

Neak Loeung Bridge (Tsubasa Bridge) spanning 640m over the Mekong River in Cambodia within the Southern Economic Corridor



# JICA and Connectivity in the Mekong Region

The Kingdom of Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Kingdom of Thailand, and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (abbreviated names used hereinafter), through which the Mekong River<sup>1</sup> flows, are collectively referred to as the Mekong region countries. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is actively supporting for the development and enhancement of the economic corridors<sup>2</sup> that connect the Mekong region. In October 2023, JICA staff and related experts conducted an on-site survey along the Southern Economic Corridor, exploring the current state of connectivity and the challenges that must be addressed to strengthen it. This article introduces the background and overview about it. (Text: Kurosawa Akane)

In the Mekong region, there are three major economic corridors: the East-West Economic Corridor (spanning across the Indochina Peninsula from east to west), the North-South Economic Corridor (running vertically through the Indochina Peninsula from north to south), and the Southern Economic Corridor (connecting Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Viet Nam). The Mekong region faced an urgent need for the restoration of road infrastructure, which had been disrupted by conflicts that persisted until the early 1990s. Here, the development of these economic corridors has been pursued as part of an economic development program, with the vision that cooperation between countries across borders would contribute to regional stability. This initiative has progressed under the framework of international cooperation.

JICA has offered substantial assistance in infrastructure development and development studies, covering both tangible and intangible aspects. For instance, a noteworthy project within the East-West Economic Corridor is the construction of the Second Mekong International Bridge, connecting Thailand and Laos across the Mekong River. This 1,600-meter

bridge’s completion has established uninterrupted connectivity along the East-West Economic Corridor, spanning from Viet Nam through Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. Additionally, in the Southern Economic Corridor, JICA has supported projects such as the construction of Neak Loeung Bridge (Tsubasa Bridge) in Cambodia, and the maintenance and enhancement of Cambodia’s National Road No.1 and No.5.

Moving forward, the importance of enhancing connectivity from both tangible and intangible perspectives will continue to grow as part of development cooperation within the Mekong region.

Under the industrial agglomeration and the division of labor across nations in the region, JICA is aware of the issues facing the ASEAN region as a whole. So, in October 2023 a on-site survey team was formed to travel the Southern Economic Corridor—approximately 900 kilometers from Ho Chi Minh City in Viet Nam to Bangkok in Thailand—to gather insights.

The survey team was made up by not only members of the relevant country teams but also the staff in charge of infrastructure development and trade facilitation in JICA Headquarters, as well as experts and local office

Above: The Second Mekong International Bridge constructed along the East-West Economic Corridor, linking Thailand and Laos.  
 Below: National Road No.5, which connects Phnom Penh to the Thai border. Before (left) and after (right) development.




Photo: JICA  
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staff within JICA. Through the mission, they witnessed the remarkable growth of the three countries and were able to identify regional challenges that cut across borders from a multifaceted perspective.

For instance, national highways such as the one connecting Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh, developed and rehabilitated with JICA's supports, have shown significant improvements, including reduced travel time. However, the Southern Economic Corridor, uniting the three countries, is not functioning adequately. It became clear that challenges persist in terms of connectivity from a systems perspective, including complex customs clearance procedures at borders, and deficiencies in the implementation structure and legal framework for border management.

JICA staff who participated in this survey express their interests for JICA's future efforts in coordination, mediation, and collaboration spanning multiple countries and sectors, aiming to create additional value. For example, JICA will support to establish an institutional framework related to trade facilitation, including customs, across multiple countries, and provide broad technical cooperation for capacity building. Additionally, they stated their desire to bring a win-win situation for the governments and businesses of the Mekong countries through assistance for the development of human resources needed by industries, addressing the challenges faced by companies within Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along the economic corridor.

The survey on the Southern Economic Corridor, conducted on the occasion of the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation, will serve as a crucial foundation for future partnerships between the Mekong region, the entire ASEAN region, and Japan. JICA's established asset of trust with Mekong region countries is bound to extend further into coordination, mediation, and collaboration across multiple nations and sectors, weaving additional value in the process. 

1. The Mekong River is an international river that originates from the Tibetan Plateau, flows through China's Yunnan Province, forms borders between Myanmar and Laos, Thailand and Laos, and travels through Cambodia and Viet Nam before reaching the South China Sea. It is approximately 4,800 kilometers in length.  
 2. These corridors are designed to enhance logistics across borders by developing infrastructure and cross-border systems in specific regions. This strategy aims to generate a synergetic economic impact through the reduction of transportation costs, the expedited transit of goods, and the augmentation of transport volume, connecting production and industrial hubs and demand centers. The scope of this development extends beyond road network enhancements, encompassing the establishment of communication networks, the streamlining of customs procedures, and other related initiatives.

Reference

**Examples of JICA's International Cooperation Projects Concerning Transportation in the Mekong Region**

- **SECOND MEKONG INTERNATIONAL BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION PROJECT**  
**Term of cooperation:** Commenced with financial assistance (loan agreement signed) in December 2001  
**Outline:** Within the context of Mekong River Basin development, a high priority was given to the development of the East-West Economic Corridor, which connects northeastern Thailand to central Viet Nam through Laos. This cooperation project supported the construction of an international bridge spanning the Mekong River, connecting Thailand and Laos. As a result, it facilitated the connectivity of the East-West Economic Corridor from Viet Nam to Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar, facilitating logistics and the economic development of the regions along the corridor.
- **The Project for Construction of Neak Loeung Bridge**  
**Term of cooperation:** Commenced with grant assistance (grant agreement signed) in June 2010  
**Outline:** Cambodia's National Road No.1 is part of the Southern Economic Corridor connecting Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Thailand. However, this road was divided by the Mekong River, necessitating the use of ferries to cross the river, resulting in waiting times of approximately seven hours at peak times. In this cooperation project, support was provided for the construction of a bridge to Neak Loeung, a critical dividing point. This development significantly facilitated logistics, transportation, and exchanges, making a valuable contribution not only to Cambodia but also to the overall economic development of the Mekong region.
- **National Road No.5 Improvement Project (Thlea Ma'am - Battambang and Sri Sophon - Poipet Sections) (2)**  
**Term of cooperation:** From May 2013  
**Outline:** In Cambodia, with support from Japan, ADB, and other partners since the end of the civil war, significant progress has been made in the restoration of roads, a crucial component of logistics infrastructure. Nonetheless, some areas have deteriorating emergency repair sites and inadequate width, posing a critical challenge for improving existing roads to meet the growing logistics demand driven by future economic development. Notably, National Road No.5 is anticipated to function as a vital industrial artery in the Mekong region. Therefore, in this cooperation project, activities such as road improvement, widening, and bypass construction are underway. This will enhance transport capacity, facilitate logistics with Thailand, and promote economic development.

Reference links

- On-site survey along the Southern Economic Corridor (Mekong region)  
<https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/LS-4/index.html>  
<https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/1060240/index.html>  
<https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/CP-P25/index.html>  
[https://www.jica.go.jp/information/blog/1525786\\_21942.html](https://www.jica.go.jp/information/blog/1525786_21942.html)
- On-site survey along the growing ASEAN and the significance of Japan's international cooperation Vol. 1 (newspicks.com)  
<https://newspicks.com/topics/jica/posts/19>
- On-site survey along the Southern Economic Corridor (Mekong region)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dhathwzguk>
- Infrastructure for people ~ Asia highway (Full ver.)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ly03jU0w>