

Global Inequality and Poverty Crisis: ASEAN Ineffective Role in the Mekong River Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

Mekong River, known as the beating heart of mainland Southeast Asia, has been facing degradation of its natural flow of water due to anthropogenic activities across the river initiated by the Chinese government through the construction of hydropower dams. As a consequence, the river which provides a key source of water supplies and resources for the millions of people who live across its watershed has suffered significantly resulting in inequality and poverty in the community. The purpose of this study is to examine the root causes of inequality and poverty in the Lower Mekong region, as well as to identify ASEAN's role in responding to the situation. The findings revealed that due to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects through the construction of dams along the river as well as ASEAN's inability to resolve and address the crisis owing to economic dependence and difficulty to reach a consensus among its members has been a contributing factor to the ineffectiveness of ASEAN in the conflict resolution. From the findings, it can be concluded that China's financial hegemony over the Mekong countries can have an impact on the region's future levels of poverty and inequality.

Keywords: Mekong; China; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); ASEAN; hydropower dams.

Sungai Mekong, yang dikenal sebagai detak jantung daratan Asia Tenggara, telah mengalami penurunan aliran alami air akibat aktivitas antropogenik yang berlaku di sepanjang sungai yang diprakarsai oleh negara China melalui pembangunan bendungan pembangkit listrik tenaga air. Akibatnya, sungai yang menjadi sumber utama pasokan air dan sumber daya bagi jutaan orang yang tinggal di daerah aliran sungainya telah menderita secara signifikan yang mengakibatkan ketidaksetaraan dan kemiskinan di dalam masyarakat. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengkaji akar penyebab ketimpangan dan kemiskinan di kawasan Lower Mekong, serta mengidentifikasi peran ASEAN dalam merespon krisis tersebut. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa karena proyek Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) melalui pembangunan bendungan di sepanjang sungai serta ketidakmampuan ASEAN untuk menyelesaikan dan mengatasi krisis karena ketergantungan ekonomi dan kesulitan untuk mencapai konsesus di antara para anggotanya telah menjadi kontribusi faktor ketidakefektifan ASEAN di dalam resolusi konflik. Dari temuan tersebut, dapat disimpulkan bahwa hegemoni finansial China atas negara-negara Mekong dapat berdampak pada tingkat kemiskinan dan ketidaksetaraan di masa depan.

Kata kunci: Mekong; China, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); ASEAN; bendungan tenaga air.



Introduction

Globalization can be defined through several concepts. First, globalization is an action by international actors at a distance that has significant consequences for others in the global world. Second, is time-space compression, where countries can easily connect through electronic communications. Third, accelerating independence, which was understood as the strengthening of economic and social interdependence, as events in one country have a direct impact on another. Fourth, a shrinking world, where gaps between countries are closed and create a borderless world. Lastly, other concepts such as global integration, reorganization of power relations between regions, recognition of world nations, and strengthening of networks between regions (Held and McGrew 2003). Globalization indeed creates an opportunity for countries to prosper in its economic, political and social aspects, however, globalization is also the major cause of world inequality and poverty among nations.

Asia is known as the largest continent in the world which is also known as home to the world's largest and most powerful rivers. Most of the rivers originally came from the Tibetan high plateau which is located within China's territory that serves as the headwaters for all the rivers. The Tibetan Plateau, known as "the roof of the world" is the main resource of Asia's greatest rivers, comprising the Brahmaputra, Indus, Yellow, Yangtze, Salwin, and Mekong Rivers (Bellezza 2017). Both the Yangtze and the Yellow rivers flow across China's land, however, the Mekong River flows across China and other Asia countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, or called the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB). The Mekong River is famously known as the heart and soul of Southeast Asia. Most Asia countries are heavily dependent on the Mekong River as it plays a crucial role in the country's economy with its key resources such as water, sediment, and fish. These resources are fundamental resources that support the livelihood of millions of people along the river.

Apart from food and water resources, the river also provides electricity production and thus leads to the construction of many hydropower plants by countries such as China. The construction of hydropower dams had led to negative effects on the environment, economy, and livelihood of the population in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) countries. The construction of dams is seen as an impediment to the Mekong basin's vital protein supply (Wyrwoll et al. 2017). As fisheries are the primary occupation of the Mekong population and are regarded as an important source of food and nutrition, fish is the main source of protein for the locals living along the Mekong River. In addition to fish resources, the agricultural sector,

such as rice production, is impacted by the droughts in the LMB region, which have caused large crop losses and severe economic losses for the afflicted nations (Kang et al. 2021). Poverty and inequality would therefore result from the mainstream hydropower projects, as the poor population is heavily reliant on aquaculture and agriculture as their primary economic development and livelihood, and the impoverished population would suffer from the fisheries losses and declining crop production.

Most of Asia, which is heavily dependent on resources from the Mekong River is suffering from the construction of hydropower dams as it leads to inequality and poverty among the downstream countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia. China, which has control of most of the Mekong River, has built various massive dams which then create livelihood contraction towards its downstream Mekong River neighbours. The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has seemed to have taken a poor proactive role in bringing Mekong issues into ASEAN's agenda and has been ineffective in resolving this global inequality and poverty crisis due to challenges in its principle and dependency on China's economic investment and funding. Hence, this paper will discuss on what are the causes of inequality and poverty issues along the Lower Mekong region and the action taken by ASEAN in resolving the issue.

Causes of Poverty and Inequality Along the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) Region

Poverty can be defined as a situation of deprivation that impacts the livelihood of individuals and communities in a country. Poverty has many components, including economic vulnerability to many types of disruptions, a lack of opportunity to participate in decision-making, and a lack of access to knowledge (Epprecht et al. 2008). According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), poverty can be described as a scarcity of income and essential resources that makes it hard or challenging for people to live a dignified life and provide for themselves. Inequality, on the other hand, refers to a lack of equality in terms of position, rights and opportunities (Afonso et al. 2015). Economic inequalities refer to the distribution of economic elements such as wealth among individuals in a group, groups in a vast population, or among countries. For decades, the Lower Mekong Basin have endured poverty and inequality as a result of the Mekong River development project initiated by the Chinese government.

The Mekong River, one of the world's leading tropical rivers, plays a fundamental role in providing water resources to most Asian countries that shape the ability of the region to prosper. The river that contains the

largest inland fishery and freshwater supply are also famous for its massive amount of potential energy. The river can generate electricity by constructing a hydroelectric power plant in the water system, supplying electricity to the riverbank and millions of households across the river. Hence, due to the huge demand for energy and electricity supply, China has been building hydropower plants along the Mekong River for over 30 years. The Mekong River is mostly under the control of China, which makes use of its geographic position to impose restrictions on water flow or release water whenever it pleases by constructing dams (Piriyalertsak 2021). As hydropower plants are a source of clean, low-carbon, safe, efficient, and renewable energy, China is working hard to improve its power supply structure. Therefore, their development is essential for China.

Figure 1: Map of Large-scale Dams Along the Mekong River



Source: Roney and Wongruang (2021)

As part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a major transnational infrastructure project launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, China plans to widen the river and build hundreds of dams in the Lower Mekong River (Human Rights Watch 2021). The BRI project is a multi-year investment and infrastructure project aimed at increasing China's foreign policy and global influence. China has begun to dominate and strengthen its dominance across the Mekong River through the weaponization of water. Funds were given for projects under the Lancang-Mekong

of water. Funds were given for projects under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), in which China has become an investor and has provided financial support for other projects on the Mekong River. For instance, China has been subsidizing neighbouring nations through the BRI project, such as the construction of Lower Sesan 2 Dam in Cambodia, China's large-scale funded hydroelectric dam with a length of 6,500 meters located in north-eastern Cambodia, which is one of Cambodia's strategies for the growth and development of the country (Koemsoeun 2018). The operations of these dams raise concerns from neighbouring countries, fearing that the dam's construction will affect their livelihoods. Many fear that China could use the dams to restrict the flowing of water downstream and effectively turn off the tap for countries that rely heavily on the river for their economic stability and livelihood. The construction of hydroelectric plants has had dramatic impacts on the Mekong River over the past years, causing unseasonable floods and droughts, low water levels in the dry season, and reduced amounts of sediment carried by rivers, which dramatically affects the agriculture, biodiversity, and fisheries resources. For instance, in Vietnam, the region faces the risk of a water crisis and shortages due to a lack of water resources and human activities upstream that caused saltwater to intrude the freshwater of the river, threatening the region's aquaculture and agriculture supplies (The Star 2021).

This matter causes catastrophe to the livelihood of the Mekong community as the rivers are their main food resources and source of income. In the dry season, water constraints hinder farmers from producing and storing crops, and the invasion of saline water badly impacts the agriculture sector, as certain crops, such as rice, have a limited tolerance to saltwater, hence severely affecting rice production (Al Jazeera 2020). Besides farmers, the fisherman is also being severely affected by this problem as the decreased water flow leads to reduced fish stocks, putting fishermen in a desperate situation where they have begun to reach other sectors to survive as labour opportunities have been dismissed. In addition, the drought, water scarcity, and saltwater intrusion also pose a severe threat to the Mekong community's health. According to the United Nations Viet Nam Joint Assessment Report, poor hygiene practices of individuals and communities, and inadequate knowledge of the risks of saltwater intrusion and water scarcity will increase the risk of water-borne and skin diseases. People in Vietnam had to pay for freshwater used for domestic activities like cooking, washing, and showering, as well as for agricultural uses like irrigation which put the community in a financial crisis.

Then, forced displacement as a consequence of dam construction also poses a significant risk for the Mekong community. According to Eyler

(2019), the Lao population, the ethnic minorities living near to Nam Ou River, is pushed to relocate to a resettlement village on the premise that the dam company will compensate them. However, the Chinese company's financial assistance to ethnic minorities is never enough to support their livelihood because they are treated badly by poor housing facilities of village resettlement and little access to land given for agricultural activity. Some of the poor communities were driven to rent land from a neighbouring village, which then led to a debt dilemma as they had no other source of income to pay. Then, the Lower Sesan 2 project in Vietnam resulted in the displacement of approximately 5,000 local residents, who were forced to accept minimal compensation, substandard resettlement sites, and no training in alternative means of earning a living (Financial Times 2021). This situation has caused despair and poverty in the Mekong community. This problem poses a serious challenge to the Mekong community, as people's lives are at stake and rivers are the only way for local communities to generate income and earn a living. Through this explanation, it is apparent that man-made activity across the Mekong River, which negatively caused poverty and inequality in downstream communities, has a direct influence on the food security and health of people in the LMB region (Soukhaphon et al. 2021).

China as Guarantor: Debt Trap Diplomacy

Historically, the Lower Mekong Basin region's economic development level continues to lag behind other neighbouring countries, and its sustainable development status still seems to be low. China has always committed to and actively participated in the framework of multilateral cooperation across the Mekong region, and the country continues to deliver essential services and support for the region's sustainable development. One of China's contributions is the founding of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) in 2016, which is known as a cooperative effort to assist the building of the ASEAN Community and strengthen the China-ASEAN strategic cooperation. The LMC is a framework for economic cooperation among its six member states: China, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The framework's primary function is water resources management, and in an effort to minimize poverty and inequality among members, LMC is viewed as a more efficient means of resolving issues that other forums and organisations are unable to address, as well as the only viable means for Mekong nations to coordinate with China over water resources issues (The Diplomat 2018).

The LMC framework will be implemented via three pillars which correspond to the three pillars of the ASEAN Community: political and stability, economic and sustainable development, and social, cultural, and

people-to-people interactions. In addition, the LMC aggressively conducted action plan cooperation in sectors like water resources, agriculture, cross-border economic cooperation, production capacity, connectivity, and poverty reduction. China has provided substantial financial support for the social and economic development of the Lower Mekong region through the LMC special fund. For example, in 2020, China provided Myanmar with nearly USD 6.7 million through the special fund, which finances 22 projects in the fields of agriculture, education, and information and communications technology (ICT) (China Daily 2020). Then in 2022, China provided Cambodia with approximately USD4 million for the construction of 13 new projects that will contribute to solving Cambodia's developmental requirements in sectors such as regional development, water management, agriculture, environment, capacity building, and cultural heritage. The LMC has assisted Cambodia in more than 80 projects, including the construction of a highway linking Phnom Penh with the port city of Sihanoukville and the expansion of the capital's international airport, which ultimately results in a constructive impact on the community through the development of human resources, infrastructure building and improvement, trade with countries across the world, bringing in foreign direct investment, as well as promoting tourism (Khmer Times 2022). In addition to providing financial assistance, China also made a significant investment in the Mekong region. Compared to 2015, China-Mekong commerce was estimated to have reached USD 322.1 billion in 2020, an increase of 66.3 per cent. As a result, China is currently considered as Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos's major trading partners (Yi 2021).

As part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has viewed itself as a willing investor and guarantor including everything from agriculture to tourism through the LMC mechanism. Despite the fact that the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation is viewed as a boon to the Mekong area because it has allowed for the country's development, the LMC can also be a curse for the region as Chinese finances might lead to disaster and result in a debt trap. Massive Chinese financial aid and investment can also be viewed as debt-trap diplomacy, a term introduced by Brahma Chellaney in 2017 to explain China's geopolitical advantage in countries trying to repay debts received under the BRI infrastructure schemes (Chellaney 2017). Through BRI, China supports infrastructure projects in developing nations, typically by granting enormous loans, to their governments, resulting in these nations falling into a debt trap that makes them susceptible to China's influence. The debt-trap diplomacy is demonstrated by the Sri Lankan debt issue. The nation encountered financial difficulties while constructing a port at Hambantota, an operation under a Chinese joint venture, whereas the

government failed to meet its debt commitment to the Chinese, and it was compelled to cede possession of the port and adjacent land on a 99-year lease (The Asean Post 2018). The economic crisis caused by this issue led to violent protests by the Sri Lankan people towards the government and finally to the resignation of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2022 (Deutsche Welle 2022). Critics of BRI assert that the projects are an insidious Chinese conspiracy for global dominance, in which China arranges ambiguous arrangements and inflates the cost of projects, leaving poor nations unable to pay back their loans and allowing China to seize control of their land and resources (The Asean Post 2018).

Aside from Sri Lanka, the debt trap has also impacted among the Mekong region including Laos. Laos has taken several moves to make the country more appealing to investors in various sectors of the economy, including consenting to the BRI projects by the Chinese company, in order to open up its economy. According to Voice of America News, China has remained to be the greatest foreign investor in Laos, with more than \$16 billion invested in 813 projects (Voa News 2022). Nevertheless, as a result of China's investment leading to the country's development, its public debt would significantly expand putting the country's macroeconomic stability at risk. Laos owed \$14.5 billion in public debt in 2021, according to a report released by the World Bank in April 2022, with China owing the majority of that amount. Bilateral creditors, mostly China, are responsible for most of the country's foreign public debt burden, which is financed through loans for projects such as the China-Laos railway (World Bank 2022). Every year until 2025, Laos must pay back \$1.3 billion in foreign debt, which is nearly equivalent to the country's federal reserve funds and half of its domestic earnings. As Laos struggles to avoid a probable debt crisis, it cedes primary control of its electric grid to a Chinese corporation, granting them majority authority over the projects within its boundaries for the following 30 years (The Diplomat 2021). While the Laotian government may depict this as a process of cordial ties, the Chinese company's control provides China with the capacity to import a portion of the electricity resources into China, aid in the development of the Chinese interior, and create social stability and security. Moreover, this sort of control enables China to take advantage of and profit from poor nations, which in this case is Laos, while the poor nations absorb the negative effects.

On top of that, China's substantial trade, investment, and financial backing in the Mekong region have made it difficult for the countries to turn their backs on China. According to Hoekstra (2018), there are two factors that account for why China provides developing nations with loans and financial support. First, to decline western influence. For many years, parts of the

Mekong area relied heavily on United States (US) financial assistance, but China is now providing significantly more financial support and loans to these nations than the US does. Second, to broaden its sphere of influence and garner support in the Mekong region. For example, due to China's huge investment in Cambodia, the country has supported and backed China in the South China Sea territorial dispute, resulting in the failure of ASEAN members to establish a united front against China's stance. As a result of China's investment, the Mekong countries are less able to assert their national rights as a result of perceived injustice.

The Ineffectiveness of ASEAN's Role in the Mekong River Inequality and Poverty Issue

Founded in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations consists of eleven countries and is divided into two divisions, the Maritime and Mainland Southeast Asian Nations (Kausikan 2020). Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Brunei, and Singapore are maritime states, while Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos are mainland states. For years, ASEAN has been chastised for its lack of involvement or ineffective performance in the controversy of water security in the Mekong region. In comparison to the renowned contentious international issue, the South China Sea territorial dispute, where China tends to claim nearly all waters up the South China Sea on the basis of its historic rights, ASEAN has paid relatively minimal attention to the matter concerning the Mekong River. Although ASEAN failed to resolve the territorial disputes, ASEAN still shows its contribution in negotiating with China through several negotiations over the years despite failing to reach a consensus on the issue.

In 1996, ASEAN established the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC), including China as its member. One of AMBDC's goals was to strengthen links and economic ties between ASEAN member states and Mekong coastal countries. However, since 2014, the AMBDC gradually lost its momentum and went dormant as the group did not have much of the economic scale to fund its initiative. ASEAN's approach to the development of the Mekong region has so far been assigned to sub-regional categories that have received the consent of ASEAN but are not located within its active institutional authority. However, the summit and sub-regional approaches focus primarily on a developmental approach that focuses on economic sense, rather than actively addressing the Mekong inequality and poverty issues. As ASEAN remain as a bystander in the resolution of the Mekong conflict, there are currently 12 cooperation mechanism related to the Mekong sub-region, including the Mekong-Japan Cooperation (MJC), the Mekong-US Cooperation, and the Mekong-

Republic of Korea Cooperation (Mekong-ROK) which is a joint effort aimed at strengthening and sustaining the growing economic and sustainable development of the Mekong partner countries.

There are two reasons for ASEAN's failure in addressing the Mekong River inequality and poverty issue. First, failure as a result of economic dependence on China. Some ASEAN members, such as Laos and Cambodia, rely heavily on Chinese economic assistance and investment because China is their primary source of development (Darmawan 2021). The dependency theory, according to Dos Santos (1970), an early adopter of the theory, is a situation in which the economy of some nations relies on the expansion and development of another nation's economy. It means that some countries' development is constrained by their dependence on other nations where they can only develop if they depend on the dominant countries, which can have either a beneficial or detrimental impact on their future development. Dos Santos (1970), identified three types of dependence that poor nations have experienced: colonial dependency, financial-industry dependency, and technological-industry dependency. First, colonial dependency means a colonial state's dominance in the economic connection of the colonized countries including trade monopolies and an imperial monopoly on land, minerals, and labour in colonized countries. Second, the financial-industry dependency is characterised by the dominance of large capital in hegemonic centres and its growth and expansion through investment in the production of raw resources, agricultural goods, and technology sectors in the domestic market of developing nations. The third is technological industrial reliance which is an industrial development-based dependency. It is significantly controlled by the technological monopoly exercised by capitalist centres, as impoverished nations rely on the importation of machinery and natural resources for the industrialization of their economies.

In regards ASEAN situation in the Mekong issue, the Chinese foreign direct investment in countries such as Cambodia reach approximately USD860 million in 2020, up 70 per cent from 2019 (The Star 2021). China has made significant investments in large-scale construction projects in Cambodia, including the 190-kilometre Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway, and thereby contributes to the country's development. According to an article by Agbebi and Virtanen (2017), Chinese investments are vital because they assist in resolving a country's poor infrastructure and have the ability to give chances for human resource development through job and skill-building opportunities, as well as technology transfer for the local populations and business. As a result, several states are hesitant to bring this topic up on the ASEAN agenda and refuse to declare it as a regional agenda, fearing that their economic and diplomatic relations with China will be strained.

Second, the inability to reach a consensus or a unified ASEAN stance due to problems in the ASEAN basic principles, where the centrality and unity of ASEAN have been questioned. The principles of consultation and consensus are clearly expressed in Article 20 of the ASEAN charter, which ensures equality among member states and prevents any member from being excluded in making a major decision. Due to a lack of unanimity among the member states, ASEAN was unable to raise this topic on its ASEAN agenda, which undermined the principles of consensus in the ASEAN charter. During the 2020 ASEAN virtual summit, Vietnam attempted to place the Mekong issue on the agenda but was unsuccessful because the maritime states believe the issue is best addressed or discussed through existing sub-regional frameworks since only a few members are impacted by its degradation (See 2021). In addition, several ASEAN members are reluctant to view the issue as a regional concern due to their sensitivity and fear of offending China, as well as their reluctance to engage in geopolitical competition in the region.

Then, the inability to come to an agreement may be due to the backing of China's allies, such as Cambodia, since the country demonstrated their unwavering support for China during the Philippines-China territorial conflict in the South China Sea. China's regional economic dominance has put ASEAN on the back foot where China has strong control over some ASEAN member states which lead to ASEAN's premise of centrality and unity, which calls for agreement among all member nations to reach decision-making, has been shattered by Cambodia's preference to deal with the problem bilaterally (Heng 2021). During the South China Sea conflict, Cambodia was highly condemned for its continuous backing of China by obstructing ASEAN remarks toward China, which led to the failure of ASEAN to find an agreement on the issue. Since Cambodia will be the next ASEAN chair in 2022, it is probable that Cambodia may once again show its support to China by not addressing the Mekong issue during ASEAN summits. With Cambodia's pro-China stance, ASEAN will find it difficult to reach a consensus and set an agenda regarding the Mekong issue, as it was believed that ASEAN would remain inactive on any matters concerning China's dominance in its region (Dunst 2021). According to Panha (2021), Cambodia is expected to engage in silent diplomacy and consultation with China to achieve mutual or common ground for greater integration among ASEAN members so that the organization does not disintegrate due to individual interests. Silent diplomacy, on the other hand, has its drawbacks. Mhango (2012) in his article *Is Quiet Diplomacy in Consonance with Meaningful Peace-Making in SADC? Lessons from Zimbabwe* identified a number of flaws in silent diplomacy in conflict resolution. First, when informal engagements which do not necessarily

bind parties to arise, silent diplomacy leads to vague and uncertain goals. Second, due to the lack of involvement of civil society in the mediation process, the viability of silent diplomacy as a successful peace-making method will be questioned. Third, clashing interests between the parties can jeopardize the decision-making process, raising needless doubts about the process's authenticity. Therefore, it is evident that silent diplomacy is not the best way to achieve sustainable consensus between China and ASEAN member states. Since ASEAN is up against one of the world's major powers, silent diplomacy is insufficient and is likely to fail.

The principles of reaching consensus have undermined ASEAN's relevance and effectiveness in addressing the poverty and inequality issue that is happening among its member state. Although the principle helps ASEAN to maintain unity and gives member states the opportunity to participate in the association, it also weakens ASEAN's capacity to act effectively on certain security and environmental issues. According to Hiep (2016) in his journal 'Can ASEAN Overcome the Consensus Dilemma over the South China Sea?', there are three reasons that led to ASEAN's hardship in finding a common agreement. First, the large membership of the associations has given difficulties to ASEAN in decision-making. Second, not all members state has a common national interest in reaching a consensus on a certain subject matter. Lastly, interference from other external power can influence members' results in the decision-making process. When ASEAN failed to address any poverty and inequality issue, certain affected members will seek help from external partners to deter China's aggression and will jeopardize ASEAN principles of unity and centrality that weaken the ability of the association to lead on a certain issue. Although the examples provided are mainly on the South China Sea territorial dispute case, this example may also occur in the Mekong case as not all ASEAN members state are willing to take the driver's seat in bringing this issue to the ASEAN agenda.

To combat this issue, ASEAN needs to have strong unity among each other as ASEAN is recognized as one identity and it is a fundamental aspect in achieving ASEAN's vision as one stable and strong community. Without a strong identity, ASEAN essential goals of accelerating ties between members, by facilitating common interest, promoting regional peace and stability, and cooperation with international and regional organizations will be failed to implement. Eyler (2019) in his book *Last Days of the Mighty Mekong*, considered the Mekong River as a one-connected system as there is no division between the upper and lower Mekong in the region. To conserve the river, all parts of the river must be considered as part of a single system. ASEAN goals of one community cannot be achieved if ASEAN members refuse to acknowledge the Mekong issue as a regional

issue on its agenda. This issue is affecting mainland ASEAN members, and the issue facing a small number of ASEAN members is also affecting ASEAN as a whole. The Mekong River has strategic significance for all ASEAN members since it provides resources such as rice exports to both mainland and maritime countries (Hatda and Kittikhoun 2021). If the problem worsens, rice output will fall, and countries that rely on Mekong states would be left with insufficient food supplies.

Conclusion

The hydropower plant including the China BRI project will bring undeniably economic benefits as China provides financial assistance to other countries and also provide development opportunities to the Mekong countries. This project not only contributed to the development of the nation but also improved the livelihoods of locals and provided ample access to electricity and modern infrastructure. However, dam construction has had a severe influence on the Mekong community's livelihood, resulting in larger losses of aquaculture and agricultural resources, climate change, and a lack of freshwater quality, all of which contribute to inequality and poverty in the Lower Mekong Basin region. As a result of financial support and loans provided by China, the Mekong countries, such as Laos, have fallen into a debt crisis or debt trap, which could lead to tremendous inequality and poverty. Despite the fact that hydropower development and the financial support given by China on the Mekong River provide economic benefits, millions of people in the downstream Mekong region are being forced to shoulder the cost of development expansion in the pursuit of economic growth. ASEAN as a unified community must work together and have a strong political will to address this global inequality and poverty issue effectively on the ASEAN agenda.

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