

Sixth Meeting of the Working Group on the Environment (WGE-6)

Introduction

The sixth Meeting of the Working Group on the Environment (WGE) for the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) was sponsored and hosted by Asian Development Bank (ADB) on 10 January 2000 at the ADB Headquarters in Manila, Philippines.

Meeting Participants included official Government representatives from Cambodia, People's Republic of China, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam; Bank staff and Consultants; resource speakers from UNEP and the Mekong River Commission (MRC); and an observer from UNDP, Cambodia. The Steering Committee for GMS environmental projects also comprises the official Government representatives to the WGE Meeting, as well as representatives of ADB, UNEP and the MRC. The full list of attendees is attached as [Appendix 1](#).

Objectives

The meeting was organized with the following objectives:

- a. To discuss the GMS Interim Assistance Plan for 2000-2002 focusing on the concept and implementation of economic corridors;
- b. To report on proposed and ongoing potentially environmentally sensitive projects, both at the national and regional levels, for ADB support;
- c. To discuss the strategic environmental planning tools available for the GMS countries;
- d. To review the status of the regional TA on Strategic Environmental Framework for the GMS;
- e. To discuss the coordination of international assistance;
- f. To develop a strategic environmental response to the GMS program, 2000-2002; and
- g. To present and agree on the recommendations to the GMS Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings to be held between 11-13 January 2000.

The Agenda and Program for the Sixth Meeting of the Working Group on Environment is attached as [Appendix 2](#).

Opening Session

The Meeting was formally opened with a statement from Mr. J. Warren Evans, Manager, Environment Division, Office of Environment and Social Development of ADB. Mr. Evans welcomed the participants and briefly introduced the resource persons from ADB. He underscored the importance of the WGE-6 as it leads up to the Senior Officials and Ministerial Meetings in the next three days. He also noted that at the end of the meeting, the group would have produced a well-prepared presentation for the Minister's Meeting.

Mr. Evans noted that since the start of the GMS program in 1993, environment has been a key element. He believed that considerable technical assistance has been given by ADB in setting the foundation of the program to enable the GMS countries to undertake environment projects; establish networks among

themselves, and set the stage for operationalizing the program. He cited the important issue of integrating the environment in the national and subregional programs of the GMS countries, which should be the focus of future assistance toward maximizing the development impact in the region.

Mr. Evans posted three questions to the meeting that could serve as challenges in furthering the environmental agenda of the WGE and the GMS. These are: (a) What can be done to ensure that the focus of assistance is transferred to the line agencies and ministries in each country?; (b) How can the WGE influence planning in the GMS countries; and (c) How can the WGE reach the decision-makers who, in turn, could influence the development process in their countries? In closing, Mr. Evans emphasized that the main purpose of the meeting is how to reach the decision makers, and elevate the relevance of the WGE to shape the focus of future assistance.

Mr. Peter King, Senior Project Specialist, Agriculture and Social Sector Department (Region East) briefly introduced the agenda of the WGE-6, which was adopted by the meeting. He noted that the meeting's output would be a draft recommendation report to the Senior Officials and the Ministers for consideration during their respective meetings.

The Interim GMS Assistance Plan, 2000-2002

Introduction and Overview

Mr. Toru Tatara, Head, GMS Unit of ADB gave an overview of the interim GMS Assistance Plan for 2000-2002 focusing on the concept and implementation of economic corridors. Mr. Tatara cited the pragmatic and results-oriented approach being adopted by the GMS program. He reported that in 1999, the program had two major achievements, namely, the approval of the East- West Transport Corridor project, and the signing of the cross-border agreements by the Governments of Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam on 26 November 1999.

Mr. Tatara also highlighted the more interactive discussions expected of the Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings, which is a departure from previous years' passive approach of endorsing sectoral recommendations. The following major topics are planned for discussions: (a) opening of borders; (b) economic corridors; (c) strategic environmental framework; and (d) work on poverty reduction. He cited that the outcome of the WGE-6 would be an important input for these high-level meetings.

Mr. Tatara underscored the major developments of the GMS program to date and presented an update on the activities of the GMS focusing on the implementation progress of subregional projects. He noted that there has now been an increasing attention to cooperation in the soft sectors and in improving the policy/regulatory framework in the subregion.

A brief overview of the interim GMS Assistance Plan was also presented by Mr. Tatara. He reported that the plan has been formulated presenting the overall thrusts of the program for economic cooperation in the GMS, together with the loan and technical assistance pipeline. He emphasized that an integrated and strategic approach will also allow more proactive resource mobilization and donor coordination, especially important given the post-crisis constraints on both financial resources of GMS governments and private sector investments. The key elements of the GMS program in the medium term were also presented as follows: (a) advance implementation of priority subregional project; (b) focus on

software aspects; (c) mobilization of resources focusing on partnerships with private sector; (d) building national capacities for management of GMS program; and (e) development of economic corridors.

Comments:

Mr. Evans requested clarification on the financing options for GMS projects. Mr. Tataara noted that in relation to the internal financing option, since resources are allocated per country, funds are pooled for subregional projects. He stressed that these funds are not enough to meet the requirements of the GMS, hence, coordination with other donor agencies is important.

The representative from Thailand, Dr. M. Tabucanon, requested that the GMS governments be given copies of the development plans under the East-West Economic Corridor project. Mr. Tataara responded by assuring the meeting that they will be provided with the outcomes of the pre-investment study of said project. He emphasized, however, that in-country coordination should be pursued by the respective countries and among GMS member Governments. Mr. Evans affirmed the commitment made by Mr. Tataara.

Dr. Tabucanon also reported that in Thailand, National Coordination Meetings on the GMS are held to update concerned agencies of the developments in their respective working groups. She also referred to a recommendation during the WGE-5 to produce a newsletter for the purpose of disseminating information relevant to the GMS and to the WGE.

Overview of Potential Environmentally Sensitive Projects for ADB Support

Mr. Robert Dobias, Sr. Environment Specialist, Environment Division, ADB presented an overview of the proposed and ongoing potentially environmentally sensitive projects for ADB support, both at the national and subregional levels.

Mr. Dobias also noted that ADB's overarching objective of poverty reduction would be given due attention in future Bank assistance. He suggested that the linear approach of identifying environmental impacts of projects (especially with reference to transport projects) be avoided and instead a more holistic and integrated approach be adopted.

Strategic Environmental Planning Tools

Overview of Strategic Environmental Assessment and Tools for Economic-cum-Environmental Planning

Mr. P. King presented an overview of the concept of strategic environmental assessment and discussed the tools for environmental planning. He stressed that the main consideration of planning is planning for the future and endorsed economic-cum-environmental planning. He noted that ADB has completed a manual for economic-cum-environmental planning that could be used as a reference of GMS governments.

Comments:

Mr. C. Rajendran, Sr. Project Specialist, Forestry and Natural Resources Division (West), ADB requested clarification on the extent to which the availability or the

lack of economic-cum-environmental tools is related to the institutional arrangements needed to help in the process.

Mr. King noted that the common failing of governments is the difficulty in getting economic and environmental agencies to work together toward a common goal. The common approach needed is to closely interact with the national economic agencies to regularly report on environmental developments.

Mr. Evans also noted that country environmental policy integration workshops with economic and environmental planning specialists had been held during the last 4-5 years. These workshops highlighted the need to overcome institutional difficulties to allow integrated planning on a routine basis.

TA No. 5783-REG: Strategic Environmental Framework for the GMS

In his presentation, Mr. R. Dobias, highlighted that the focus of the strategic environmental framework (SEF) is on the cumulative impacts of projects, rather than on their individual impacts. He presented the expected outputs of the SEF as follows: (a) SEF for GMS focusing on water resources, transport and environment sectors; (b) prototype early warning system that can be used at the conceptual stage; and (c) CD-ROM with all the TA outputs.

He reported that the draft SEF is expected to be completed in November 2000. The draft final SEF would be circulated to the GMS countries and qualified observers for comments.

Comments:

Mrs. K. Keola, a representative from Lao PDR suggested that the next National Meeting be held soon. Mr. Dobias noted that this suggestion could be raised during the upcoming TA review meetings.

Mrs. M. Hutachareon, a representative from Thailand, suggested that outcomes of past projects, e.g., SEMIS I, be utilized in the preparation of subsequent projects. Mr. Evans noted that good suggestion and assured that appropriate linkages are being established toward this end.

Dr. M. Tabucanon, another representative from Thailand, queried on the possible duplication and overlap of MRC's Basin Development Plan (BDP) with ADB's SEF. She cited that the ASEAN's Strategic Environment Plan should also be referred to in relation to SEF. Mr. Dobias assured the meeting that the TOR for the SEF project requires consultants to look at existing studies, national plans and other regional plans to avoid duplication and enhance complementarity.

Ms. S. Mya, the representative from MRC, clarified that while ADB's SEF focuses on the specific sectors, MRC's BDP looks at water resources and that the BDP is still under finalization. Mr. P.King stressed that while it may be difficult to establish linkages given the hierarchy of plans, efforts are geared to promote this approach.

Dr. Tabucanon expressed support to the earlier suggestion of the Lao PDR representative. She requested clarification on the case studies to be undertaken in the SEF project. Mr. R. Dobias confirmed that each GMS country is involved in the case studies.

Mr. Evans emphasized that the responsibility of in-country coordination lies with the GMS governments because they are the common parties amongst various projects and/or regional groups. He noted that overlaps in projects are not at all harmful as long as outputs are matched accordingly. Duplication of efforts should definitely be avoided.

Mr. Sovannora Ieng, a representative from Cambodia suggested that agencies and other GMS working groups should recognize WGE members and be consulted or informed on relevant undertakings. Mr. Evans noted the suggestion and assured that it will be part of the issues to be taken up during the Senior Officials meeting.

Coordination of International Assistance

Mekong River Commission Activities

In her report, Ms. S. Mya focused on the Water Utilization Program (WUP) of MRC. She reported that the WUP is mainly related to the Mekong Agreement which aims to establish rules for water utilization and for inter-basin diversions, and rules for maintenance of flow in the mainstream. She presented the three main components of WUP, i.e., (a) establish basin modelling and knowledge base; (b) develop rules for water utilization, and (c) implement institutional strengthening.

Ms. Mya highlighted the development tools to be used for the WUP, namely, database and data access/sharing management; GIS, mapping and decision support systems; communication and information exchange; analytical tools/simulation models; modelling of water quantity and quality; and transboundary socio-economic and environmental analyses.

Ms. Mya also reported on the WUP Working Groups (WG) to include the basin modelling and knowledge bases WG, the socio-economic and environmental analysis WG, and the rules WG. She also explained the implementation arrangements for the WUP and the relationship between WUP and BDP. The major milestones of the WUP were also discussed, together with the other progress to date. The basic project data such as cost and cofinancing were also presented.

UNEP's Environmental Activities in the GMS

In his presentation, Mr. Surendra Shrestha, Regional Coordinator, Regional Resource Center - Environmental Assessment for Asia and the Pacific, UNEP presented an overview of UNEP's Regional Resource Center (RRC) for Environment Information whose main functions are to provide technical backstopping, data archive function; cooperative assessment network; and database on State of the Environment Framework in Latin America, Africa, West Asia and Eastern Europe. He also reported on the networking being done by UNEP with bilateral and multilateral agencies in support of programs for Asia and the Pacific. He also discussed their proposed program at the national, subregional, regional and global levels by linking regional relevance and global priorities.

Mr. Shrestha developed his discussion by linking the activities of the RRC with the GMS program, specifically with the SEF and SEMIS II projects. He briefly discussed relevant activities on these two projects.

He cited several issues for discussion by the WGE as follows: (a) training (short-term/long term and hardware/software); (b) issue focused common framework that considers compatibility and aggregation; (c) acquisition of primary data; (d) networking; and (e) issue focused information.

In summary, he suggested the following GMS/WGE priorities: (a) common framework on data collection and assessment; (b) agreement on sharing of meta-data; (c) agreement to request ADB to allocate at least 5% of all project budget for information collection, analysis, archive and dissemination; (d) serious review of outdated policies on information; and (e) decentralization of environmental information networks.

Comments:

Dr. M. Tabucanon, a representative from Thailand, shared the experience of Thailand in decentralizing the national network with the formulation of a plan relating to coordination among departments to be endorsed by the National Environment Board for implementation by all concerned agencies. She underscored the need to have quality data and good monitoring techniques, and to strengthen the capability of environmental laboratories in the region.

ADB and the Global Environmental Facility

In his paper, Dr. Nessim Ahmad, Policy Coordinator of the Office of Environment and Social Development, ADB discussed the concepts behind the global environmental facility and ADB's role in its implementation.

It was further reported that there has been success in the two GEF projects implemented by ADB for the World Bank and the UNDP. He also reported that there are five other GEF-projects under consideration.

Mr. Ahmad informed the meeting that ADB is willing to assist in the development or implementation of projects in the region for possible GEF funding. He encouraged the meeting to coordinate with ADB on this endeavor.

Developing a Strategic Environmental Response to the GMS Program 2000-2002

The meeting noted the critical importance of coordination at the national and regional levels to ensure sustained operations in the GMS.

Presentation and Agreement on Recommendations to the GMS Senior Officials and Ministerial Meetings

The GMS representatives held a separate session amongst themselves, chaired by Dr. Tabucanon, Thailand representative, to discuss the issues for consideration during the Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings. Messrs. R. Dobias and P. King guided the meeting in drawing up an issues paper for presentation during the high-level meetings based on the list of issues agreed upon by the WGE representatives, mostly culled from the proceedings of the WGE-5. The issues paper is presented in [Appendix 3](#).

Closing Session

In his closing remarks, Mr. Evans, ADB thanked the WGE representatives and representatives from UNEP, MRC, and Conservation International for their efforts in reaching a productive conclusion to the meeting.