



Development Dynamics in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region

– Trans-Boundary Routes of Human Insecurity –

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Abstract— *The Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) has already witnessed two decades of broad regionalising efforts that have augmented local economic development whilst bringing about important social changes. Given the peculiarities of the sub-region and the advantages of a highly globalised 21st century, development opportunities in the GMS have produced synergistic effects characterised by a high level of interdependence. More frequent intraregional exchanges have inevitably stretched the sub-region's internal borders to a critical point, and border communities have been directly and heavily affected by this new reality. This paper provides some information about the circumstances around cross-border interactions and their new dynamics. Particular attention is given to new paradigms of human (in)security in the region, with trafficking and smuggling activities spreading and developing in unprecedented ways. Two case-studies are introduced: the situation of Burmese migrants along the Thai-Myanmar border at Mae Sot, and human trafficking and smuggling in the Mekong Delta region. The ultimate scope of the paper is that of demonstrating the existing connections between trans-boundary issues, particularly those belonging to the ever-expanding sphere of illegality.*

Keywords— Greater Mekong Sub-region, border development, cross-border interactions, migratory flows, trafficking.

1. INTRODUCTION

Backgrounds

The regionalising process in the Greater Mekong Sub-region has been implemented for almost two decades already, as an attempt to promote regional integration aiming to accelerate sub-regional economic development first. As a result, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in cross-border interactions, particularly after the Asian financial crisis in 1997. One thing that should be never forgot when dealing with issues in the Greater Mekong Sub-region is the fact that the area covered is neither geographically nor geopolitically defined. Past historical events tell us that the six members of the GMS can be very close as well as quite distant from one another at the same time. Common past experiences and close political ties are not enough to bring consensus when broader development concerns are at stake. Improved access to education and quicker contacts with the outside world have spurred a high rise in national consciousness in the region, which has translated into different social, political and economic phenomena. In particular, the rapid globalisation of all spheres of society in the sub-region has prompted governments to raise their protection shields, despite being aware of the impossibility to survive without being efficiently interconnected. This dual approach of opening the doors to the neighbours whilst growing suspicious about possible conflicts of interest might well be said to be the currently preferred diplomatic strategy adopted by all of

the GMS governments, although with varying degrees. A significant lack of communication and understanding between the central authorities and the local realities has caused unprecedented occurrences of intra-regional issues. What makes the Greater Mekong Sub-region a hot spot is the attention that the international community has started to pay with regard to its development potentialities. This attention has quickly translated into investment projects, and the well-weighed willingness to pull the area out of poverty has meant a lot of co-operation agreements are being signed at all levels. Without a univocal regulatory framework, a number of overlapping projects have easily led to confusion, and confusion is a close ally of an uncontrolled proliferation of issues. Nevertheless, although co-ordination among the GMS members remains a sensitive point of disagreement, billions of dollars regularly funnelled into the region have undoubtedly bore fruit. The two-fold approach generally adopted by the international community aims to address both the physical and non-physical barriers that hinder a full exploitation of the potentialities of the sub-region. Too often in the past, economic outcomes were given priority in governments' agendas. Similarly, too often NGOs activities were aimed principally to improve the local well-being of people. The analysis of the interdependence between economic and social issues in the sub-region provided within this paper sheds some light on the two apparently separated aspects of development. Things in general are moved by people and economic issues are at times followed, at times preceded by social issues. The rapid globalisation of the 21st century has changed the rules on the tables of developers. Economic growth does no longer provide a sufficient basis for overall sustainable development, although social stability has more and more proved to be a necessary prerequisite for meaningful co-operation.

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This is particularly true for the Greater Mekong Sub-region, and even more for its border communities. Marginalised people have restricted and often delayed access to the advantages of development, and this alone is a serious concern for any government. In the case of the GMS, things are complicated by the oftentimes inaccessibility of border locations and by the fact that those areas are mostly dwelled by ethnic minority groups. The reality is that people move faster than goods. And they adapt extremely quickly to ever changing situations. Despite the frequent claims by regional and international institutions regarding the promising prospects of the GMS, which mainly focus on economic growth, it is important to balance these assessments by seriously looking at the negative social impacts on cross-border areas that are too often ignored by the governments and the international community as well. Human insecurity for these people is the inevitable by-product of rapid economic growth, and without properly addressing this dark side of sub-regional integration, facilitated by a too optimistic GMS doctrine, the very success of overall sustainable regional development will almost certainly be undermined.

This paper examines the new development dynamics of the sub-region that have prompted people to choose mobility, too many times not for the better, but for survival. Economic growth and regionalisation in the GMS have meant wider movements, better perspectives, and bigger risks. The expansion of markets inevitably includes the internationalisation of labour markets as well, fostering unprecedented intra-regional mobility. Moreover, geographic closeness and ethnic affinities cannot but encourage the trans-boundary movement of young labour force, and in the last two decades, new trans-national migration routes have been delineating.

Identification of the Issue

Migration is obviously not a new phenomenon in the whole of Southeast Asia. Indeed, if it is to be considered as the general movement of people from one place to another, then the GMS is arguably one of the most active places in the world [1]-[2]. The largest flows of people have, until now, converged towards the more developed country of the bloc, Thailand. That trend continues to persist and is likely to grow stronger until economic and social conditions in the neighbouring countries improve enough to level up the currently existing development gap. Therefore, already established routes are taken into consideration in order to support the current migratory behaviours.

However, the incidences observed within this study have hinted to another kind of phenomenon that was already there in the past, but that has increased with the development of border areas: border migration. Border migration as analysed in this paper is to be considered as the movement of people of different origin towards a frontier, with the prime intention of settling on either side of the common border. In this perspective, the boundaries of the phenomenon itself stretch towards new definitions and keep pace with the times of globalisation. The overall picture of migration occurring within the GMS could be then updated as shown in Figure 1.

[Figure 1] It is important to stress the fact that migration routes too often coincide, for reasons that will be explained later in the paper, with the routes beaten by traffickers of human beings.

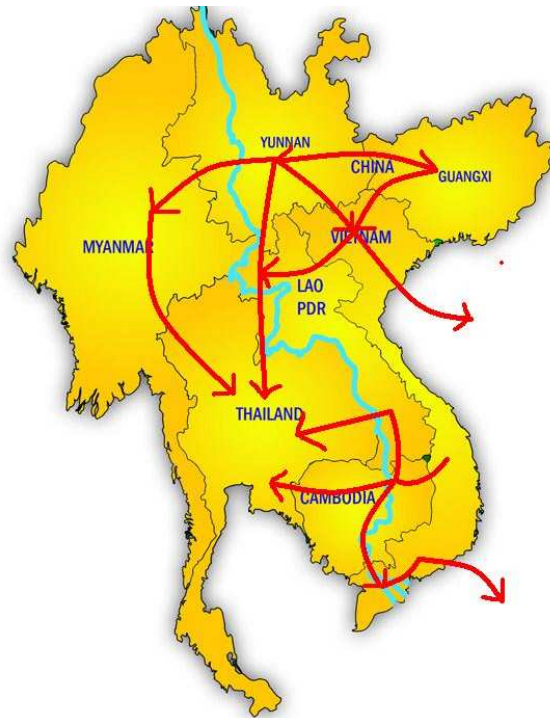


Fig. 1. Migration / human trafficking routes.

Positive economic outcomes and rapid urban development in the areas adjacent to border crossings have attracted people from neighbouring, as well as distant locations. Domestic and foreign investment has been funnelled into such areas, multiplying and diversifying the chances to successfully set up new businesses or take part in already running activities. Moreover, border trade has been officially and unilaterally encouraged in many ways, not last that of cutting taxes and granting financial aid. All of the above-mentioned reasons, alongside the establishment of special border economic zones and cluster industries, have reduced the risks and constraints of running small businesses alone. Border areas are also benefiting from an illegal but still indispensable informal trade, which is largely responsible for overall economic development and it counterbalances the risks of stalemates where official trade relations might remain locked in, as already happened on past occasions. All of these, plus many other more personal motivations, have fostered expectations in the hearts of many and have set them on the move. A clear evidence of this new trend is given by doubling population numbers near the crossings. Moreover, this new phenomenon does not only spur economic growth along the borders, but it also balances the gap between urban and rural centres, so deep in all of the GMS countries.

2. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Aim of this study

As the direct continuation of a project witnessing the development-related changes occurring throughout the Greater Mekong Sub-region, the overarching aim of the study to which this paper belongs is identifying, analysing, and comparing trans-boundary issues and their incidences as they appear at the border areas along main established intra-regional routes. The regionalising process in the GMS has been implemented for almost two decades already, as an attempt to promote regional integration aiming to accelerate sub-regional economic development first. As a result, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in cross-border interactions, particularly after the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Within this background, the analytical questions that this study addresses are: what is happening in these cross-border communities? And what kind of new dynamics have emerged there?

The ultimate scope of this study is thus that of clarifying the current state of things and of contextualising them within a sub-regional perspective. Eventually, an insight into future projections will be provided, in the sheer hope that it might be inspirational to those who have the power to change the course of things on the ground.

Methodology

Official data published by the GMS countries have obviously been collected and processed. They are statistics made public by the central and local authorities and are often the only available source to start with. Since the GMS comprises six countries, each at a different level of development and with significant national peculiarities, the question of uniformity is essential in processing the retrieved data: not all of the statistics offices publish regularly on an annual basis; not all of them have an up-to-date database; not all of them are able to provide sub-national information; depending on the country, statistical figures may only be accessible on site and, for those who host them online, accessibility in English is rare or, even when in the national language, often restricted. Furthermore, sensitive data are hardly accessible to foreigners, thus the collaboration of one or more local institutions becomes fundamental.

Most important, this study is almost completely the fruit of extensive field-work activities conducted all over the sub-region. Trips have been taken individually and in group, both officially and privately, particularly in the northern part of the sub-region, where issues have been occurring with a higher incidence. Through a prolonged and direct contact with the situation and with local people, the author was able to collect a considerable amount of raw data and first-hand impressions on things as they literally happened. Not many foreigners have been able to approach and observe the sensitive border areas of mainland Southeast Asia, a fact also supported by the reactions of the local people and, perhaps more meaningfully, of the local authorities. The surveyed places are the border check-points and their adjacent areas along the so-called GMS economic corridors, three

main arteries criss-crossing the sub-region in all directions. The reason for that choice well summarises the GMS dilemma: given the sub-region's peculiarities, multilateral development and the abatement of physical and non-physical barriers along the GMS's internal frontiers have proved to be a double-edged sword, fostering widespread welfare and progress, but also spurring the proliferation of uncontrolled trans-boundary issues. In both cases, the repercussions are felt all over the sub-region and have a domino effect on the appearance of new trends, as briefly explained within this study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Unfortunately, not all that glitters is gold, particularly in rapidly changing environments such as the GMS. Economic migration, human trafficking, and drugs smuggling are all equally responsible for large movements of people across the borders, and, most important, they are so closely connected to one another that it is oftentimes impossible to distinguish one phenomenon from the other. Rather, this study has found out that on many occasions all of the above are more like phases of a single event, which might start as economic migration, go through human trafficking and drugs smuggling, and in some cases might even end up as a refugee problem. The very same routes used by labour migrants are, alas, preferred by traffickers as well, for some very good reasons. Many are the cases in which traffickers strike deals with would-be migrants in order to provide them with support and protection during their journey, in exchange for some help with their business. So people are often used as porters for drugs, just to mention one. No matter how many times history repeats itself, the dream of a better life in a wealthier place lures poor men, women, and children into undertaking those journeys, unconsciously understanding that things might not always go as smoothly as predicted. So from a simple agreement for mutual help, it becomes a deal struck with blood, and many a time the migrants fall into the possession of criminal syndicates and get involved in prostitution, drug consumption, forced labour, and any other kind of illegal activity. Only a small share of them will eventually reach their dreams, and, after a passage through hell, will hopefully find some tranquillity at their final destination (which, anyway, not always coincides with the place they had set off for).

This paper introduces some of the above-mentioned phenomena through the analysis of two case-studies. The aim of both is to demonstrate the deep interdependence of some of the most sensitive trans-boundary issues occurring in the sub-region.

The plight of the Burmese migrants

A taste of what has been said hereabove can be easily experienced at many points along the Thai-Burmese border, but particularly around the town of Mae Sot, located in Thailand's Tak Province. It does not take an expert to realise that the Thai town of Mae Sot looks, or better sounds, all but a Thai town. The Burmese share of the population is overwhelming. There are Burmese

schools, Burmese health clinics and shops whose clientele is a hundred per cent Burmese. The local authorities acknowledge this fact, but are faced with a delicate diplomatic problem. In order to understand it, this study has briefly but clearly re-traced the roots of and rationale behind the movement of people from Myanmar into Thailand. Myanmar has recently seen a resurgence in clashes between the Burmese Army and armed groups representing minorities, particularly in the wake of the general elections that were held in November 2010. Although brawls and fights have broken out repeatedly during the last half century in the outskirts of the country, some major offensives have been registered in Kayin State since 2007. Even though such events seldom make it to the international news and the Burmese national coverage may well be biased, the presence of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) along the borders makes believe that none of the two parties has eventually prevailed yet, and the situation remains almost unchanged. Nevertheless, field-observations and witnesses' reports have uncovered a bitterer truth bobbing up to the surface. If it is in fact true that KNLA-occupied positions have stood the army's attacks during the years, the same cannot be said for the majority of isolated villages within the state. The army has allegedly forced thousands of people out of their villages, who have chosen to flee rather than endure all sorts of brutalities. This policy to pressurise ethnic minorities in Myanmar is sometimes seen as a way to deny them their traditional homelands, although NGOs and Burmese leaving in Thailand believe that it might have actually had the opposite effect.

Whichever theory might suit the reader, this study aims only to show the facts occurring at those places. And it is an undeniable fact that there exist a large number of border camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) in Myanmar and refugee camps in Thailand all along the two countries' common border. Allegations from people living at those sites claim about denials of basic rights such as education and medical care, and often religious beliefs are a sufficient reason for them to be attacked, too. The intimidation strategy used by the army might explain the relatively low number of open fights with the KNLA. Moreover, it gives the international community the benefit of the doubt, which is apparently enough to avoid direct confrontation. Nevertheless, hearings at Mae Sot, where people feel safe enough to speak out against their situation, refugees seem to share similar grievous experiences. Oftentimes the army does not even touch the population, which, for fear of what it might be, chooses beforehand to flee into the jungle with nothing more than they can carry. Then the army arrives, villages are reportedly looted, livestock confiscated, and what is not taken is destroyed to the extent that nothing a lot more than charred wood is left of the village it used to be. Some refugees have talked about landmines being placed throughout the area, as well as on-sight shootings of those few who decided not to leave. But, again, that remains hard to prove. What is a recurrent fact in the refugees' stories is that after leaving the villages, the only choice those people have is to flee deeper into the forest, towards the land controlled by the

ethnic armed factions, such as the KNLA, along the border with Thailand. Unfortunately, they seem not to have the possibility to go back when the army is gone, because reportedly their farmlands are quickly converted to, for instance, rubber and castor oil plantations, and what is left of their rice paddies and fruit orchards serve to support further militarization of the area. This is how these people end up in camps for IDPs that are usually close to and under the control of KNLA-like groups. Nevertheless, such precarious solution could not be but temporary and most of the people, usually those in working age, decide to go further and cross into Thailand.

This is a decisive step for their future in Thailand, as the way they officially enter the country will give them certain rights and deny them of others. The majority of those who cross are generally in a hurry and are not fully aware of the possibilities that are being offered to them by this even desperate situation. This means that they just go on to the other side and ask for asylum, becoming refugees. Also called Externally Displaced Persons (EDPs), they enjoy limited rights and have to live in camps located mainly in Mae Hong Son Province (just north of Tak Province), and in Tak Province, mostly around Mae Sot. Mae Sot has reportedly the highest concentration of EDPs and this is easily explained by the fact that the town is located across the border where the heaviest fighting has taken place. This situation is peculiar to the Mae Sot – Myawaddy area, whereas further southwards, places controlled by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) seem to enjoy relative calmness thanks to agreed ceasefires. Moreover, southern areas are topographically characterised by mountains covered by dense jungles, thus refugees, although present, are fewer in number and remain more isolated.

Even though sporadic but significant fights have recently interested the surroundings around Mae Sot – Myawaddy, this, plus the fact that the location is along the EWEC, has undoubtedly attracted the attention of the international community, whose presence in Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces has sharply risen in the past years. Many NGOs are actively involved in a vast range of support activities towards the refugees in particular, which helps the Thai Government share the burden of monitoring the development of the situation. Nevertheless, this study has shown that not always things are so straightforward, and oftentimes refugees have to go through much harsher suffering. There are, in fact, all the conditions for any sort of criminal activity to prosper, and people often end up being exploited in their own country, during the journey, and afterwards once they have reached Thailand. Human trafficking has been going on for years, with thousands of Burmese caught and trafficked annually. But human trafficking in this troubled part of the GMS sub-region follows different routes. While elsewhere it is not uncommon to see how victims would be sold at the beginning of their journey, in this case people are fleeing, so they set off on their own accord. That is why, strictly speaking, they cannot be categorised as trafficked. Of those interviewed, some said to have asked for permission from their families,

while others clearly said that it was their families who encouraged them to seek a better life in Thailand. The decision made, they would then look for someone who could show them the way to the other side. These “guides” are reportedly persons native to the area, mostly women who know the geography, the culture and the language. But there appears to be a subtler reason behind the nature of such intermediaries. Many of these agents appear to be involved in other illegal activities, too, such as smuggling in drugs and other goods, and use the same trails and contracts to traffic in human beings. That way, the latter are asked to carry the goods, oftentimes hidden within their bodies, thus becoming unwilling porters. But that is a risk desperate people seem to be willing to take, particularly because they naively believe that they will be soon enjoying better conditions.

According to the information gathered within this study, here comes the point where many would-be-refugees become trafficked persons. The guide-turned-traffickers would now make a selection of those people who, according to their judgement, might stand labour conditions as workers in constructions sites, industries, or plantations, from people, mainly women of young age, who could make for a good deal as prostitutes. The trick is that many of these people have still a legal status when they cross the border, and they often do that through formal channels with official documentation. Once on the other side and after the selection has been made, personal belongings, documents included, are taken away by the traffickers and then handed to the buyers, who still will not give them back to their rightful owners. By doing so, the victims have nothing to prove their identity and would anyway not turn to the local authorities for fear to be repatriated as illegal migrants [3]. In fact, they know that if sent back to Myanmar, they would almost certainly be directly delivered to Burmese officials and would eventually face long jail terms and other kinds of punishment. So at this point the group splits. Men usually accept the new reality more willingly as they only have to bear the brunt of fierce working conditions and the hardship of dodging authorities, which, compared to starvation and persecution at home, is definitely a better-off perspective. The plight of women is much worse. According to some witnesses, the dream of the Promised Land starts to vanish even at border check-points, where corrupted officials abuse them threatening incarceration if they oppose. Allegations of misconduct by officials and policemen are quite common and do not end at the check-points. The women are promptly sold to labour brokers, but they are not meant to stay at one place for too long, following a pattern thought to avoid that the victims become too acquainted with the place and their fellow workers. So they are reportedly moved from one place to another, and from one owner to another.

In an attempt to curb this kind of intra-province movements, and to avoid that the labourers could reach even further places, Thai authorities have established many non-border check-points on the roads from and to the border. This countermeasure is deemed to be quite effective and is being adamantly adopted along the economic corridors. Unfortunately, more controls do not

necessarily mean tighter controls, and in many cases they become a further opportunity for corrupt officers to extort more money. Paradoxically, this sordid process meets with the tacit approval of its victims, who are faced with no other choice than to be sent back to Myanmar. This victimisation has been arguably going on for years, since the people interviewed were mostly in their 30s and had now been accepted into refugee camps after been discharged of by their owners because no more fit to be part of the entertainment industry. This is how, at the end of their journey, they are finally granted the status of refugee and can relatively settle down. Many have their own little shops in town, mostly restaurants and bars. What is remarkable in the area is the presence of many facilities for the support of Burmese refugees that are run by Burmese people. Many are health clinics that offer aid to HIV positive patients, who are likely to have become such along their journeys. Many are also the schools that deliver traditional Burmese education to children. Financial contribution comes from international non-governmental organisations as well, although such centres are oftentimes set up with funds contributed by Karen who migrated to Mae Sot in the past and continue to live there in the present. Given these circumstances, the fact that most of the refugees, unlike regular economic migrants, are not willing to travel further inland towards the capital, and acknowledging what most of them have been through, Thai authorities seem to overlook the actual illegality of many. This is the diplomatic dilemma which Thai authorities have tried to deal with in recent years, and although forced repatriation programmes do sometimes occur, the situation is not likely to change if things on the other side of the border are not solved first.

Human trafficking and smuggling in the Mekong Delta

Human trafficking and labour migration as commonly intended are still an issue in the whole sub-region. With regard to another GMS hot spot, the Mekong Delta, they nevertheless present some characteristics peculiar only to this border. First of all, the fact that there has been a conflict until not long ago is not to underestimate. There is still a general perception by Vietnamese people to be somehow superior to their closest neighbours. This is arguably given by a number of reasons, among which the outcome of the war, the increasing economic gap, and political affinity. The pressure that the Vietnamese Government is still able to exert on its eastern neighbours is in fact widely perceived. The treatment reserved to Cambodian people on Vietnamese soil is reportedly not always fair. Nevertheless, a flow of migrants can still be noticed along the border running from Moc Bai towards Ha Tien, near the Gulf of Thailand. This study has shown that the establishment of large economic zones in Tay Ninh Province and the increased number of people crossing at that border has caused the occurrence of illegal crossings to move southwards. In particular, the Mekong River check-point at Vinh Xuong – Kaam Samnor appears to be experiencing a rise in the incidence of such movements. The gates are located 30 km north of the nearest Vietnamese town of Chau Doc, and are reachable by

boat in around 40 minutes. The choice of the location does rarely depend on the easiness of the crossing itself. In this case, too, controls are not difficult to circumvent, but speculations could be made as follows: the Cambodian side of the crossing is sparsely populated and there are no big centres in its proximity, thus allowing a freer movement of people down to the border; crossings can be easily made by land or by river, and in both cases it is almost impossible to spot them, particularly at night; Chau Doc is fairly well connected to the prosperous delta, both by roads and by river services; canals and tributaries connect the Mekong directly to Ho Chi Minh City; from there people could easily move elsewhere. What this study could not get a clearer picture about is the share of labour migrants as opposed to the share of trafficked persons. As cross-border smuggling activities here appear to be still frequent, it is reasonable to think that migrants could be forced to be unwilling porters, as already seen elsewhere. In particular, this study could prove, or at least confirm the rumours, of two main items being smuggled through human trafficking in this area: cigarettes and drugs. Tobacco trade from Cambodia into Viet Nam seems to be an issue of major concern for the Vietnamese authorities, who listed tobacco as a prohibited import item. Although authorities have long been trying to tighten their grip on the problem by publicising trials and countermeasures, smugglers seem to find cigarettes just too profitable to give up.

More interesting are the findings about the movement of drugs. To track down its routes, mapping the incidence of HIV infection has proven to be quite an effective way. In the case of south Viet Nam, An Giang Province, where Chau Doc is located, and greater Ho Chi Minh City jump to the eye for their high share of population living with HIV/AIDS, as shown in Figure 2. [Figure 2]

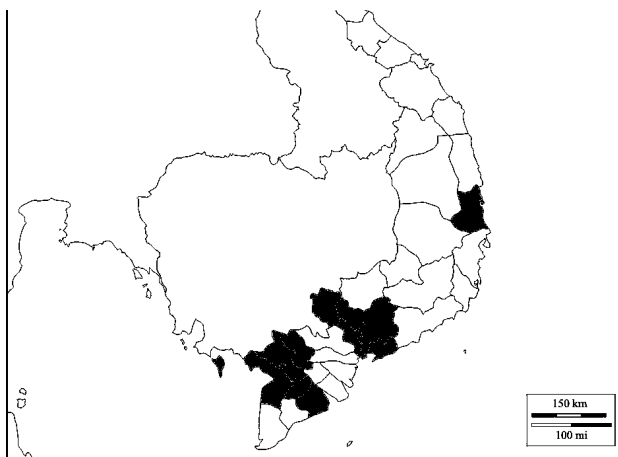


Fig.2. High HIV infection rate provinces in Southern Viet Nam.

By looking at the map, it can be easily seen that the Mekong area, from Chau Doc down to the sea, is a place of concern. Although the map does not explain the origin of the infections, it is reasonable to affirm that a large quantity of drugs may be passing through the region. The provinces along the Mekong are highly populated and

the spread of the disease is considerably quicker than in other places. Hence it is also relatively easier to monitor and draw hypotheses on the amount of drugs that is being trafficked. Tracing the path back into Cambodia with the same approach, it is easily understood that the epidemic may come straight from neighbouring Thailand, as shown in Figure 3.

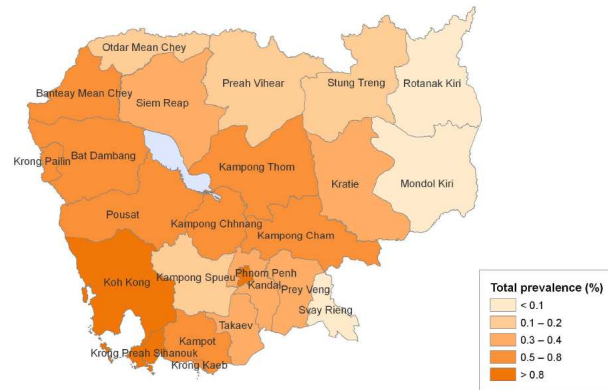


Fig. 3. HIV infection rate by province in Cambodia.

Although this method appears to be rather reliable at the moment, once the movement of people becomes freer and larger, it will be difficult to effectively link the HIV epidemic to the drugs trafficking phenomenon. The hope is that, by then, controls over the population and along the borders will be more efficient.

4. CONCLUSION

Positive trends and negative trends are common developments of any society in the world. They are just more striking in developing regions because, there, changes happen at a much higher pace and circumstances are more problematic. This study has shown that, although there might be different reasons behind the single issues, most of the times they are closely connected and influence one another. The results of the extensive field-works discussed in the two case-studies have been fundamental in the identification of common behaviours, observed in all of the instances thus far dealt with. A series of external factors, among which globalisation and the intervention of the international community, alongside rapid local development, have meant issues occurring within the sub-region have become so interdependent that can hardly be individually identified and analysed. Moreover, the ever-changing circumstances, the current amount of available information and its relatively reliable sources do not allow for definitive solutions to the problems, but only aim to provide an as-much-as-possible accurate image of what is actually happening. Finally, the author would like to restate the intrinsic importance of internal borders and the complex range of activities occurring around them, supporting the thesis that many issues make their first appearance where frictions inevitably are induced or restricted. As a window protects our home and at the same time shows us new horizons, so do a country's frontiers.

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