both internal staff and local communities.

The Government is also considering providing high priority to the tourism development especially ecotourism of the Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri Provinces, adjacent to the Vietnamese border. Master Plan of Tourism Development of both provinces was formulated in 1999-2000 with the objective to develop natural resources and cultural environment for ecotourism and promote appropriate markets, infrastructure and services.

According to Leksakundilok (2004), Cambodia received 174,574 foreign tourists at an annual increasing rate of 12.56 percent from 1962-68. Tourism in Cambodia grew very quickly, particularly after a 1993 election organised by the UN. The number of tourists increased 21.3 percent per annum on average (from 118,183 in 1993 to 218,843 in 1997); in 1994 there was an increase of 49.44 percent.

In Cambodia, there are few CBET sites and efforts are underway to establish such in the near future. In Chambak Commune, Kompong Speu Province, villagers are developing CBET, facilitated by Mlup Baitong, a local NGO. Minority communities in Ratanakiri are also working on CBET with the assistance from an organisation called DRIVE. The Lutheran World Federation, Osmose, and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) are also providing support for CBET initiatives (http://www.geocities.com/cambodiachen/docs/What_is_CBET.doc).

Lao PDR

In 2005, the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) estimated that the tourism industry generated over US\$146mn, and emerged as the top earner of foreign exchange. During the same year, after a decade of spectacular growth, Lao PDR welcomed over one million visitors for the first time since the Government opened the country to international tourists in the early 1990s (Schipani 2007).

Bouttavong *et al* (2002) estimate that culture and nature-based tourism make up over half of the total value of the entire Lao tourism industry revenues. Since 2002, ecotourism has become an important economic activity in Lao PDR. Financial benefits of ecotourism has provided local stakeholders and land-use planners in the country a broader perspective on an alternative livelihood already taking place on forest land.

Lao PDR expects tourism to be the top contributor to its economic growth, and is, therefore, focussing on promoting ecotourism in international markets. It recorded 1.2 million tourist arrivals that generated

US\$173mn for the country in 2006. Tourism is the second largest contributor, after mining, to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The country projects 1.3 million arrivals with US\$190mn generation from tourism in 2007. During the first quarter of 2007, it welcomed 420,000 visitors. It projects two million visitors with US\$290mn revenues in 2010.

Lao PDR is known as an ecotourism destination – more than half of its tourism earnings are derived from ecotourism. The Government has made tourism development initiatives, with the focus on ecotourism, one of 11 priority sectors to help improve standards of living. The country has two cultural world heritage sites endorsed by the UNESCO, 15 national cultural and natural heritage sites and a network of 20 national protected areas. Additionally, the country is positioning itself to be a land link and crossroad of commerce, economic co-operation and tourism in the sub-region.

The first support for CBET started with Nam Ha Ecotourism Project in Luang Nam Tha, which now receives about 5,000 visitors each year. Similar projects have been extended in Savanakheth, Khammouane and Luang Prabang provinces by different organisations. The Government has considered ecotourism as a means of generating income for the local people and raising awareness on environmental conservation, encouraging local production and protecting multiethnic culture and traditions. Lao PDR has also expanded the investment opportunities for tourism-related businesses by allowing 100 percent foreign ownership in hotels and restaurants and 30-70 percent in tour companies. The country has also worked with international organisations and neighbouring countries to improve public infrastructure for the development of tourism sector.

The opening of the Friendship Bridge II linking Mukdahan (Thailand) and Savanakheth (Lao PDR) has encouraged more Thais to visit Lao PDR as well as travel farther to Vietnam. Thais are the largest group of visitors with 675,845 visitors in 2006 accounting 55 percent of total arrivals. Laos had 18 international immigration points, 13 of which offer visas on arrival.

Myanmar

Myanmar is a country rich in cultural heritage that could easily attract tourists. However, the tight centralised planning, closed economy as well as political instability has been a major barrier to tourists visiting the country. Myanmar has been actively involved in regional as well as sub-regional cooperation efforts for the development of both intra-regional and inter-regional tourism development. However, its tourism industry development pace is still at a modest level due to existing substandard tourism infrastructures. In 1992, the Ministry of Hotel and Tourism was formed, and in 1994 a high level Tourism Development and Management Committee was set up.

Good Example: One of CBET sites of Luang Namtha Ecotourism Site in Lao PDR

The NTA Lao/UNESCO Nam Ha Ecotourism Project addresses the urgent need to preserve Luang Namtha's environmental and cultural heritage within an economically viable framework. Nam Ha National Biodiversity Conservation Area was established in 1993 covering 222,400 hectares. Nam Ha is home to a variety of animals, plants and birds, a number of which are globally threatened by hunting and increasing loss of habitat. The Project is developing pilot cultural and ecotourism activities to foster sustainable economic development and stimulate conversion of the cultural and environmental asset base in and around the Nam Tha National Biodiversity Conservation Area. It has major objectives to ensure that tourism contributes to the conservation and preservation of the natural and cultural heritage; ensure community participation and management in tourism development and activities in order to protect the cultural rights of affected indigenous people; provide members of local communities with essential training and skills relevant to the local tourism industry; and integrate public and private sector activities. It is conducting activities like village outreach programme, cultural research and mapping, visitor information and awareness, training and capacity building and trekking development in its command area (Nam Ha Ecotourism Project 2007).

Myanmar also organised "Visit Myanmar Year" in 1996 which promoted tourism industry in the country. According to the Ministry of Hotel and Tourism, the total arrival of tourists in Myanmar was 653,549 in 2005-06, and 654,602 in 2006-07. In terms of distribution of tourists region wise, Asians account for 55.7, West Europeans 30.5, North Americans 7.4, Oceanians 2.8, East Europeans 1.6, Middle East 0.9, other Americans 0.5 and Africans 0.1 percent respectively in 2006-07. The total earnings from Tourism sector were US\$178mn in 2005-06 and US\$198mn in 2006-07 (Myanmar Tourism Statistics, 2006-07).

A separate policy for CBET is not emphasised from conventional development policy but ecotourism is included in all tourism promotion and marketing. In Myanmar, some of the most well known ecotourism sites are Alaungdaw Kathapa National Park, Popa Mountain Park, Hlawga Wildlife Park, Shewesettaw Wildlife Sanctuary, Inlay Birds' Sanctuary, Moyingyi Wetlands and Sein Ye Forest Camp. Limited knowledge and shortage of foreign investment are hindering the development of CBET in the country.

Thailand

Thailand is the most successful tourism development country in the Mekong region. According to Leksakundilok (2004), international tourists visiting Thailand almost doubled from 529,860 in 1990 to 1,132,509 in 2001. The “Amazing Thailand Year” campaign (1998-99 and extended to 2000) is one of the main reasons that tourist numbers increased dramatically during 1998-2000 at the rate of 7.53, 10.5 and 11.64 percent respectively. The Government has strongly supported the investment in the sector to promote tourism at the community level. The National Ecotourism Policy was formulated by the Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research (TISTR) during 1996-97. The Policy offered a common understanding and framework for action for the various organisations and individuals involved in ecotourism.

In Thailand, the main objective of the CBET is to develop sustainable tourism and quality marketing programmes. The concept was forced due to national and international awareness of environmental concerns. The aim of CBET is to preserve tourism areas to attract quality tourists to visit the country and to stay longer. NGOs are encouraging communities to view ecotourism approach as a means of exercising control over the development of their communities instead of just responding to external forces. The National Ecotourism Policy was officially proclaimed by 1998 and followed by the National Ecotourism Action Plan 2002-06 in 2001.

Vietnam

The tourism industry is new for Vietnam as compared to other GMS countries. The WTO reported that only 7,000 foreign tourists travelled to Vietnam in 1989 compared to about 25,000 tourists who travelled to Lao PDR in the same year. In 1991, a tourism development master plan for Vietnam was published by WTO in collaboration with UN. This plan targets the number of tourists to increase to 500,000 in 1995 and to about 1.5 million by 2000 generating 28,700 new employment opportunities. Ethnic minorities area benefited from CBET in Vietnam through employment opportunities and infrastructure development in the last decade. In 1999, a workshop on “Development of a National Ecotourism Strategy for Vietnam” brought together a variety of stakeholders who shared ideas and exchanged views about policy development for ecotourism. Vietnam then revised the Tourism Master Plan that includes specific guidelines for tourism in National Park and for CBET.

According to Leksakundilok (2004), mountain tourism (a kind of ecotourism) presented 5,475 direct participants in 1995 and increased to 5,802 in 1996. However, negative impacts remain including environmental pollution and degradation, intrusion of

unhealthy culture, social problems such as drug addiction, gambling and prostitution. The State Steering Committee for Tourism headed by the Deputy Prime Minister is one of the main actors coordinating the agencies concerned with sustainable tourism development. The tourism development strategy 2010 is under implementation. This will ensure that tourism development in Vietnam is a “spread head sector in the economy” and will develop in line with cultural and ecological tourism while preserving and realising cultural identity, good traditions and customs of the people.

Yunnan, China

Yunnan is a Province of China with rich tourist attractions: highland plateau landscape, snow-covered mountains and canyons, various ethnic cultures and unique micro-climates. By the first half of 1990s, Yunnan had established a tourism product and services, with investment concentrated on “one centre, three tourist routes, four places, five areas, six products and nine key projects” (Yunnan Tourism Bureau, 1998 cited in Zhang 2001).

Yunnan has initiated foreign investment projects in sectors such as infrastructure, agriculture and biological resources, minerals, tourism resources and environmental protection. It received more than 38 million foreign and Chinese tourists and got US\$2.48bn revenue from tourism accounting for 10 percent of the provincial GDP in 1998. It has identified priority areas for ecotourism, including five ecotourism zones and eight eco-cultural tourism routes (WTO 2002). Some tourism projects in Yunnan are promoting “green tourism” which supports both sustainable mass tourism and ecotourism.

Private Sector Participation

The rapid construction and operation of GMS Economic Corridors (East West Economic Corridor, North South Economic Corridor and Southern Economic Corridors) along with other sub-corridors would certainly benefit to CBET in the sub-region. The extended part of the GMS – Guangxi Province of China – an infrastructure project is going to join Guangxi to the rest of GMS, including a port to support the coastal and river cruise lines from Guangxi to Ha Long Bay. In connection with cultural heritage protection, there are two eco-museums which were completed in 2005 and similar three are being completed in the near future. Both interventions are expected to contribute to CBET in the sub-region.

ADB is providing technical assistance for the formulation of the GMS Tourism Sector Strategy 2006-2015 for the building of human and institutional capacities, strengthening ownership and participation, ensuring a more equitable distribution of benefits and

developing safeguards to protect minorities. The thrust of this strategy is to manage the structure and impact of this growth so that it will be more sustainable, equitable, sensitive and responsive to the needs of less advantage groups and make direct positive impacts towards the MDGs.

During the 17th Meeting of the Working Group on the GMS Tourism Sector in March 2006, Lao PDR informed about the projects promoting tourism sector: the Mekong World Tourism River Corridor (to develop a camp site and rest area at Mukdahan on the East West Corridor and border with Lao PDR); the Emerald Triangle Area Tourism Zone (to develop a Three Civilizations Theme Park and Museum with related visitor facilities and services located at Sisaket); the Heritage Necklace Circuit; and the Andaman Coast Tourism Zone (to develop an international seaport located in Ranong Province for cruising and yachting to the Andaman islands off the coast of Thailand and Myanmar, a marine ecotourism activity center and camp site located at Phang-Nga province targeted at high-end ecotourism markets and an aquarium with indoor and outdoor exhibition in Phuket that would feature marine life of the Andaman coast and islands). The Emerald Triangle project involving three GMS countries – Thailand, Laos and Cambodia – which is still at the initial planning stage, identifying the land access, international airports, cross-border checkpoints, attractions (ecotourism, natural, cultural and heritage tourism), human resource development needs.

The recent progress of the Southern Tourism Corridor that links Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam requires human resource development and improvement of the border posts, among other sub-projects. In the 18th GMS Tourism Working Group Meeting in Cambodia in September 2006, it was proposed that the three countries should adopt a common name, the “Southern Tourism Corridor”, that a formal agreement formalises this cooperative arrangement, that the three countries nominate two to three provinces each to participate in this project, that a joint feasibility study be undertaken, and finally, that each country appoint a focal point to facilitate coordination.

Cambodia has established a mechanism for private sector participation at the national and sub-regional level through the development of the tourism marketing board. The Cambodia Community-Based Ecotourism Network (CCBEN) was established in 2002 to promote and support CBET for the conservation of natural and cultural resources and for equitably raising the living standards and quality of life of local communities. CCBEN is a network of organisations, travel agencies, educational institutions and communities in Cambodia which are involved in CBET. It aims to be a partner with the Government and is trying to develop pro-poor CBET in Cambodia, as a way of alleviating poverty

and protecting environmental, cultural and social resources.

The UNWTO is assisting Cambodia in formulating a long-term plan for CBET. The main activities include four pilot community-based projects: HRD strategy project at the national and local levels; institutional streamlining of the Ministry of Tourism to better equip the institution for CBET development; diversification, and short, medium, and long-term marketing strategy for CBET; and small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) skills enhancement (especially micro-credit and micro-financing in CBET).

Lao PDR has completed the proposal for the establishment of the Tourism Marketing and Promotion Board. It is now waiting for the President to sign the decree on implementation of the tourism law. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) had recently undertaken a study on tourism investment policies, procedures and priorities in the GMS. Additionally, Mekong Tourism Office (MTO) is providing training for Lao PDR on the Training of Guides at Heritage Sites on four of the projects assigned to Lao PDR targeting site managers from relevant world heritage and national heritage sites as well as representatives from the travel industry. The country has also established eco-guide service centers to provide information about environmentally friendly travel in participating provinces such as Savanakheth, Champasak, Khammouane, Luang Nam Tha and Luang Prabang. Lao PDR also successfully held Lao Ecotourism Forum 2007 entitled “Bridging the Mekong Region” in Vientiane, in July, 2007.

For Yunnan, on the Golden Quadrangle Area, a preliminary plan for tourism development has been completed and approved at the provincial government level in 2006. The plan was to be endorsed to the national government in near future. Border posts would be upgraded from provincial to national level to facilitate the tourist flow.

In general, there are many opportunities and advantages from CBET in the sub-region, if GMS countries use these properly. CBET may be seen as one type of community-based natural resource management. CBET can also help conserve natural beauty and local culture while improving rural livelihoods. It is a tool for conservation, quality of life, increasing knowledge, awareness and understanding of local problems, bringing opportunities together, opening up opportunities for exchange of experiences and knowledge with outsiders and provision of supplementary income for individuals and community development funds. There are some direct/indirect environmental benefits from CBET, such as creating awareness and developing management skills,

encouraging environmental planning and managing environmental problems.

Challenges of Development of CBET

Tourism is a sector that all GMS countries want to promote in order to raise foreign currency reserves. It is a fast growing industry. Launching tourism promotion years, i.e. Amazing Thailand Years in 1998-1999 plus 2000; the Visit Laos Year in 1999-2000; Visit Indochina Year 2001; Visit Myanmar Year in 1996; and visit Bangkok Year in 2002 was an initiative to boost tourist numbers. Ecotourism and sustainability have received scant attention in these promotions over the last five years. Many tourism operators have been interested in ecotourism development, which has spread globally particularly after the World Congress at Rio de Janeiro, in 1992. They geared up to invest in destination areas in developing countries including those in the GMS. At the same time, many community developers, conservationists and NGOs have been concerned about the impact of ecotourism promotion.

In terms of CBET management, there are some issues of concern such as carrying capacity and local benefits of ecotourism sites. By definition, ecotourism prefers small number of tourists but in many cases, control and monitoring of the carrying capacities of target areas is often difficult. It is a challenge for GMS countries to find the balance in managing tourists by taking into account environmental and cultural conservation, political interests and fair share on benefits to the community people.

The impact of tourism on the environment includes depletion of natural resources, pollution, soil erosion, natural habitat loss, increased pressure on endangered species and heightened vulnerability to forest fires. Negative impacts from tourism occur when the level of visitor use is greater than the environment's ability to cope with this use within the acceptable limits of change. There are arguments about the influx of tourists, economic benefits from tourism and infrastructure development which suggest that if these are not managed properly, they may turn ecotourism into mainstream mass tourism. Currently, there are negative impacts in small amount but could increase in the long-term. All stakeholders including local people have had very little experiences in managing ecotourism and its varying objectives.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) agreement has been signed to develop a single visa programme between the two countries (Thailand and Cambodia) but the issue connected to the sharing of visa fees is still outstanding.

Mattsson (1999) described that potential for ecotourism in the sub-region is found in five areas: biodiversity

and landscapes; protected areas; the Mekong River and Waterways; History and Culture; and Human diversity. The GMS is home of 551 protected areas, 300 mammals, 1,000 birds, 400 reptiles, 100 amphibians and at least 25,000 higher plants.

According to Schipani (2007), in Lao PDR, ecotourism and rubber plantation are now competing with each other for forested land. Conversion of natural forest and mono crop rubber is accelerating loss of biodiversity. Ecotourism is generating significant levels of foreign exchange about clearing large tracts of land.

Pleumarom (1999) believes that third world government often promote all forms of rural and nature tourism as ecotourism, while frameworks to effectively scrutinise, monitor and control development are non-existent or poorly articulated.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The tourism sector is a major contributor to the socio-economic development of the GMS. The 11 flagship programmes of the GMS, therefore, include the tourism sector in its sub-regional development plan. If managed strategically, tourism has the potential for employment and economic benefits for people across the sub-region. This means ensuring benefits of tourism to distribute equitably among GMS countries and especially to the poor; minimising the negative impacts of tourism on the sub-region's culture and natural heritage on the environment and on the society as a whole. If these challenges are met, the tourism sector will increasingly contribute to the GMS vision and help GMS countries achieve the MDGs of poverty reduction, gender equality and environmental sustainability.

Improvement of tourism infrastructure and elimination of impediments in the tourism sector will enhance the development of the industry, which, in turn, would promote GMS as a single tourist destination. With a view to promote intra-regional and inter-regional travels, it is important to solve the issues of cross-border travels and improve the systems for visa-on-arrival facilities at the airports as well as border check-points. It is also essential to establish effective cooperation among the governments, travel and tourism services in private sector of GMS countries. Development of database and e-marketing system plays a pivotal role for both intra-regional and inter-regional tourism development.

CBET offers both an opportunity and threat to communities. If the management and capacity building of local communities are not done in parallel, opportunities will be lost and significant damage will be caused. Some of the problems observed are benefits going to a small group committees, environmental damage, sex tourism and indigenous people becoming

vulnerable. Thailand is the most progressive country in terms of policy and planning with good cooperation among all stakeholders. Other GMS countries have also managed to integrate ecotourism with mainstream tourism to support economic development of the country.

The sole participation of community people is not easy in CBET due to the fact that tourism is heavily reliant on the market and resources such as national parks and other protected areas are mainly government owned. The experiences of CBET in GMS countries show that a top-down planning and development approach with limited community participation which cannot benefit overall community and creates imbalances and uneven development. The government should accept the right of community people to participate in planning, decision making and managing eco-sites and natural resources including protected areas and national parks.

For countries like Lao PDR and Cambodia, CBET is seen as a better option for tourism development than conventional or mass tourism. Greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening current pace of tourism development in such a way that poor people could gain significant benefit from its development. Specifically for Lao PDR, it is strongly recommended to the authorities to formulate and enforce a long-term plan that protects the profitable ecotourism industry and limits further introduction of rubber plantation. If the current rate of land clearance and rubber encroachment in Lao PDR continues to go unchecked, the dependency of people in those areas are on eco-tourism and diversified forests for food and ecological services,

which might soon find themselves in difficult conditions of Lao PDR's rubber mono cropping.

To ensure that tourism development in the sub-region is community benefit orientated, the strategy seeks to:

- expand opportunities by bringing tourists to villages and towns in provinces with high incidence of poverty, or linking poor communities to the tourism industry through the supply of handicraft, agricultural, and other products;
- ensure that tourism is recognised as a major actor in the poverty reduction policies, plans, and programmes of the GMS countries;
- provide a framework for local populations to engage in businesses and in direct employment in the tourism area; and
- create indirect employment opportunities from the production of tourism-related inputs.

The ecotourism offers many opportunities to reflect on the importance of sustainability, and the possibilities of implementing approaches which move us in a new direction. But it also suggests that there are significant obstacles. A new correlation of social forces, a move towards broad-based democratic participation in all aspects of life, within each country and in the concert of nations is required to overcome these obstacles. Strategies to face these challenges must respond to the dual challenges of insulating these communities from further encroachment and assuring their viability. In a positive note, the strategy for GMS tourism development for next 20 years forecast that the GMS will be one of the world most important ecotourism and cultural tourism destination by 2018.

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