



## Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program

**26<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference**  
**15 December 2023**  
**Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar**

### **JOINT MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**

#### ***Building a Strong and Cohesive GMS Community with a Shared Future towards Resilient Economic Development***

1. We, the Ministers and Heads of Delegations from the Governments of the Greater Mekong Subregion countries, met in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December 2023 for the 26<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting of the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program (GMS Program).
2. We recognize that we were meeting at a time when the GMS countries are facing challenging global and regional backdrop, even as they take on the immense requirements of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and reviving their economies. The ill effects of the pandemic still linger and are compounded by adverse developments and threats in the form of prolonged international conflicts and an unstable geo-political situation. These in turn worsen the already disrupted global supply chains and further complicate other economic headwinds we face. These include pervasive inflation and threat of global recession, rising global debt burdens, energy and food insecurity, and the need to adapt and surmount the challenge of the worsening climate emergency, and exploit and benefit from the opportunities offered by digitalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
3. We are encouraged by the good progress being made through cooperative efforts not only to address these challenges but also toward implementing the longer-term directions under the GMS Economic Cooperation Program Strategic Framework 2030 (GMS-2030). We are very pleased to note the ongoing initiatives in priority sectors of cooperation and in important thematic and cross-cutting areas of GMS development, including fostering greater inclusiveness and broadening support for the GMS Program; embracing and developing today's key drivers of development, namely innovation and digitalization; improving and facilitating regional trade and investment, including the development of special economic zones, particularly in key border areas; and expanding knowledge creation, cooperation, and their useful application for regional development.

#### **Recent Achievements of GMS Cooperation**

4. We are therefore pleased to acknowledge the following recent achievements in the various **priority sectors of cooperation** in the GMS Program:
  - (i) In **transport, the software side of railway development** advanced with the ADB TA *Connecting the Railways of the Greater Mekong Subregion (Phase 2)* completed in April 2023 helping to improve the organizational structure of the Greater Mekong Railway Association; to complete an operational readiness plan to ensure appropriate standards for technology on safety, productivity, and environmental quality of railway

operations; to advance negotiations to address the Framework Agreement for Cross-Border Railway Transport Connectivity; and to update the GMS cross-border rail network strategy.

- (ii) Regarding the **Cross-Border Transport Facilitation Agreement (CBTA)**, the signing of the Protocol 1 Extension MOU by all countries this year added new routes and border crossings and opened key transport corridors, including sections through Guangxi and Yunnan of the PRC through Viet Nam. Moreover, the relaunch of the Early Harvest program with the extension of its MOU validity is expected.
- (iii) In **Trade and Investment**, the GMS Task Force on Trade and Investment (TFTI) held extensive consultation with members of the GMS Business Council on the impact of digitalization in their current business activities, explored opportunities for collaboration with GMS working groups on agriculture and health, and is now gearing up to endorse a collaboration on digital supply chains with the GMS Working Group on Agriculture for implementation in 2024.
- (iv) In the **Energy Sector**, the GMS Energy Transition Task Force (ETTF) addressed various key issues, including optimizing the benefits and synergy of regional power trade through establishing a short-term power trading platform and enhancing bilateral and multilateral trading arrangements; the need for grid flexibility resources, commercialization of green energy technologies, and capacity building for greater awareness and knowledge; and cooperation on energy efficiency. Further, the ETTF aligns with ASEAN's energy transition efforts and continues to work with ASEAN on the regional power market.
- (v) In **Agriculture**, the GMS Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security Program is helping GMS countries meet the growing demand for safe and high quality agri-food products both domestically and outside the GMS. The GMS Working Group on Agriculture (WGA) in 2023 continued to focus on subregional cooperation on green and climate resilient agri-food value chains, and green financing of small and medium agribusinesses.
- (vi) In **Environment**, the GMS Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability Program, 2020-2025 is working to improve climate compatibility and environmental sustainability of economic growth in the GMS by enhancing climate resilience, green growth, and environmental quality of the GMS Program. The 27th GMS Working Group on Environment (WGE) Annual Meeting discussed national priorities, strategies, and road maps for deploying innovative and digital technology solutions and for facilitating low carbon transitions in the green freight and agriculture sectors.
- (vii) We are gladdened by the GMS **Tourism's** continued rebound with travel and tourism soon recovering to pre-pandemic levels, reflecting our resolve to more closely integrate GMS economies toward greater resilience and protecting our shared cultural and natural heritage. We also appreciate the efforts of the GMS Tourism Working Group and its Secretariat, the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office, to organize the memorable 2023 Mekong Tourism Forum in Preah Sihanouk, Cambodia, and successfully implement the GMS Tourism Recovery Communications Plan. We also acknowledge the outcomes of the 52nd GMS Tourism Working Group and Mekong

Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO) Board Meetings hosted by Myanmar on 21–22 November 2023 which resulted in an important decision to propose renaming the MTCO as the Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Office (GMSTO) and envisaged its establishment as an inter-governmental organization in 2024.

- (viii) In **Health**, the GMS Working Group on Health Cooperation embarked on the development of a new sector strategy, the GMS Health Cooperation Strategy 2024–2030, identifying two pillars, namely, regional health security, and health system strengthening towards universal health coverage. Moreover, cross-cutting themes, particularly, climate change, digitalization, and gender equality and social inclusion, will be given prominence.
- (ix) In **Urban and Border Area Development**, several notable multi-sector and cross-border projects are currently being pursued, covering various themes and objectives, such as trade and investment facilitation, green growth and climate resilience, cross-border tourism, and public goods management.

5. In addition to accomplishments in specific sectors, good progress has been made in various important **cross-cutting themes identified in GMS-2030** as well as **new emerging areas** that impact GMS development:

- (i) Recognizing the crucial role of innovation as a key driver of development, the preparation of a GMS Innovation Strategy for Development 2030 has been initiated. This will accelerate the subregion’s development and maximize benefits from innovation while addressing its possible disruptive impacts. It will leverage the specific capabilities of the GMS countries and promote collaboration among them in enhancing investments and entrepreneurial activity for development. Based on these premises, we have endorsed the **Concept for the Preparation of a GMS Innovation Strategy for Development 2030**, which will guide the development of the Strategy, which could be presented for the Leaders’ endorsement in their next Summit.
- (ii) Relatedly, we welcome the completion of a **Scoping Study on Digitalization in the GMS**, that will provide the basis for the preparation of a GMS Digitalization Action Plan and define the scope and dimension of digitalization for the GMS Program as well as identify preliminary entry points for the GMS Program to support its member countries in their process of digital transformation.
- (iii) Toward further broadening support for the GMS Program and promoting it as an open regional cooperation platform, we are pleased to note the undertaking of two **studies aimed at deepening and strengthening the engagement of two key stakeholders and drivers of GMS development, namely, the private sector and the local governments**. These studies will assess past and existing experience and mechanisms pertaining to these important sectors’ participation in the GMS Program, explore potential new ones, and identify entry points as well as specific initiatives and actions for these purposes.

6. We recognize the crucial role and continued relevance of economic corridor development toward achieving the GMS vision and are pleased to know that the **Fourteenth Economic Corridors Forum (ECF-14)** will be held early next year, hosted by the Kingdom of Cambodia, with the theme “Harnessing and Accelerating Economic Corridor Development to Ensure GMS Resilience Against Major Global Challenges”.

7. We are also pleased with the success of the **GMS Economic Corridor Governors' Forum** held in Kunming on the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> August this year, which exhibited significant improvements in terms of participants and technical content.

8. We note that there has been good progress in the preparation of the **GMS Regional Investment Framework 2024-2026**. This new three-year rolling pipeline of GMS projects is being prepared through an extensive consultative process and is based on the new criteria to ensure project readiness in terms of feasibility, implementation, financing, as well as alignment with the strategies, goals, and thematic priorities set in GMS-2030.

9. We also note with satisfaction that the **GMS Knowledge Network** continues to make substantial progress in enhancing knowledge-related cooperation activities among the GMS countries, including stocktaking of the knowledge needs of the countries and preparing a Knowledge Network workplan, and, subsequently, identifying low-hanging fruits for knowledge creation and sharing. The study is likely to be completed by the end of the year.

### **The Way Forward**

10. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions worldwide, but the subregion has weathered its adverse impacts quite well. Now that it is all but behind us, our recovery efforts are again challenged by new and unexpected strains on the global economy. However, the progress that we have been making in the past year again demonstrates the resilience of our subregion and of our cooperation program.

11. We are keenly aware of the need to monitor the results of our cooperation program to ensure that we are steadily making progress toward our shared vision. We will need to regularly assess our success in implementing the priorities enunciated in GMS-2030, using the GMS Results Framework, which we endorsed in our last Ministerial Conference.

12. We fully commit to keep working together to develop the GMS Program as an open cooperation platform, to tap the opportunities offered by linkages with other relevant global and regional initiatives. We will therefore further promote synergies and complementarities between the GMS Program and the Belt and Road Initiative, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, Global Development Initiative, and ASEAN, as well as other regional and global cooperation initiatives, to provide new impetus to the development of the subregion and beyond.

13. We also realize that apart from the lingering economic effects of the pandemic and the new headwinds threatening the regional and global economy, we face another major and urgent threat, namely, climate change and other environmental challenges. We realize that our subregion is heavily impacted by these trends. We will therefore endeavor to find ways toward building our resilience against, adapt to and mitigate the impacts of these trends. These efforts will include transitioning to cleaner energy; increased investment in sustainability; and pursuing a more balanced, inclusive, and sustainable development for our subregion.

14. Despite the challenges, however, we are quite confident that the GMS will continue to steadily move forward toward the Vision set in GMS-2030 of **a more integrated, prosperous, sustainable, and inclusive subregion**. In this we are assured not only by the GMS's solid track record of fruitful cooperative action, but also by the continued strong support of our development partners, the private sector, the GMS local governments, subregional knowledge institutions, and other stakeholders. We also express our sincere gratitude to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar for its gracious and able hosting of the 26<sup>th</sup> GMS Ministerial Conference.

*Endorsed in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December 2023.*