



Completion Report

Project Number: 44300-012
Technical Assistance Number: 8516
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Strengthening the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office

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| TA Number, Country, and Name: | | | Amount Approved: \$225,000.00 | |
| TA 8516-REG: Strengthening the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office | | | Revised Amount: Not Applicable | |
| Executing Agency: Asian Development Bank | | Source of Funding: TASF-Others | Amount Undisbursed: \$39,976.60 | Amount Utilized: \$185,023.40 |
| TA Approval Date: 22 Oct 2013 | TA Signing Date: 22 Oct 2013 | Fielding of First Consultants: 17 Mar 2014 | TA Completion Date Original: 30 Jun 2015 Actual: 30 Jun 2016 | |
| | | | Account Closing Date Original: 30 Jun 2015 Actual: 1 Sep 2016 | |
| Description | | | | |
| <p>Although global economic uncertainty lingered, in 2012 the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) received 44.8 million international tourists, an increase of 16.4% compared to 2011.¹ Improved land and air connectivity, streamlined visa requirements, and Asia's surging demand for leisure travel drove growth, but tourism activity and benefits were highly concentrated in primary destinations. Recognizing the need to address inequities, GMS ministers had earlier endorsed the GMS Tourism Sector Strategy 2005–2015. Its objectives were to promote the GMS as a single destination, offering diverse, high-yielding, multicountry tourism products that could increase and spread the benefits of tourism widely. These objectives aligned with the GMS Strategic Framework 2012–2022, which emphasized joint tourism promotion and knowledge management to support regional integration.</p> <p>GMS tourism sector strategy implementation was directed by the GMS Tourism Working Group (TWG), comprising senior officials and technical staff from each GMS national tourism organization. In 2006, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific assisted the TWG establish its secretariat—Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO)—to coordinate and monitor GMS tourism sector strategy implementation and lead the “Explore Mekong” destination marketing program. Other MTCO functions were to organize TWG meetings and the annual Mekong Tourism Forum, fundraise, and disseminate tourism knowledge products.²</p> <p>TWG members provided MTCO with \$90,000 annual core funding and modest office space in Thailand. However, MTCO operations were constrained by weak planning, insufficient staffing and financial resources, and informal status. Lacking a cohesive strategy, the destination marketing program was faltering because of low private participation and ineffective stakeholder coordination. To formulate long-term solutions to these challenges, the GMS TWG requested ADB technical assistance (TA) to prepare an operations plan for MTCO, establish a GMS tourism knowledge management platform, and update the GMS destination marketing strategy.</p> | | | | |
| Expected Impact, Outcome, and Outputs | | | | |
| <p>The expected impact of the TA was MTCO effectively performs its key functions as GMS TWG secretariat. The outcome was an enhanced institutional framework for GMS tourism cooperation. Outputs aimed to: (i) prepare a comprehensive MTCO operations plan, (ii) establish a functional web-based GMS tourism knowledge management platform, and (iii) prepare an updated GMS destination marketing strategy and action plan for TWG endorsement.</p> | | | | |
| Delivery of Inputs and Conduct of Activities | | | | |
| <p>TA preparation engaged TWG members, development partners, and ADB staff with expertise in tourism, knowledge management, and regional cooperation and integration. Appropriate policy guidance was provided by the TA steering committee, involving senior officials from each GMS national tourism organization, MTCO staff, and ADB. TA design was relevant to GMS development priorities and ADB support for the GMS Economic Cooperation Program. Its intended outcome was aligned with the GMS tourism sector strategy, GMS strategic framework, and ADB's sector strategy.³ Consultant's terms of reference were sufficiently comprehensive to enable timely delivery of the intended outputs. As envisaged, two international individual consultants were recruited to assist the TWG prepare a comprehensive MTCO operations plan and update the GMS destination marketing strategy. Working closely with the international institutional development and knowledge management specialist, the national development coordination specialist effectively built MTCO capacity to coordinate regional tourism sector assistance, better monitor GMS tourism sector strategy implementation, and disseminate regional tourism knowledge products. Apart from the generally satisfactory performance rating of the first international tourism marketing specialist, all</p> | | | | |

¹ The Greater Mekong Subregion comprises Cambodia, Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the People's Republic of China, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

² MTCO was declared TWG secretariat under the *Siem Reap Declaration on Mekong Tourism* (2005).

³ ADB. 2011. *Greater Mekong Subregion: Tourism Sector Assessment, Strategy and Roadmap 2011–2013*. Manila.

other consultants were rated satisfactory. Consistent with its design, the TA utilized 7 person-months of international consultant inputs. National consultant inputs totaled 13.2 person-months, slightly less than 15 person-months envisaged. Overall, consultant inputs are assessed as satisfactory.

ADB and counterpart inputs were satisfactory and properly sequenced, enabling effective delivery of all intended TA outputs and the outcome. Successive drafts of the MTCO operations plan and associated draft-final agreement to establish the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office as an international organization (the MTCO Charter) were reviewed at semi-annual TWG meetings and refined with consultant and MTCO inputs. ADB and senior GMS tourism officials co-chaired all TA workshops and TWG meetings. The original TA completion date was extended from 30 June 2015 to 30 June 2016. This provided time for the TWG to organize a regional workshop to jointly review the draft-final MTCO operations plan and draft-final MTCO Charter. The additional workshop was financed with TA savings from the consultants cost category.

The draft-final MTCO operations plan and draft-final MTCO Charter set out mechanisms to elevate MTCO's status to an international organization and sustainably finance its expanded role. TA resources were efficiently utilized to develop the GMS tourism knowledge platform www.mekongtourism.org and Experience Mekong GMS Tourism Marketing Strategy and Action Plan 2015–2020.⁴ Both benefitted from the MTCO executive director's website design experience and digital marketing expertise. The updated strategy was launched at the 20th GMS ministerial meeting (2015) and featured in successive Mekong Tourism Forums. This raised the profile of TA outputs and generated significant positive media coverage. Overall, the performance of ADB, the GMS TWG, and MTCO are assessed as satisfactory.

Evaluation of Outputs and Achievement of Outcome

All TA outputs are satisfactory and met or exceeded the performance targets in the design and monitoring framework. GMS ministers endorsed the Experience Mekong GMS Tourism Marketing Strategy and Action Plan 2015–2020. More than 500 hard copies of the report were disseminated to industry stakeholders and it has been downloaded at least 300 times from MTCO's online library (www.mekongtourism.org/e-library). At TA completion, the industry-relevant strategy was being effectively implemented by the TWG and its partners in alignment with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Tourism Strategic Plan 2016–2025.

Mekongtourism.org averages 11,000 unique users monthly, with 1,558 Facebook followers, 12,000 monthly Twitter impressions; and 400 searchable, freely downloadable publications in the e-library. The website was awarded a Hospitality Sales and Marketing International Adrian Award (2015) and Pacific Asia Travel Association Gold Award (2016) for its innovative design and use of cutting-edge technology to share travel and tourism-related knowledge.

The MTCO operations plan and MTCO Charter were prepared to final-draft status. At TA completion, the documents were endorsed in principal by all GMS countries and the draft-final MTCO Charter was undergoing national parliamentary and/or cabinet-level approval processes. The TA outcome is likely sustainable, given the GMS countries anticipate formal acceptance of the MTCO Charter at the 6th GMS Summit in 2018, to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the GMS Economic Cooperation Program. Meanwhile, GMS countries continue to fund core TWG and MTCO operations, supplemented with extra-budgetary contributions by the private sector and development partners. The expected outcome of an enhanced institutional framework for GMS tourism cooperation has been achieved.

Overall Assessment and Rating

The TA is rated *successful* based on an assessment of its relevance, effectiveness, process efficiency, and sustainability. It strengthened the GMS tourism cooperation framework, improved GMS tourism knowledge management, and produced an industry-relevant subregional tourism destination marketing strategy.

Major Lessons

The GMS countries' initiative to transform MTCO into an international organization went beyond the original TA scope. The TA provided a suitable platform for ADB to provide impartial advice and for GMS countries to flexibly support essential research, legal review, and high-level consideration of the MTCO Charter.

Recommendations and Follow-Up Actions

ADB's GMS Secretariat should monitor progress towards approval of the MTCO Charter and share lessons with other GMS working groups. ADB should consider providing additional support to expand MTCO's successful knowledge platform and destination marketing initiatives through GMS tourism sector lending and TA operations.

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⁴ The brand identity progressed from "Explore Mekong" to "Experience Mekong" to reflect changing market demand.