

South-South Economic Cooperation: Exploring Mekong-Ganga Relationship, Project Launch Meeting, October 8, 2004, New Delhi

The Launch Meeting of the project “South-South Economic Cooperation” Exploring Mekong-Ganga Relationship, was held on October 8, 2004 at the Ambassador Hotel, New Delhi, India. The project aims at cross-fertilization of experiences and lessons learnt on economic (trade and investment) cooperation between India and select Mekong countries, namely Cambodia, Lao and Vietnam. Senior representatives from the Indian government and Mekong countries attended the meeting, which also involved the participation of representatives from NGOs, international organizations and academia from India, Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao.

In the welcome note delivered by Pradeep Mehta, Secretary General, CUTS international, he provided a brief introduction to CUTS work on trade issues and said that the Mekong Ganga project intends to fill the gap in the current state of understanding and advocacy on South-South cooperation.

Nagesh Kumar introduced the project, by providing an overview of India ASEAN initiatives and RIS’s involvement in the same. He explained that this project looks into India’s partnership with three important Mekong countries and identify future potential for the same. He said that the project intends to tackle barriers in promoting trade and investment and provide policy recommendations for the same.

C M Bhandari, Additional Secretary, MER, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India gave the keynote address, where he congratulated CUTS for this initiative. He provided a glimpse of his immense understanding of the Mekong countries, while he was the Indian Ambassador in Cambodia, and provided an insight into the Indian initiatives to promote Mekong-Ganga relationship, in four areas of tourism, culture, education and transport, i.e. a more cohesive form of cultural cooperation. The Indian government is starting entrepreneurship-training centres in these three countries, enhancing transport connectivity between India and Mekong countries, as well as supporting the funding of development programs to enhance the integration of Mekong countries in the ASEAN. He emphasized the need for promoting middle level technology transfer amongst South-South cooperation. Mr. Bhandari also offered to provide assistance and support of the Ministry to CUTS for the successful conduct of the project.

The three subsequent sessions on multilateralism, current scenario of Mekong Ganga trade and investment and business perspectives involved representatives from Mekong countries giving their views on the subject, subsequent to the thematic address by the session speaker.

A.N. Ram, Former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, who was the architect of the Look East Policy of the Government of India, chaired the first session, South-South Economic Cooperation and Multilateralism. Veena Jha, Coordinator UNCTAD-India, speaker for the first session spoke about the growing importance of South-South

cooperation, and UNCTAD's activities in capacity building towards promoting South-South cooperation.

George B Assaf, Regional Director of UNIDO chaired the second session on the current scenario of Mekong-Ganga cooperation in trade and Investment, where a critical and thought provoking speech was delivered by K.J. Joseph. Senior Fellow, RIS on the low level of economic relationship between India and Mekong countries, and the need for India to offer more on the table.

S.S. Kapoor, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Commerce, Government of India chaired the third session on business perspectives on Mekong-Ganga cooperation, and commended CUTS on their initiative towards promoting Mekong-Ganga cooperation.