

COMPLETION REPORT

The Japanese Donor in the Frontiers of Thailand in the Context of Mekong Connectivity

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This qualitative research entitled “The Japanese Donor in Frontiers of Thailand in the Context of Mekong Connectivity”, aims to understand and analyze how Japan as donor has played roles in the Mekong frontiers and how people have perceived such roles taking a case study of the Second Mekong International Bridge (SMIB) located between Mukdahan Province of Thailand and Savannakhet Province of Laos. Concepts of donor and partner country relationship and national frontiers and cross-border development are used to analyze data. Key findings are followings:

First, the research finds that various complex interactions occur along Mekong borderlands in Northeast region of Thailand. This is because many of the border places are very fertile areas enabling socio-economic and cultural changes to take place and individuals, groups and states as well as international communities (financial institutes, international donors or developers) shape and are shaped by those changes. For example, EWEC, SMIB and highway No. 9 have been put in place to stimulate effective flows of people, goods, vehicles, technologies and so on across the borderlands under Mekong integration and connectivity programme supported by ADB and Japan.

Second, Japan has many roles to play in the Mekong regional development and connectivity. These include donor, trading facilitator, technical provider and knowledge supporter. The Government of Japan (GoJ) has established key development institutes including JBIC (Japan Bank for International Cooperation and thereafter IBIC has been changed to JICA-Japan International Cooperation Agency), ADB (Asian Development Bank) and Japan Foundation. Most Japanese supported projects are large scale. The GoJ has intended to secure core business goals, improve enabling environments for investments and to maximize reputations through philanthropic activities. SMIB is the example of the GoJ’s first memorable Japanese ODA loan perceived by the GoJ that could stimulate cross-border development in the Mekong region because it can provide a link from Vietnam to Myanmar. The bridge helps to link frontier areas with economic centers of each country.

Third, approaches of Japan justifying to aid the Mekong connectivity are mainly based on the Japanese own development pathways that have been implementing in their home country. Japan has been highly influenced by the concept of growth and progress from the western ideology. Japan government realized that its country was far behind Western countries in technologies and economics. Therefore, the government decided to catch up with the West. Most policies, laws, regulations and national plans of Japan had followed western ideas, methods and techniques to modernize the country. At the same time, the government developed its own domestic capacities and

capabilities through school and research at universities. Hence, frontier cities in Japan had been developed to balance with growth pole development policy by support the areas with infrastructure development including heavy industry, hydropower, nuclear power, public transportation and etc. In addition, together with ultranationalism and militarism ideologies, Japanese played aggressive role during the WWII in Asian countries and caused lots of pain with people. After the war, the GoJ realized their brutal action. They possess conscientious reflection on external sin. Thus, Japan had wanted to support a development in poor Asian Countries to compensate and recover the pain experienced by Asian people during the war through Official Development Assistance. Finance, knowledge, technology and modern management with self-help effort approach have been transferred to the Mekong region.

Fourth, approaches of Japanese development in the Mekong are mainly based on a replication of their own development trajectory that has normally practiced in their home country. As Hirsch and Griffiths (2006:2-3) put it, “Japanese development assistance has been predicated in part on replicating Japan’s own economic development experience through a strategic emphasis on economic growth, a tendency toward economic infrastructure projects to underpin such growth, and a relatively heavy reliance on bilateral loans rather than grants to finance such infrastructure”. An imitation of Japanese development approach in the Mekong have been implemented through huge loan in regional Mekong project with expecting to alleviate poverty and to improve living standard of the poor in underdeveloped provinces along the Thai national borders which this research has considered these spaces as the national frontier.

Fifth, the SMIB as prime example of Japanese ODA’s project becomes the architecture that is developed, designed in a combination with Mekong aesthetic. The Japanese construction companies in partnership with the Thai and Laos companies mainly built the bridge. Institutionally, SMIB is considered as the key Mekong regional project of JICA. The project seems to meet the goal of JICA in the sense that it provides means for regional connectivity and economic development. It supports cross countries’ cooperation between Laos and Thailand in establishment of co-management of the bridge.

Sixth, from perspectives of government agencies, business sectors and tourist organizations, SMIB is economically successful in connecting the borderlands with central areas of economic development in the Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. It supports Mekong regional development scale as it has been effectively and conveniently stimulating massive movement of people, vehicles and goods since the official use of the bridge in 2007. It fruitfully facilitates effective cross-border trade and tourism. Before the bridge had been built, economic development level of the province was relatively low. The bridge in connecting with highway No. 9 links Mukdahan Province with Laos and Vietnam. The bridge attracts many investors and tourists. Recently, JICA released their ex-post evaluation of the Japanese ODA loan project made by an independent expert on the case of the bridge. This report summarized that the project was evaluated to be economically satisfactory.

Finally, however, the research finds significant perception regarding social and environmental impacts caused by the bridge and highway No. 9. It looks like social impacts had been less concerned right from the beginning of the

SMIB project. From views of the GoJ, business and tourists, the bridge accelerates an access of EWEC and enhances transportation network, which is a priority of Mekong connectivity planned by Japan. But, there are critical responses from local people, villagers and NGOs that this Mekong project has brought key social problems which are seemingly unrealized by the Japanese donor such as expensive land price for the poor, unfair compensation on land expropriation, environmental and health problems, smuggles and disappearing of small business due to a replacement of large retailers. Likewise, negative impacts of the GoJ's development projects in Japan is similarly found in many rural areas due to the established economic zone pulling out many rural people to work outside. Large-scale infrastructure and industrial development in Japan have created a decline of small shops caused by the introduction of free markets and revisions of the large retailers.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)

- "The Japanese Donor in Frontiers of Thailand in the Context of Mekong Connectivity",

Paper will be presented by Asst.Prof.Dr. Kanokwan Manorom at The 3rd MSSRC International Conference on "Mekong Region and ASEAN in Transition: People and Transborder Issues" 11 -12 September 2014 at U-Place, Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand

Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)

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