

**Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)
Fourth Meeting of the GMS Urban Development Working Group
via web-based conferencing
17 December 2020**

Summary Proceedings

I. Introduction

1. The Fourth Meeting of the GMS Urban Development Working Group (UDWG) was held in via web-based conferencing (Zoom) on 17 December 2020. The objectives of the meeting were to: (i) discuss the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on selected public utilities and how these have responded to address challenges on their operations, financial management and investments; (ii) discuss how COVID-19 has made city governments approach smart city development as well as the introduction of digital solutions for urban planning and service delivery; (iii) update on the draft Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation Strategy 2030, the GMS medium-term COVID-19 response plan, and changes in the GMS Regional Investment Framework that are relevant to the Urban Development Working Group (UDWG); (iv) agree on the next steps, including the preparation of the next regional meeting. The meeting agenda is **attachment 1**.

2. The meeting was chaired Mr. Xu Jianping, Director General, Department of Regional Opening-up, National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of PRC and was co-chaired by Mr. Antonio Ressano Garcia, Principal Urban Development Specialist, Urban Development and Water Division (SEUW), Southeast Asia Department (SERD), Asian Development Bank (ADB). GMS UDWG members and their representatives from Cambodia, PRC, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam and ADB participated in the event. The list of meeting participants is **attachment 2**.

II. Opening Session

3. The Chair, as meeting host, welcomed all participants and expressed appreciation to GMS Secretariat for co-organizing the virtual meeting. He noted that the COVID-19 pandemic situation we are in is a difficult time but special because GMS countries have helped each other overcome the challenges and shared experiences in addressing the pandemic. He stated that the Chinese government attaches great importance to urban development and regard it necessary for national modernization. In their 13th Five-Year Plan, the top-level design of China's new urbanization is comprehensively established, key areas of reform including household registration system achieved, and quality of urbanization improved. The proposal for the 14th Five-Year Plan is to promote a people-oriented urbanization as future direction in the country. He then recognized the severe challenges that COVID-19 poses to urban governance and enjoined all to enhance urban capacity and resilience in tackling risks and challenges with the use of modern information technology, among others. The Chair, on behalf of PRC, reiterated its commitment to proactively participate and support GMS Urban Development Working Group activities and cooperation including sharing PRC urban development practices. Finally, the Chair wished the meeting great success.

4. The Co-Chair thanked the Chair for introducing and providing context of the meeting. He acknowledged the participation of other officials of the host country from NDRC, Ministry of Housing and Urban Rural Development, China Centre from Urban Development and Yunnan Province. As Co-Chair, he also introduced participating ADB colleagues and requested GMS

country delegations to introduce themselves as they take on the floor in the following open discussions. He also gave a recap of the last meeting of the working group, summary proceedings of which was circulated to WG members in advance of this meeting.

III. Session 1: Urban Management and Provision of Basic Public Utility Services under COVID-19

5. Mr. Jiang Jinghao, Director, Department of Resource Conservation and Environmental Protection, NDRC spoke on the topic of urban medical waste management and facility construction under the coronavirus pandemic. He pointed out that strengthening medical waste management is of great significance to prevent spread of diseases, protect the ecological environment and safeguard people's health. He then shared on China's response to the significant increase in medical waste generated due to COVID-19 outbreak in their country which revealed some weaknesses in their waste disposal capacity.

6. In April 2020, the National People's Congress considered the adoption of the revised "Solid Waste Pollution Prevention and Control Law" which enhanced enforcement of medical waste management. Following this law, the NDRC worked with relevant departments to accelerate promotion of centralized medical waste disposal facilities that will ensure the safe and effective disposal of medical waste. The measures taken were as follows: (i) accelerate the construction of centralized medical waste disposal facilities under a two-year capacity building plan; (ii) strengthen management of medical waste; (iii) arrange central funds (initially with 4.5 billion yuan) to support the construction of medical waste disposal facilities; and (iv) strengthen supervision and monitoring to ensure implementation according to plan.

7. He further reported that under the leadership of PRC Party Central Committee with President Xi Jinping at its core, China has achieved significant strategic results in epidemic prevention and control and in realizing economic and social development. As next steps, NDRC will continue to work with relevant parties for the prevention and control of epidemic and improvement of medical waste disposal and management. He mentioned about PRC application to ADB for a knowledge cooperation technical assistance that will research and inform PRC 14th Five-Year Plan on environmental infrastructure development. Lastly, he emphasized the importance of interdependence and mutual cooperation to overcome the pandemic and that PRC continue to recognize the GMS mechanism as an exchange platform and ADB support to strengthen this cooperation.

8. Mr. Alan Baird, Principal Urban Development Specialist, SEUW, ADB presented on Emerging Lessons for Water Utilities from the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia Pacific. The lessons were based on findings of a survey conducted in Asia Pacific including GMS countries, to better understand impacts of COVID-19 on the operations of water utilities particularly in the following areas: technical operations, commercial operations, human resources, supply chain, and crisis preparedness. A synthesis of survey responses blended with best practices across the world proposes the following lessons for consideration: (i) Enhance resilience to shocks and stress; (ii) Improve water sector crisis preparedness; (iii) Develop utility response management (across all operational functions); (iv) Enhance Wastewater-based epidemiology monitoring; (v) Integrate WASH into public health policy; (v) Undertake capacity and sector development; (vi) Conduct industry-wide knowledge sharing; (vii) Employ smart water management including digital technologies; and (viii) Enable remote working and decentralization. Copy of his presentation is in **Attachment 3**.

9. The Co-Chair thanked both presenters for their relevant and interesting presentations. He took note of PRC research proposal to ADB regarding appropriate medical waste management. He said that this will have to be coordinated with the GMS Health Sector Working Group and within ADB between the Southeast Asia Department and East Asia Department. He noted from the two presentations that digitalization and/or the application of information technology is becoming an important tool in responding to a pandemic or similar emergency crisis. He then opened the floor for discussion or sharing of country delegations of their experiences in this regard.

Discussion

10. Lao PDR shared that under pandemic situation, they do not have much restriction or limitation in the operation and management of public utilities. They focused their pandemic response on raising public awareness and understanding of the situation and how to prevent spread of COVID-19.

11. Myanmar shared that in their case, operation and management of water utilities is important to serve the increasing population specially in urban cities like Yangon. With the pandemic situation and the second wave of infection in August 2020, provision of clean water cannot be overemphasized. Aside from the usual measures like staying at home, practice social-distancing and the like, 3 housing projects were carried out to serve as quarantine facilities.

12. Thailand informed about their Contingency Plan 2021-2022 to combat the impact of COVID-19. It has four priority areas, namely: stimulate local economy, promote industrial and services sector, develop human capital, and employ enabling factors such as investment on infrastructure especially in Special Economic Zones and on legal system and institutions.

13. Viet Nam shared that it is also facing a lot of challenges including in the area of urban development and looked forward to the sharing and discussion in this meeting. He opined that Smart City initiative and application of information technology are good ways to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and economic development.

IV. Session 2: Development of Smart Cities: Digital Solutions for COVID-19

14. Ms. Qiu Aijun, Deputy Director General, China Center for Urban Development, NDRC, PRC presented their experience and efforts related to Smart City Development and Digital Anti-epidemic Fight. She explained that with PRC's long-term development efforts on smart cities and digital economy, city governments were able to leverage science and technology in pandemic prevention and control. The accumulated experience in using big data, artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet and other new-generation information technology was useful and replicated for pandemic prevention and control, effective treatment, livelihood protection, orderly production recovery and urban governance. She then proceeded to cite examples of various digital applications employed by city governments in the following areas: (i) integrate and enhance the functions of smart service platforms to enable effective pandemic prevention and control; (ii) leverage telemedicine to provide active and effective rescue and treatment services; (iii) make use of smart city platforms to promote innovative government management and social governance; and (iv) develop new modes of online services to guarantee public service delivery during the pandemic. Lastly, she recommended that GMS countries accelerate planning and development of their internet and communication infrastructure, develop convenient and smart applications to meet the needs of residents, and popularize the use of smart terminals towards an improved

urban development and governance. PRC is ready to support GMS cooperation in this regard. Copy of her presentation is in **Attachment 4**.

Discussion

15. Cambodia appreciated the comprehensive presentation and noted that some of the methods employed by PRC can be replicated in their country such as the broadcasting of education program. He opined that this is a good way to keep human resources strong even when in a pandemic situation. The Co-chair mentioned that ADB urban and social teams are working together to use more digital solutions in urban and education projects and has a pilot project in Lao PDR on this. If countries will be interested, this can be a potential topic of future GMS Urban Development Working Group meetings.

16. Lao PDR congratulated the presenter and would like to learn more from PRC about “Smart City Brain”, E-commerce and digital technology development in general. He reiterated that for Lao PDR, smart city initiatives are still at concept stage. While they are starting to experience some form of E-governance, E-commerce and digital education, they relied on private sector for these.

17. Myanmar shared that in this COVID-19 pandemic era, people are more familiar with digital technology and solutions such as this online meeting and including online services and e-commerce. Mandalay City government, for example, provide the systems to make these online services and digital solutions accessible to its people. Recently, the City also transformed water meter reading system and billing system to online/digital system making it more efficient and convenient. Yangon City government services such as application for building permits, and education for its citizens are now also accessible online and they continue to develop smart city solutions specially during this pandemic time.

18. Thailand opined that they have been handling well the COVID-19 challenge because they already have a Smart City framework in place even before the COVID-19 outbreak. They recognized the power of cities and urban areas such that if cities, which are natural magnets of population, can effectively and efficiently prevent and control the spread of infection, the whole country is safer. The framework they have adopted used both digital and non-digital means. Non-digital means like a village volunteers made information dissemination and collection more accessible to many even in remote areas. Strong leadership and agility in management is another success factor cited. Overall, it is believed that Smart Cities provide a system whereby a total integration of all stakeholders is made possible to make cities safer and make the entire environment safer for all.

19. Viet Nam reiterated that it is also facing a lot of challenges brought about by COVID-19 pandemic. Smart City development according to regulation and policy in Viet Nam is kind of strict but see the benefits in dealing with unexpected incidence like COVID-19. Thus, Viet Nam fully supports the use of information technology and Smart Cities development to further urban development in the country.

20. The Chair was glad to hear very active discussion regarding smart cities, digital solutions and pandemic control. He said that this meeting is just a start and the working group can have deeper discussions in future meetings and after this pandemic.

V. Session 3: Updates on the GMS Program

21. Ms. Pinsuda Alexander, Economist, Regional Cooperation and Operations Coordination Division, SERD, ADB, presented updates on the GMS Program particularly on the proposed new

GMS Economic Cooperation Program Strategic Framework 2030 (GMS 2030), the GMS COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan 2021-2023 and the recently endorsed Regional Investment Framework 2022: Third Progress Report and Update highlighting respective urban development-related sections. Copy of her presentation is in **Attachment 5**.

Discussion

22. The Co-chair, before opening the floor for comments and discussion, commented that in all these strategic and operational plans particularly the COVID-19 Response Plan, we must not forget to integrate certain principles like environmental and climate change considerations in any response to be carried out. He emphasized that green recovery is always important and should not be sacrificed.

23. Cambodia expressed appreciation for the updates presented and will continue to support these GMS frameworks and plans in close cooperation with fellow GMS countries and the ADB.

24. The Chair, on behalf of PRC, also appreciated ADB’s brief but comprehensive presentation. He remarked that the RIF is a very good framework and welcome ADB proposal to step up the viability and sustainability of GMS projects in the RIF. He also recognized that urban development would play an important role in driving GMS economic growth and in this regard proposed to increase projects relating to urban development including studies and research on urban development.

25. Lao PDR supports the draft GMS 2030 and the COVID-19 Response Plan as taken up in the 24th GMS Ministerial Conference. They are pleased to note the progress of RIF implementation and requested to be apprised of the status of preparation of the proposed Livable Cities Development Project for Lao PDR.

26. Myanmar appreciated the GMS Secretariat for preparing the three documents and expressed their support for these. They particularly support the vision and mission of GMS 2030 including its holistic approach to GMS development. For the Myanmar projects in the RIF, they wish to implement soonest possible specially those still under proposed stage.

27. Thailand supports the proposed GMS 2030 and COVID-19 Response Plan as they endorsed during the 24th GMS Ministerial Conference. However, Thailand thinks that for our recovery from the pandemic to be sustainable, there is a need to first strengthen the local economy. Facilitation of movement of people and goods across borders and keeping labor migration safe are also crucial elements to this response and recovery plan.

28. Viet Nam joins other GMS countries in emphasizing the importance of addressing COVID-19 pandemic and applying design standards that will help urban areas to be sustainable and protected from risks brought about by crises such as COVID-19 pandemic.

29. Ms. Alexander’s responses to some of the comments include the following:

- Re PRC proposal to add more urban development projects in the RIF is something we can look at but will have to vet more carefully. Currently, the urban development projects in the RIF are mostly ADB-assisted but RIF can include regional projects funded by own Government budget or proposed for financing by other development partners or private sector.

- Regarding more studies to be foundations of more urban development projects, this is in line with GMS intention of being knowledge-based. She cited the recently completed NSEC-5 study between Myanmar and China which was exactly this type of study.
- For Myanmar's proposal to see implementation of their proposed urban development projects in the RIF, she recommended that Myanmar work with the GMS Secretariat and other ADB officers like Antonio to see how these projects may be programmed in the next pipeline of projects between ADB and Myanmar.
- Thailand and Viet Nam's points about the application of same design standards for urban and resilient cities along the corridors are very good and maybe the Co-Chair may also comment on this as some of the corridor towns development projects have some of these city standards/elements incorporated.

30. The Co-chair responses were the following:

- He welcomed PRC two proposals.
- Re Lao PDR question about Livable Cities Project, it is still on but has been renamed as Urban Environment Improvement Project because of narrower technical scope, that is, mainly on solid waste management and waste-water treatment.
- With respect to Myanmar comments, these projects are noted and internally in ADB we also need to coordinate on which of the country's projects can be in the RIF and which ones are in the national pipeline and a good coordination between RIF and COBPs.
- On the issue of design standards raised by Viet Nam, this is an important area of work that ADB can look at. This point will be shared with colleagues in ADB Viet Nam resident mission, mainly with Mr. Satoshi Iishi who is the lead in Viet Nam's urban development so that this may be considered in future investments. Furthermore, he pointed out that careful thinking should be given to how best to approach such type of work, considering that Viet Nam's pipeline in ADB is slowly evolving towards more non-sovereign projects. This needs to be considered when looking at design standards.
- For Thailand, similar case as Viet Nam, we need to coordinate with our Private Sector Department on this point.

VI. Closing Session

31. The Co-chair raised the following next steps:

- Lao PDR is the next country to host the working group meeting. The Secretariat will coordinate with Lao PDR relevant ministries on the hosting arrangements including format and agenda that will allow more time for countries to prepare inputs and have more detailed or deeper discussions.
- Continue discussions on Smart City topic and probably consider couple of virtual meetings to build up the discussions and achieve better level of details.
- The Secretariat will circulate all the meeting materials including the summary of proceedings.

32. The Chair in his closing remarks thanked ADB and GMS country delegates for the work and contribution in GMS urban development and for the active participation in this meeting. Although the meeting was conducted virtually, good results were achieved. He believed that the exchanges will help to have closer cooperation and provide impetus for economic recovery from this pandemic. He wished everyone the best for their health and work. The Co-chaired thanked

PRC for hosting the meeting and for the kind wishes for everyone. He took note of being efficient as much as possible in future meetings and in knowledge exchanges on urban development issues. Overall, agreed with the Chair for having a fruitful meeting and thanked the Chair, presenters and all participants.