

Greater Mekong Region Human Resource Development Review

Date	December 2007
Report Title	Report on the Review of NZAID Engagements in Human Resource Development in the Greater Mekong Subregion of Southeast Asia
Team	Douglas Day, Farib Sos, Peter Morrow

Background

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) comprises the countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam and China's Yunnan Province. The Subregion has a population of 300 million, immense economic potential, rich natural resources and environments and diverse linguistic and cultural heritages. Poverty in the GMS has been declining since 1992, but recent assessments indicate that a vast number of poor people remain, income inequality has increased, and access to vital social services remains severely limited and unequal. Most GMS governments have specific development strategies to address particular needs.

New Zealand has been supporting human resource development (HRD) in Southeast Asia since 1950. Current New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID)-supported programmes in the GMS include the Mekong Institute (MI) and the Phnom Penh Plan for Development Management (PPP), both of which offer training courses for managers focused on capacity development. Government officials from the GMS (currently 64 per year) participate annually in the New Zealand-based English Language Training for Officials (ELTO) programme. Postgraduate students from the GMS are studying in New Zealand under the New Zealand Development Scholarships (NZDS) scheme. A number of other programmes sponsored by other donor agencies have also been supported.

Purpose and Objectives

Purpose: to inform the development of an integrated approach and guide the focus of NZAID's HRD programme in the GMS. The objectives are identified below.

Relevance: 1. provide a profile of NZAID's current engagements in HRD in the GMS including an analysis of stakeholder views. 2. assess the extent to which HRD programme activities are aligned to the poverty reduction and HRD strategies of partner governments and other donors/agencies; integrated with one another and with bilateral programmes; and aligned to the sectoral and targeted geographic focus of NZAID's Asia and Country Strategies. 3. identify the HRD priorities of the GMS and highlight where NZAID's programme could be responsive to these priorities.

Effectiveness: 4. assess the extent to which HRD programmes contribute to NZAID's poverty elimination mission in the GMS.

Efficiency: 5. assess whether the programme has been implemented through the best use of available resources.

Main Findings

Mekong Institute: MI was set up in, Thailand, in 1996 to promote HRD in the GMS through the delivery of skills-based courses to middle and senior public and private sector officials. It was relaunched as a regional training organisation in 2003. MI is facing devolution of authority as it becomes an independent international organisation accountable to its Council, and an evolution in its strategy and structure as it faces an increasingly competitive environment. MI's current core programmes are aligned to the strategies of GMS countries and based on national poverty alleviation plans and on country requests. It recently increased the number of courses with a poverty elimination theme and intends to develop core products around four thematic areas that reflect both government and regional strategies in the GMS. MI's financial support comes mainly from New Zealand and Thailand. Other donors support MI through sponsored courses.

Responses regarding the effectiveness of MI's courses were mixed, with some interviewees questioning their practicality; however, course ratings were very good. MI is planning a tracer impact study of learners, and this should provide a more objective view of their effectiveness. The relative cost per head of courses at MI appears high.

Phnom Penh Plan for Development Management: launched in 2002 as a capacity-building initiative of the GMS countries, its goal is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of development management in GMS countries. The focus is on improving the quality of development decision-making of a critical mass of middle- to senior-level officials. PPP considers that this core of GMS change agents can contribute to the institutional reforms that will stimulate economic growth and social development in the GMS. The 30 learning programmes provided in 2006-2007 were all concerned with policy and management issues related to the strategies of partner governments. PPP financial support comes from the ADB, NZAID, China and France. PPP has formed and works with a network of capacity-building partners for its programmes (10 institutions in 2006). Comments and ratings by participants on 2007 courses were positive, suggesting that the courses are effective in meeting participants' objectives. PPP's total budget in 2006 was \$4,073,000 and it offered 16 training courses, each of one to two weeks' duration, to 297 participants.

English Language Training for Officials Programme: this programme assists the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Viet Nam, Timor Leste, Indonesia and Mongolia. The broad goal is that officials develop the spoken or written English language skills required for their work. The ELTO programme is highly regarded by stakeholders, current participants and *alumni*. ELTO is perceived to add value through the benefits of English language skills. Holding the programme in New Zealand enables participants to gain new knowledge and skills in their specialist areas. ELTO's alignment with partner government strategies was strengthened by the move in Phase II to theme-based courses.

As no other donors currently target English language training for officials, it complements the English language programmes offered by other donors. By improving their English language skills, it also offers participants the possibility of becoming eligible for advanced level study. The end-of-course evaluations completed by participants consistently reflect a high level of satisfaction with the course and its outcomes. The Review found that ELTO programme is managed efficiently, with an average annual increase in costs during Phase II less than the

rate of inflation. The average per participant cost in the most recent financial year was \$5,846 per person, per month.

New Zealand Development Scholarships (NZDS): the NZDS scheme's aim is that, by providing people with knowledge and skills to contribute to the sustainable development of key sectors in their home country, it will reduce poverty, promote good governance, and contribute to the HRD of targeted countries. Students from the GMS have been studying in New Zealand on NZDS scholarships since 2006.

The NZDS scholarship scheme is small compared with other scholarship-providing countries. New Zealand could target its scholarships to niche areas such as agriculture, veterinary science, sustainable development and eco-tourism, where it has particular expertise to better harmonise with other donors. It is premature to comment on the effectiveness and efficiency of NZDS. A blended mode of teaching and learning involving a twinning arrangement between a New Zealand university and a university in a GMS country could lower delivery costs.

Alignment to the sectoral and targeted geographic focus of NZAID's Asia and Country Strategies: NZAID's focus in Southeast Asia is on sustainable rural livelihoods, complemented by initiatives in other sectors, such as health, as appropriate and by regional and thematic programmes such as assistance for trade and private sector development. In Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam, aid is concentrated on two main geographic areas. The alignment of the four main programmes reviewed in the Review report with NZAID's sectoral and targeted geographic focus is through the complementary regional and thematic programmes. All four programmes are aligned with the strategies of partner governments.

There are considerable synergies between NZAID's programmes and those offered by other donors; the challenge is to avoid duplication of effort and resources by identifying niche areas where New Zealand has particular expertise and targeting them. ELTO does this. NZDS has the potential to do so. It will be more difficult to ensure this for MI and PPP, firstly because they are institutions supported by a number of other donors besides NZAID, and secondly because of the less focused nature of their interventions. Overall the four programmes are well aligned to the strategies of partner governments and to the complementary aspects of NZAID's sectoral focus in the GMS. It was not possible, within the scope of this Review, to make direct comparisons between the programmes regarding their efficiency.

Integration: the four programmes are integrated with one another and with bilateral programmes and are aligned with partner government strategies in the GMS and with NZAID's regional goals. They operate essentially independently. Wherever appropriate, activities should be integrated to achieve programme synergies.

NZAID also supports a number of other initiatives in the GMS, meaning that it has set itself multiple objectives in multiple programmes with limited resources. NZAID may be spreading its resources too thinly over the programmes. Consideration should be given to assessing the appropriateness of continuing to fund both MI and PPP. Despite overlap in the target groups, there appears to be little difference in the courses being offered by MI and PPP. If support for both is continued, NZAID could, as a major funder for both, coordinate meetings to synergise the work programmes.

Approaches to the elimination of poverty: NZAID's programme of activities in the GMS embody a top-down approach towards its core goal, with emphasis in all four of MI, ELTO, NZDS and PPP on capacity building in the public sector. Two other significant NZAID supported activities in the GMS, Volunteer Service Abroad and Mekong River Commission, complement these four cornerstone programmes, and more closely align to a bottom-up approach to the goal of eliminating poverty.

Key Issues and Learning for NZAID

Top –down verse bottom-up

NZAID could reconsider the respective benefits of top-down and bottom-up approaches to the elimination of poverty in the GMS and the merit of a greater focus on practical vocational training targeted to rural areas rather than conceptual training targeted at officials.

Longer, Stronger, Deeper

In setting multiple objectives in multiple programmes with limited resources, NZAID runs the risk of under-resourcing programmes in the GMS. More impact could result from supporting fewer programmes in-depth.

Tangible Training Outcomes

A problem frequently encountered with short-term courses is that they do not produce a tangible outcome for the participant in the form of a degree or a measurable improvement in ability. Courses can be designed to produce more tangible outcomes, whether in the form of a diploma or a practical, applied skill.

Gender Equality

Gender imbalance was identified despite NZAID's policy of encouraging applications from women for ELTO and NZDS, and that nearly all ELTO participants and NZDS students interviewed thought that women were either advantaged or had equal chances in the selection process. This suggests that the causes of the imbalance occur before the selection process for the Mekong HRD programmes, and may relate to access by women and men to higher education in the GMS countries.

Follow-up

The Review recommended that NZAID consider three broad options for the future: 1. continue supporting the present suite of programmes with minor changes to improve efficiency and/or effectiveness; 2. focus on fewer programmes and sectors and on deeper engagement to raise impact; 3. focus more on vocational training and less on training of officials. With respect to the existing programmes, the Review recommended that NZAID develop a more integrated approach across its programmes in the GMS. Over 20 programme-specific recommendations were also made. In response NZAID proposes to move towards reducing the number of programmes supported and to take the third option into consideration during planning processes.