

Review and Prospect of the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Lancang-Mekong Countries



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Abstract



Review and Prospect of the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Lancang-Mekong Countries is a research project under the Green Lancang-Mekong Initiative, which aims to improve Lancang-Mekong countries' understanding about the regional performance in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to provide practical and effective decision-making support for the Lancang-Mekong environmental cooperation through the evaluation of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Lancang-Mekong countries scored relatively low in the SDG Index and Dashboards Report issued by SDSN. On the whole, Cambodia was off track towards SDGs due to weak foundation, but the newly launched PPP policy may effectively improve the business environment and the China-initiated AIIB may provide funding for future development. China has laid a sound foundation for development after 40 years of reform and opening up. Attaching utmost importance to sustainable development, the Chinese Government has successively set forth systems and policies that are compatible with SDGs. This makes it likely to fully implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, despite moderate challenges related to health (SDG 3), economic equality (SDG 10), climate change (SDG 13), and marine ecosystems (SDG 14). The Lao Government has incorporated SDGs in its national development plan and adopted "SDG 18: Lives safe from unexploded ordinance" in light of national conditions, but data and financing capacity inadequacy remains a major constraint urgently to be addressed for SDG realization. Myanmar's sustainable development has been relatively stagnant in recent years. Although Myanmar established the National SDG Steering Committee in 2016 and promulgated the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan 2018–2030, it remains to be seen whether these mechanisms and programs can be effectively enforced. With best foundation among the five countries in Indochina Peninsula, Thailand takes a more proactive attitude and embraces a more optimistic prospect of sustainable development. Vietnam refreshed its best score in the 2018 SDG Index rankings, but it still faces very severe test in achieving SDGs as the momentum of development is restrained by "serious disparity of performance".

In terms of SDG Dashboards, the six countries perform well in reducing extreme poverty (SDG 1) and enhancing partnerships (SDG 17), but face common challenges on good health and well-being (SDG 3) and marine ecosystems (SDG 14). While good health and well-being remains a persisting and tough challenge, some Lancang-Mekong countries are stagnating or even retrogressing towards marine ecosystem conservation in recent years. Major challenges for the six countries are also related to hunger (SDG 2), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), and peace, security and strong institutions (SDG 16). The figures show that the region faces many challenges: relatively fragile sustainable development foundation represented by infrastructure construction, regional development and governance system deficits, and the serious climate and environmental disasters.

all Lancang-Mekong countries currently have appropriately localized the SDG endeavor. These countries have formed innovative philosophies, relevant institutions and alignment policies to enhance global partnerships. Meanwhile, as the Lancang-Mekong cooperation and the "Belt and Road" initiative continue to deepen, these mechanisms will help the Lancang-Mekong region implement the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. In the future, six countries should deepen the connection in the field of sustainable development, strengthen the construction of sustainable development infrastructure, highlight the idea of a community of shared destiny through public goods innovation, deepen international cooperation and upgrade regional partnerships.

1 Forward

The concept of sustainable development has become the guideline for long-term global development after more than three decades of continuous evolution and development. It has gradually been translated into today's sustainable development goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. On September 25, 2015, Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was unanimously adopted by 193 United Nations member states at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit held at its New York headquarters. It stands as a programmatic document that guides global sustainable development over the next 15 years. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has undertaken the unfinished tasks and gone beyond the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by highlighting people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership.

From a macro perspective, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the most ambitious target framework widely recognized by world leaders in history. It creates an excellent opportunity for Lancang-Mekong countries to bound forward for an all-round transition to sustainable development. At present, Lancang-Mekong countries have deepened cooperation in sustainable development and delivered noticeable outcomes in the fields of production capacity, innovation, people's livelihood, environmental protection, and openness. Apparently, Lancang-Mekong cooperation (LMC) has demonstrated vigorous vitality while offering a new paradigm for South-South cooperation. It has made positive contributions to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the reformation of international relations featuring win-win cooperation.

From a global perspective, LMC has risen into the most dynamic and promising new mechanisms in the subregion, and will set a model for South-South cooperation. The committed implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will help Lancang-Mekong countries achieve sustainable development, accelerate high-quality regional development by integrating into the Belt and Road Initiative, and contribute best regional practices for building a community of shared future for mankind.

Lancang-Mekong countries ranked relatively low by SDG Index for the three years from 2016 to 2018, according to the comparative analysis of the SDG Index and Dashboards Report issued by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). On the whole, Cambodia failed to make desired progress due to weak foundation. The newly launched public-private partnership (PPP) policy may effectively improve the business environment, and the China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) can provide funding for future development. China has laid a sound foundation for development after 40 years of reform and opening up. Attaching utmost importance to sustainable development, the Chinese Government has successively set forth systems and policies that are compatible with SDGs. This makes it likely to fully implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, despite moderate challenges in terms of health (SDG 3), economic equality (SDG 10), climate change (SDG 13), and marine ecosystems (SDG 14). The Lao Government has incorporated SDGs in its national development plan and added "SDG 18: Lives safe from unexploded ordinance" in light of national conditions, but data and financing capacity inadequacy remains a major constraint urgently to be addressed. Myanmar's sustainable development has been relatively stagnant in recent years. Although Myanmar established the National SDG Steering Committee in 2016 and promulgated the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan 2018–2030, it remains to be seen whether these mechanisms and programs can be effectively enforced. With best foundation among the five countries in Indochina Peninsula, Thailand takes a more proactive attitude and embraces a more optimistic prospect of sustainable development. Vietnam refreshed its best score in the 2018 SDG Index rankings, but it still faces very severe test in achieving SDGs as the momentum of development is restrained by "serious disparity of performance".

Lancang-Mekong countries, as culturally and geographically linked developing nations, more or less lag behind the targets under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and require considerable efforts to achieve SDGs across the board. Currently, there are multiple realistic challenges facing Lancang-Mekong countries, including relatively weak foundation represented by infrastructure construction, unrefined and impersistent philosophy of sustainable development, inadequate regional governance capacity, and severe climate and environmental disasters. Meanwhile, major opportunities have been brought by Lancang-Mekong cooperation, such as deepening LMC mechanism, remarkable achievements of joint Belt and Road construction, and China's contributive wisdom and scheme for cooperation to drive regional sustainable development.

In the future, the six Lancang-Mekong countries can deepen alignment in the field of sustainable development, and work together to advance SDG implementation in the Lancang-Mekong region. To achieve this, they can enhance cooperation in poverty reduction and agriculture, strengthen regional connectivity, seek high-quality growth, jointly meet challenges in environmental governance and climate change, and deepen international cooperation and upgrade regional partnerships. This will produce new ideas and solutions for building a community of shared future for Lancang-Mekong countries.



1.1 Evolution of the UN Global Development Agenda

Three global development agendas have been developed by the United Nations since the 1990s, i.e., Agenda 21 adopted in 1992, Millennium Development Goals derived from the Millennium Declaration signed in 2000, and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted at the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. In the process of evolution, there is a shift of focus from single indicators to coordinated development of multiple indicators. In spite of this, the three agendas are not independent of each other, but come down in the same line and advance with the times.

In order to achieve sustainable development, Agenda 21 laid out nearly 40 goals and many objectives, with focus on coordinated environmental and economic development. Nevertheless, objectives under Agenda 21 are too many and dispersed, covering almost all aspects of development. It is impossible to concentrate limited human and financial resources on addressing key issues and priorities. Moreover, these objectives are highly flexible and described in a vague qualitative way, except for specific quantitative indicators for disease control. This undermines the necessary binding force because it is difficult to effectively supervise and review the implementation.

The international community came to realize that specific phased plan of action is needed to accomplish the long-term grand vision under the agenda. Against this background, the United Nations announced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MDGs are eight goals in economic, social and environmental aspects and international cooperation, which in general, has completely inherited the content of Agenda 21. They are measured by 21 specific targets, most of which are quantified and given dates (i.e., 2015). In addition, 60 indicators for monitoring progress are provided to monitor and evaluate the MDG implementation in various countries. MDGs clearly take poverty reduction as the core and aim to halve the extreme poverty rate by 2015, which largely avoids the decentralization of targets for sustainable development.

Table 1-1 Millennium Development Goals

Goal 1: End extreme poverty and hunger
Goal 2 : Achieve universal primary education
Goal 3 : Promote gender equality and empower women
Goal 4 : Reduce child mortality rates
Goal 5 : Improve maternal health
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
Goal 7 : Ensure environmental sustainability
Goal 8: Development a global partnership for development

Source: Official United Nations site for the MDG indicators,
<https://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Data/snapshots.htm>

With the dates for achieving MDGs approaching, building the post-2015 development agenda was put on the agenda. The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development proposed to develop a set of SDGs, which builds upon MDGs and puts sustainable development at the core. After two years of intergovernmental negotiations, the 193 UN member states agreed on the post-2015 development agenda in August 2015, and unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September. The new agenda has set another milestone in the global development process by charting national development and international cooperation over the next 15 years.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was officially launched on January 1, 2016. It encompasses 17 goals and 169 wide-ranging targets, which are integrated and indivisible.

Table 12 Sustainable Development Goals

No.	Goals	Targets
1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	7
2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	8
3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	13
4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	10
5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	9
6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	8
7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	5
8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	12
9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	8
10	Reduce inequality within and among countries	10
11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	10
12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	11
13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*	5
14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	10
15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	12
16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	12
17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development	19
		169

*Notes: *Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.*

Source: Official United Nations site for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/en/development-agenda/>

In short, the global development agenda builds on past agendas to a certain degree. While the core goals have evolved from environmentally sustainable development to MDGs and SDGs, the philosophy of sustainable development continues to deepen by adding the components of peace and partnership to economic, social and environmental elements. Besides, the new development agenda covers both developed countries and developing countries. The evolution of global development agenda manifests human efforts to change the development paradigm and seek the overall transformation of civilization.

1.2 Status Quo of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation in Sustainable Development

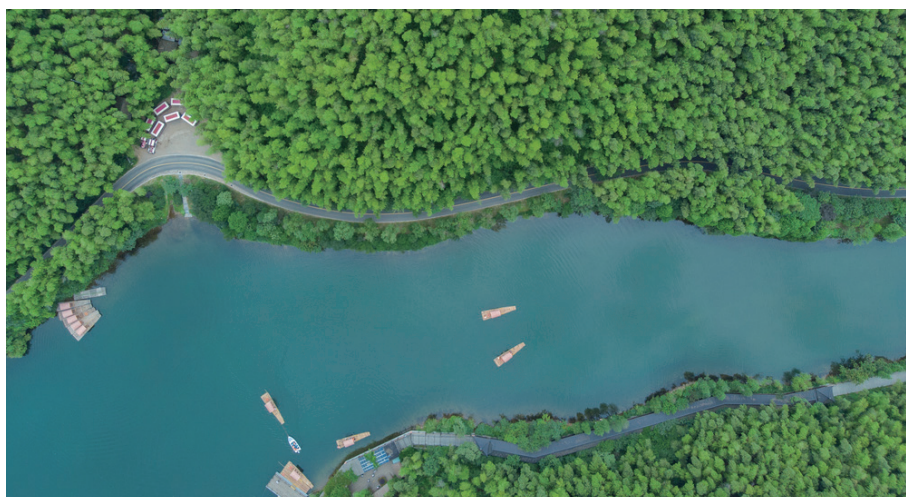
In November 2015, the LMC mechanism was officially launched, marked by the issuance of the Concept Paper on Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Framework and the Joint Press Communiqué of the First Lancang-Mekong Foreign Ministers' Meeting by the First Lancang-Mekong Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Jinghong City, Yunnan, China.

China and the five Mekong countries have long maintained close partnerships in the field of sustainable development, which has already laid a certain foundation for all-round and in-depth cooperation. In December 2018, the 4th LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting took place in Luang Prabang, Laos. The six countries agreed to jointly build the Lancang-Mekong Economic Development Belt, and carry out cooperation in areas such as production capacity, innovation, livelihood, and environmental protection, and constantly step up mechanism construction in favor of complementarity development of the LMC mechanism and other mechanisms in the subregion. To sum up, they will work together to promote sustainable development with a view to efficient, innovative, inclusive, green and open region.

1.3 Significance of Promoting the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Lancang-Mekong Countries

At present, the Mekong countries have entered the path of rapid industrialization. Economic development in harmony with environmental protection by mainstreaming environmental policies in the basin is an important component of inclusive growth and sustainable development and a direction of common concern for the governments and people of the Mekong countries. China has accumulated rich experience in promoting ecological progress and green development, which is applicable to developing countries. The transformation of China's scheme will help Mekong countries to embark on the road of sustainable development and explore a new paradigm of ecological progress.

Promoting the implementation of Agenda 2030 will accelerate high-quality regional development by engaging Mekong countries in the Belt and Road Initiative, and supply best regional practices for building a community of shared future for mankind.



2 SDG Assessment System and Methodology

2.1 UN Sustainable Development Assessment System

In light of indicator system complexity and data availability insufficiency, SDGN issued a groundbreaking global report titled SDG Index and Dashboards Report in July 2016. The report was jointly prepared by more than 150 experts, including UN officials, academics, and representatives from non-profit organizations. It was created to help countries understand worldwide progress and identify national priorities for SDGs and urge countries to early adopt and implement policies in harmony with SDGs.

Although the indicator system is subject to various limitations, under the current conditions, the SDG Index and Dashboards help countries understand the status quo and identify urgent challenges in meeting the SDGs and make possible horizontal comparison between countries and regions.

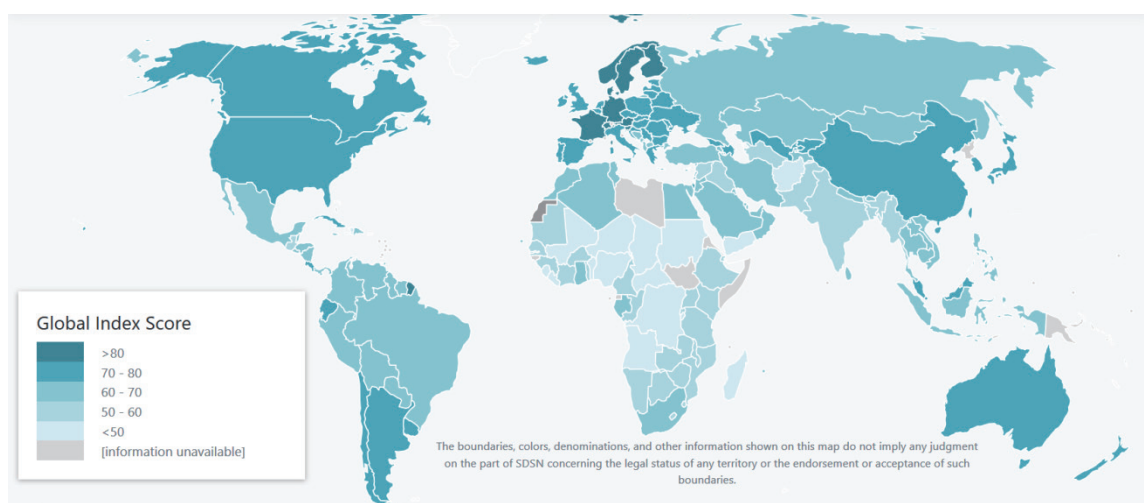


Figure 2-1 Interactive SDG Dashboards for 2018

Source: <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/#/>

2.2 Overall Global Review for SDG Implementation

According to the SDG Index and Dashboards Report from 2016 to 2018, the worldwide implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development shows the following three characteristics.

1. The level of sustainable development in a country is highly correlated with its level of economic development.

In the 2016–2018 SDG Index rankings, the best performers are largely OECD countries, most of which have completed industrialization to enter the post-industrial stage, such as Sweden, Denmark, Finland and other Nordic countries. The middle positions are mainly taken by developing countries in the stage of rapid industrialization, such as China, Thailand, and Vietnam. Underdeveloped countries in the early stage of industrialization rank relatively low, including many sub-Saharan African countries with the SDG Index below 60 points. The rankings reveal that a country's level of sustainable development is highly related to its level of economic development.

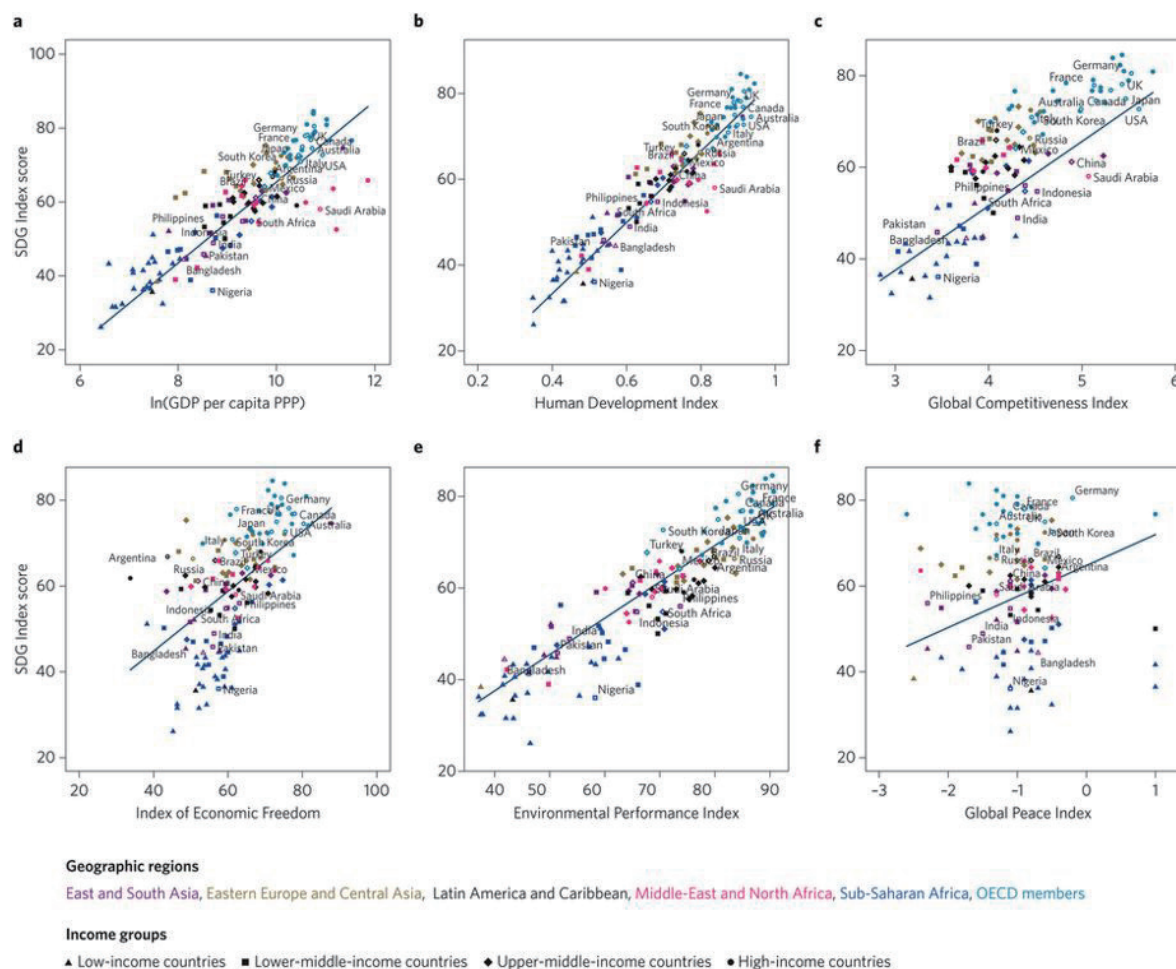


Figure 2 Correlation of SDG index with other common development indexes

Note: a–f: Pairwise correlation of the SDG Index with (a) natural logarithm of GDP per capita; (b) Human Development Index; (c) Global Competitiveness Index; (d) Index of Economic Freedom; (e) Environmental Performance Index; (f) Global Peace Index.

Source: Schmidt-Traub, G et al. "National baselines for the Sustainable Development Goals assessed in the SDG Index and Dashboards." *Nature Geoscience*, 2017, 10(8): 547-555

II. Performance gaps for SDGs exist among developed countries.

OECD countries rank in front of developing countries by the overall SDG Index, but this does not mean they lead in specific indicators. The SDG Dashboards for OECD countries demonstrate that SDGs are an agenda for developing countries as well as an issue of concern for developed countries. As shown in Figure 2–3, every OECD country faces challenges in meeting SDGs (especially as indicated by "red" rating). On average, OECD countries are "red" on about one third of the goals. The greatest challenges exist on climate change (SDG 13), ecosystem conservation (SDGs 14 & 15), partnerships for the goals (SDG 17), and sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12). Several OECD countries are rated "red" on SDG 9 due to their low economic growth and high unemployment. A large number of OECD countries face major challenges on SDG 17 largely because of their insufficient financial contributions towards international development cooperation. Some OECD countries

experience low growth and high unemployment (SDG 8) as well as major shortfall in gender inequality (SDG 5).

OECD countries are widely divided by indicators. For example, their performance gaps even exceed five times on prevalence of obesity, share of renewable energy, proportion of youth people not in employment, education and training, and gender wage gap.

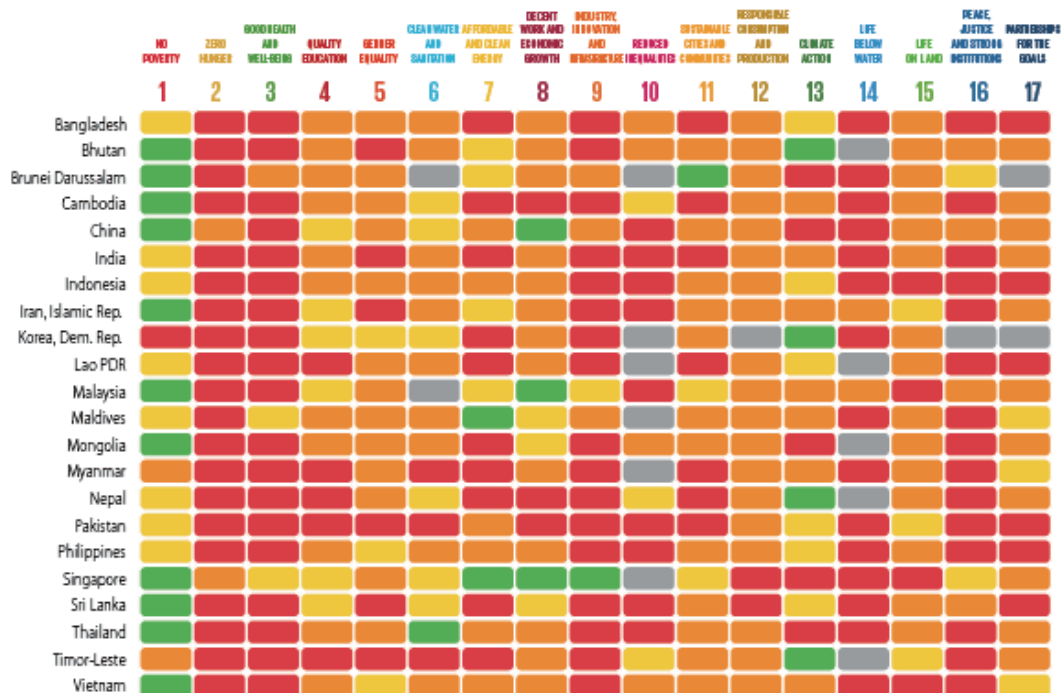


Figure 2-3 SDG Dashboard for East and South Asia (2018)

Note: Green means "SDG achieved", yellow "small distance from achievement", orange "large distance from achievement", red "huge distance from achievement", and gray means "information unavailable".

Source: SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2018.

III. Implementation priorities for SDGs are different among regions.

Constrained by geographical, cultural, historical and other factors, regions vary social operating mechanisms and development models, as well as value preferences and priorities. This naturally leads to differences in implementation priorities for SDGs. For example, the SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2018 identified different priorities for SDG implementation in East and South Asia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Countries in East and South Asia outperform many other developing countries and regions, but still face several challenges. While substantial progress has been made in ending extreme poverty (SDG 1), the dashboards show major challenges related to zero hunger (SDG 2), good health and well-being (SDG 3), industry, innovation, and infrastructure (SDG 9).

9), life below water (SDG 14), as well as peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). All countries except for Singapore and China are rated red on food security and sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), indicating severe nutritional imbalance and agricultural unsustainability. Some countries experience serious income inequality (SDG 10). It is worth noting that challenges are also grave in promoting environmental sustainability (SDGs 11, 13–15, and SDG 2 on sustainable agriculture). Overall, the dashboards show that more efforts are needed to better balance economic development and environmental protection.

Table 2–1 SDG priorities for countries in different regions

Region	Priorities	High priorities
East and South Asia	SDG2-3、SDG9	SDG11
	SDG14、SDG16	SDG13-15
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	SDG2-3	SDG13-15
	SDG8-10	
Latin America and the Caribbean	SDG10	SDG9
	SDG16	SDG12-15
Middle East and North Africa	SDG2	SDG8、SDG10
	SDG6	SDG13-16
Sub-Saharan Africa	SDG1-4	SDG10-11
	SDG6、SDG9	SDG16

Source: SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2018.



3 Review of the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by Lancang–Mekong Countries

Lancang-Mekong countries scored relatively low in the SDG Index and Dashboards Report issued by SDSN. On the whole, Cambodia was off track towards SDGs due to weak foundation, but the newly launched PPP policy may effectively improve the business environment and the China-initiated AIIB may provide funding for future development. China has laid a sound foundation for development after 40 years of reform and opening up. Attaching utmost importance to sustainable development, the Chinese Government has successively set forth systems and policies that are compatible with SDGs. This makes it likely to fully implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, despite moderate challenges related to health (SDG 3), economic equality (SDG 10), climate change (SDG 13), and marine ecosystems (SDG 14). The Lao Government has incorporated SDGs in its national development plan and adopted "SDG 18: Lives safe from unexploded ordinance" in light of national conditions, but data and financing capacity inadequacy remains a major constraint urgently to be addressed for SDG realization. Myanmar's sustainable development has been relatively stagnant in recent years. Although Myanmar established the National SDG Steering Committee in 2016 and promulgated the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan 2018–2030, it remains to be seen whether these mechanisms and programs can be effectively enforced. With best foundation among the five countries in Indochina Peninsula, Thailand takes a more proactive attitude and embraces a more optimistic prospect of sustainable development. Vietnam refreshed its best score in the 2018 SDG Index rankings, but it still faces very severe test in achieving SDGs as the momentum of development is restrained by "serious disparity of performance".

3.1 Overall Review of the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for Lancang-Mekong Countries

The SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2018 provides an SDG Index ranking for 156 countries. Countries in East and South Asia have an average score of 64.1 points. Specific to the Lancang-Mekong region, Vietnam scores 69.7 points and Thailand, 69.2 points, ranking No. 57 and No. 59 respectively. Laos and Cambodia come to No.108 and No.109 with 60.6 and 60.4 points, and Myanmar stands at No. 114 with 59.0 points. Obviously, Lancang-Mekong countries have improved the level and capacity for sustainable development between 2016 and 2018, despite large distance from SDG achievement (Table 3–3).

The SDG Dashboards reveal common challenges remain on good health and well-being (SDG 3) and marine ecosystems (SDG 14) in the Lancang-Mekong region. Five countries in IndoChina are rated red on zero hunger (SDG 2), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), peace, security and strong institutions (SDG 16). This requires more efforts to improve sustainable agricultural management, strengthen infrastructure construction, and ensure domestic stability.



Table 31 SDG dashboard for Lancang-Mekong countries (2018)

Item	China	Laos	Myanmar	Thailand	Cambodia	Vietnam
●World ranking(/156)	54	108	113	59	109	57
●Score(/100)	70.1	60.6	59.0	69.2	60.4	69.7
●Regional average(/100)	64.1					
Goal achievement						
1.No poverty	SDG achieved	Small distance	Large distance	SDG achieved	SDG achieved	SDG achieved
2.Zero hunger	Large distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance
3.Good health and well-being	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance
4.Quality education	Small distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance
5.Gender equality	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Small distance
6.Clean water and sanitation	Small distance	Large distance	Huge distance	SDG achieved	Small distance	Large distance
7.Affordable and clean energy	Large distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Large distance	Huge distance	Large distance
8.Decent work and economic growth	SDG achieved	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Huge distance	Large distance
9.Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Large distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance
10.Reduced inequalities	Huge distance	Information unavailable	Information unavailable	Huge distance	Small distance	Large distance
11.Sustainable cities and communities	Large distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Large distance	Huge distance	Large distance
12.Responsible consumption and production	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance
13.Climate action	Huge distance	Small distance	Large distance	Huge distance	Large distance	Large distance
14.Life below water	Huge distance	Information unavailable	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance
15.Life on land	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Large distance	Huge distance
16.Peace, justice and strong institutions	Large distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance	Huge distance
17.Partnerships for the goals	Large distance	Huge distance	SDG achieved	Large distance	Large distance	Small distance

Legend ■ SDG achieved ■ Small distance ■ Huge distance ■ Large distance ■ Information unavailable

Source: SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2018.

Overall, Lancang-Mekong countries have lower SDG Index scores and rankings and lag behind SDGs. Among them, China, Vietnam, and Thailand are the top performers. They score higher than the average of East and South Asia of 64.1 points, but stay only in the middle of the global rankings. Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar rank lower in the world, with scores below than the average of Southeast Asia, which implies large distance from SDG achievement. In terms of SDG Dashboards, the six countries perform well in reducing extreme poverty (SDG 1) and enhancing partnerships (SDG 17), but face common challenges on good health and well-being (SDG 3) and marine ecosystems (SDG 14). While good health and well-being remains a persisting and tough challenge, some Lancang-Mekong countries are stagnating or even retrogressing towards marine ecosystem conservation in recent years. Major challenges for the six countries are also related to hunger (SDG2), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), and peace, security and strong institutions (SDG 16). In short, Lancang-Mekong countries face challenges to varying degrees in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Most countries in the region need to further promote international partnerships because of poverty and political issues. Therefore, national policies and external assistance have become important factors affecting their performance. In addition, effective monitoring by SDG implementation agencies is particularly necessary.

3.2 Summary

In general, despite performance gaps in SDG implementation, all Lancang-Mekong countries have appropriately localized the SDG endeavor and developed work programs suited to respective national conditions. They have formed innovative philosophies (such as China's philosophy of innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared development and Thailand's SEP); relevant institutions (such as Myanmar National Steering Committee for SDG Implementation and Laos National SDG Steering Committee); alignment policies (such as Cambodia Sustainable Development Plan aligned with SDGs, Vietnam's National Action Plan for SDG implementation); or multiple measures to enhance global and public-private partnerships. These top-level designs represent exemplary practices of Lancang-Mekong countries in pursuing SDGs. In the future, they can deepen exploration on the basis of these practices and jointly contribute the Lancang-Mekong scheme for global sustainable development.

Given the current performance in sustainable development (Figure 3–1), the six Lancang-Mekong countries are divided into two tiers. First-tiered countries, including China, Thailand, and Vietnam, generally perform above the regional average, stay among the top half in the world rankings, and can continue to advance with the best position ranging from No.50 to No.60. Second-tiered countries, including Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, are largely trapped in the position range of No.100 to No.120 as they fail to achieve qualitative breakthroughs.

The progress made by first-tiered countries is related to relatively sound material foundation, and more importantly, inseparable from the factor that government departments attach great importance to SDG implementation. China, Thailand, and Vietnam submitted the VNR reports to the United Nations in 2016, 2017, and 2018 respectively to sum up the progress in SDG implementation. However, with the exception of Laos, which submitted its VNR report in 2018, second-tiered countries have not yet provided corresponding reports briefing the United Nations of their SDG implementation.



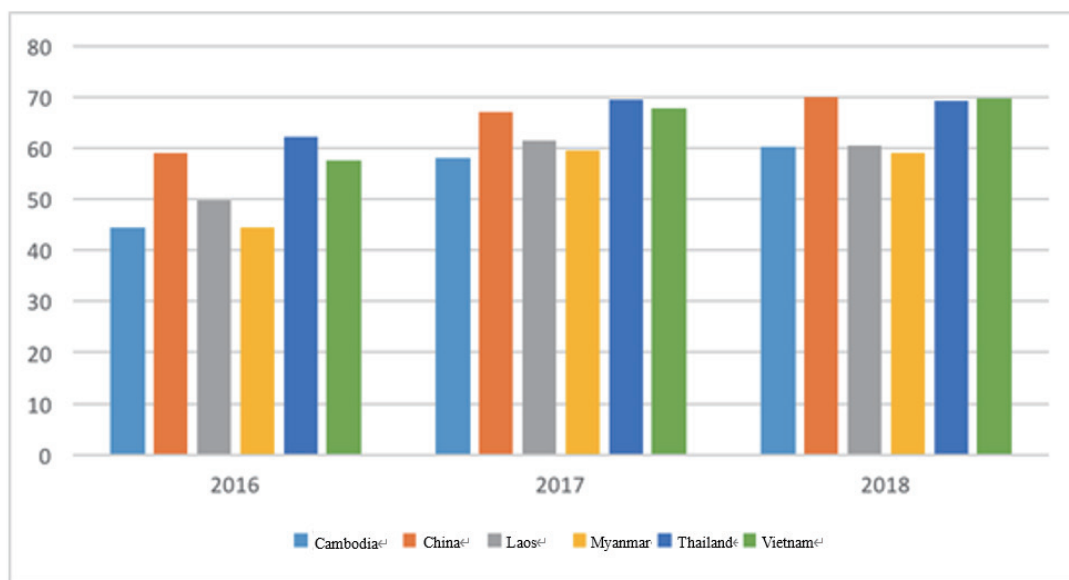


Figure 3–1 SDG Index score comparison of Lancang-Mekong countries (2016–2018)

Source: SDG Index and Dashboards Reports 2016–2018.

Therefore, while depending on the level of national economic and social development, the SDG process is significantly affected by national capacity. Herein, national capacity is reflected in three dimensions. The most important factor is financial capacity, which limits the possibility and optional means of implementation, as indicated in Laos. The second is data capacity, which directly affects the decision-making and enforcement of state organs. In the three underperformers, there is more or less lack of data. The last is integration capacity, which examines the capability to set up specialized government agencies in a timely manner, or implement targeted national policies that address the needs and preferences of different social groups. For example, Vietnam has established NCSDC and VBCSD to coordinate various shareholders and integrate the interests and opinions of the public and private sectors involved in SDG implementation.



4 Prospect Analysis of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation in Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Admittedly, Lancang-Mekong countries, unanimously as developing nations, have more or less distance from meeting targets under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and require considerable efforts to achieve SDGs across the board. Currently, there are multiple realistic challenges facing Lancang-Mekong countries, including relatively weak foundation represented by infrastructure construction, unrefined and impersistent philosophy of sustainable development, inadequate regional governance capacity, and severe climate and environmental disasters. Meanwhile, major opportunities have been brought by Lancang-Mekong cooperation, such as deepening LMC mechanism, remarkable achievements of joint Belt and Road construction, and China's contributive wisdom and scheme, and cooperation to drive regional sustainable development.

In the future, the six Lancang-Mekong countries can deepen alignment in the field of sustainable development and work together to advance SDG implementation in the Lancang-Mekong region. To achieve this, they can enhance cooperation in poverty reduction and agriculture, strengthen regional connectivity, seek high-quality growth, jointly meet challenges in environmental governance and climate change, and deepen international cooperation and upgrade regional partnerships. This will produce new ideas and solutions for building a community of shared future for Lancang-Mekong countries.





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About LMEC: Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation(LMEC), established in 2017 in Beijing, China, aims to boost the capacity of environmental governance of each country and achieve regional sustainable development through the promotion of environmental cooperation among the Lancang-Mekong Countries.