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Transnational Dynamics in Southeast Asia

The Greater Mekong Subregion and Malacca Straits Economic Corridors

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PREFACE

TRANSITER SOUTHEAST ASIA, A FRANCO-ASIAN
SCIENTIFIC COOPERATION PROGRAMME

The main goal of the Transiter Programme “Transnational Dynamics and Territorial Redefinitions in Southeast Asia: The Greater Mekong Subregion and Malacca Straits economic corridors”, is to better understand the role played by the economic corridors in the ongoing transition between the development of cross-border trade, towards a broader transnational integration process. This objective will be reached basing the research work on concrete examples, studied according to a multi-disciplinary approach of monitoring evaluation during a three-year period, in order to value and estimate the potentialities of these new dynamics, as well as anticipate on their potential negative impacts on the local populations and natural environments to be transected by the corridors. Although the primary focus of research is on Southeast Asia, the programme also analyses the conditions when possible to compare the transnational dynamics taking place along the Straits of Malacca’s maritime corridors with the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) continental corridors. It also details and reviews the multi-disciplinary research available on this region and, in particular, on Lao PDR, which is a “key country” within the subregion and the main counterpart within this scientific cooperation programme.

VIEWS OF LAO COUNTERPART

Following the policy of the government in transforming Lao PDR from land-locked to land-linked status, there have been substantial investments in transport infrastructure. Such initiative is driven by development partners, mainly the Asian Development Bank (ADB), through the Greater Mekong
Subregion (GMS) framework and bilateral cooperation between Laos and its neighbours. This gives birth to the economic corridor development concept, focusing on developing the transport infrastructure to connect Lao PDR with her giant neighbours, including the construction of the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) and the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC), and the promotion of economic opportunities along the corridors. Along with the improvement in the hardware, the government of Laos has gradually improved the trade and investment climate in the country with the objective of making it easier for the private sector to maximize the benefits from this increased connectivity and integration. Despite the massive investment in hardware, together with gradual reforms in trade and investment regulations, the expansion of trade and investment in the subregion and in Lao PDR in particular remains below expectations and the transport cost has not reflected this development.

In light of the importance of the ongoing integration of the Lao economy at the subregional, regional and global level, the National Economic Research Institute (NERI) within the Ministry of Planning and Investment and the Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CASE) — from the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) — have developed a Lao-French Scientific Cooperation Project to research on the impacts of the regional economic corridors in the GMS with specific focus on the transition from cross-border trade to transnational integration. The project aims to build upon strong complementarities between the two institutes, in disciplinary terms, thematic areas and geographies of interest, allowing a further impulse in multi-disciplinary approach to research on transnational integration. These exchanges have resulted in the outline of a bilateral cooperation project, based on the existing synergies between the NERI and the CASE, with the milestones of jointly organizing the mid-term workshop in July 2009 under the title “Researching the Impacts in Laos of the Economic Corridors in the Greater Mekong Subregion: From Cross-Border Trade to Transnational Integration” supported by French National Research Agency (ANR), French Agency for Development (AFD) and the Lao Government, and a final international research symposium in Vientiane in December 2010.

The project has had multiple dimensions of long-lasting benefits to Lao PDR as well as the counterpart agencies. At the researcher level, this has been achieved through the participation in the fieldwork with the French counterparts. By doing so, the skills and competence of our researchers have been strengthened. At the institutional level, NERI had the opportunity to cooperate and share experiences with the reputable French counterpart raising
the status of external cooperation to a more advanced level. The successful
organization of the final international symposium helped NERI to network
with researchers, not only from GMS and Malacca Straits in Southeast Asia
but also from Central America, creating the new frontier for NERI to further
expand its cooperation.

Finally, at the country level, the findings from the researchers have created
a wealth of knowledge on the roles of economic corridors in the ongoing
transition between the developments of cross-border trade towards a broader
transnational integration process of Lao PDR with understandings on the
comparable cases of the Straits of Malacca. Young researchers from NERI
have had the opportunity to learn from Malacca’s maritime corridors. Several
experiences can be drawn such as the development of dry ports in Malaysia
(ie. Nazery Khalid’s contribution) which could be initiated and developed in
Lao PDR at the head of the international bridges crossing the Mekong, or the
establishment of pair cities which command areas linking interior productive
areas and external nodes, or the corridor leading importance to combine
national integration and territorial planning (aménagement du territoire)
which could also be promoted. The different types of classification of stages
of corridor development, starting from transport corridors, multimodal,
logistic corridors, economic corridors (ie. Ruth Banomyong’s contribution)
provides us with the basis for the assessment of the level of development of the
corridors crossing Lao PDR. In addition, the results of the studies will be used
by planners and researchers to review related policies on subregional, regional
and global integration including to developing national integration strategy
as well as to feed into the ongoing preparation of national development
strategy up to the 2020s.

VIEWS OF FRENCH COUNTERPART

The Southeast Asia component of the ANR Transiter programme has been
developed as scientific cooperation composed of three phases, each concluded
with a scientific seminar. The first phase of the research programme led to
the Franco-Lao workshop “Researching the Impacts in Laos of the Economic
Corridors in the Greater Mekong Subregion: From Cross-Border Trade to
Transnational Integration”, held in Vientiane in July 2009. This seminar gave
the opportunity to present and discuss the first results of Lao and French
scholars’ fieldwork research from NERI and CASE on the transition process
from border trading practices to transnational integration. This first stage
has allowed us to compare issues, data sources and fieldwork performed by
researchers from both institutes, mainly economists from the NERI and pluridisciplinary researchers from the CASE.

The second phase of this research programme was concluded by a Southeast Asian symposium held in Vientiane in December 2010, “Transnational Dynamics and Territorial Redefinitions in Southeast Asia: The Greater Mekong Subregion and Malacca Straits economic corridors”, prepared by the same institutions, NERI and CASE, and supported by the French National Research Agency (ANR), the Agency of the Research Institute for Development (AIRD) and the Lao Government. This conference followed a year after the Central American Regional symposium on transnational dynamics and territories, held in San José, Costa Rica in December 2009. These regional symposiums hence encompass the two cultural areas included in the Transiter Programme.

These regional seminars have been the subject of separate publishing projects centred on the comparison of the transnational integration processes at work in each of the two case studies chosen in Southeast Asia: the Greater Mekong Subregion and the Malacca Straits. These seminars have also made it possible to initiate a comparison between these two transnational integration dynamics and those of the Central American isthmus, the second study area of the Transiter programme. At this second level, the first basic element in the comparison of these two emerging integrations concerns their location at the crossroads between major north-south and east-west international and subregional trade routes. They also share spatial profiles with a North-South structure resulting from the respective positions of sea coasts, rivers and highlands. These two north-south profiles, combined with the above mentioned connections between world and subregional traffic, lead to a dynamic of spatial recompositions where emerging transnational North-South corridors play an essential role.

The third and last phase of this programme was concluded by an international conference, held in Paris in February 2012, “Transnational Dynamics and Territorial redefinitions: Cross Perspectives from Southeast Asia and Central America”, has compared the transnational dynamics generated in the Central American isthmus and in Southeast Asia. This conference has, first of all, enabled a thorough comparison to be made of the transnational dynamics studied in both parts of the Transiter programme: Southeast Asia and the Central American isthmus. The comparative approach was then broadened to include the research results of other French programmes dealing with similar issues for other subregions on all continents. A final synthesis will deal with the impact of the different transnational integrations taken into account on ongoing regionalization in the globalization process.
The last two phases of the programme have closely associated French researchers and their partners from the subregions studied who have studied similar scientific issues. The field of scientific cooperation founded on different cultural approaches and interpretations, initiated in the first place with Lao researchers, has been extended to all the Asian partners. There were two objectives to this dialogue which took into account the different outlooks of the participants involved: firstly, to submit the results of the French research teams to the scrutiny of their Asian partners, and secondly, to ask them to present their own results in such a way as to lead to a constructive debate, the fruit of balanced scientific cooperation, which is taken into account in this work, in both the diversity of the contributions and the two comparative conclusions.

Sirivanh Khonthapane (NERI) and Christian Taillard (CASE)
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Three mixed laboratories of the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) — the SEDET (Paris 7 University), the Southeast Asia Centre (CASE, CNRS/EHESS) and the CEMCA (CNRS/MAE, Mexico) issued a call for projects concerning southern countries, initiated in France by the National Research Agency (ANR) in 2007. The project, entitled “Transnational Dynamics and Territorial Redefinitions: A Comparative Approach to Central America and Southeast Asia” (Transiter), was approved in 2008 and funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) and the French Development Agency (AFD).

This project, steered by Laurent Faret, a professor at Paris 7 University and a researcher at the SEDET, has made it possible not only to finance many research areas for experienced researchers, but also for young doctoral students. Thanks to frequent meetings, organized and supported by both the SEDET and the CASE, it has been possible to set up comparative grids enabling us to study the regional integration processes at work along the continental and maritime corridors of Southeast Asia. This book is the result of a collective multi-disciplinary effort over a period of four years, punctuated by numerous seminars, roundtables and symposia. We would like to thank all those taking part in these sessions analysing different types of regional cooperation in Asia and the rest of the world, and the discussants in our seminars and symposia whose constructive criticisms and suggestions have enabled our research to progress.

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