A brief policy on reviving and sustaining tourism during and after COVID 19 in the Mekong-Ganga Sub-Region

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Introduction
The novel coronavirus disease (COVID 19) has upset the entire tourism industry. Around 188 countries and territories have been infected by the ills of the virus and have, since the outbreak imposed severe air, land and sea travel restrictions to decelerate the spread of the virus. Such measures have proved to have a strong economic and social impact. A WTTC report highlights that the Travel and Tourism industry may lose more than 100 million jobs worldwide owing to the pandemic. Consequently, such wide-ranging economic implications have given cause for countries to undertake atypical work and business guidelines conveniently labelling them as the new normal. Governments are coming up with new and innovative ways to resume domestic, sub-regional and regional non-essential travel by forging travel bubbles and air bridges. Alas! Must have thought the governments after repealing travel containment measures, however, the WHO thinks otherwise. Recently, the organization said that the countries may have to go in another "total lockdown" as the cases may double globally in the coming few weeks.

Figure 1 illustrates that Asia is at the brink of losing 63.4 million jobs in 2020. On average, 1 in every 5 jobs will be lost only in Asia. Tourism dependent South-East Asian nations such as Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are more susceptible to a stagnant industry and are bound to collapse in a spiral movement of economic losses. On the other hand, as India records a good recovery rate in the patients, she will eye to improve her outbound travel segment that accounted for nearly 26 million travellers in 2018. Increasing debts and depleting limited resources of individual countries coupled with weak healthcare systems, call for more coordinated and cooperative actions amongst the MGC nations. With that said, the team proposes an India led New Sub-Regional Travel and Tourism Agreement under the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, India's Neighborhood First and Act East Policy. As a policy response to COVID 19, we have based the New SRTTA on four essential pillars of...
recovery. They are React, Revive, Remodel and Rebuild. We are confident that the framework will provide additional value to the sub-regional efforts and initiatives and help member nations in developing responsible and sustainable tourism industry standards that align with the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals. Lastly, we have wholly leveraged Mekong-Ganga’s existing intergovernmental Working Groups to advance the provisions of the Framework.


**Recommendations**
PILLAR I. REACT

The governments must reorient their priorities to people by providing accessible and affordable healthcare during the pandemic. In some countries, lockdowns have not helped in curbing the spread of the virus. Instead, people are in a far worse situation than they would have been without a lockdown. Hence, in the ongoing crisis, governments must painstakingly classify and allow businesses to operate based on two priority areas. They are high and low priority. High priority businesses would include essential services namely mental health clinics, hospitals and medical stores, import and export of essential drugs, food, medical pieces of equipment and supplies, and vending of fruits and vegetables. Low priority areas include any other non-essential business operations. Amidst the pandemic, the governments can still continue trading through what we call as cluster trading. To execute cluster trading the states or provinces of a nation must be categorized based on variables such as the active cases and recovery rate. The states with less number of cases and which are in the same stage of virus containment may establish new trade and transport routes between them. Additionally, the governments must also identify the closest and most essential supply chains within their neighborhood and leverage previously established chains to run unhindered import and export operations. The governments may also use a new method to shorten the supply chains. We decide to call it the buffer point method. A buffer point is a prompt set up of warehouses and logistical support to reduce the time taken for a given supply chain operation. In the case of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation region, Andaman and Nicobar Islands become the regional buffer point. The process involves that ships carry the necessary exports, drop them at the buffer point, and load their import goods using logistical procedures without coming into contact with any person and sail back to their respective countries.

Next, governments must provide and maintain liquidity and support affected businesses by introducing typical fiscal and monetary stimulus programs such as amortization, deferrals, short-term exemption of the payment of Value Added Tax, direct cash transfers, wage subsidy and cheap credit loans to SMEs. Compensation packages must also be provided by the governments to wage workers, recently dismissed skilled workers and lastly the unemployed. The governments must quickly identify essential sectors and introduce several short-term job schemes.

The pandemic event has already stretched the government budgets of several nations and has shut windows to access any foreign debt markets. The governments must, as a result, seek assistance from the international community in addressing the repercussions emerging from the pandemic. Multilateral Organizations and development banks already have established mechanisms for emergency financing, especially for crises, and nations must take full advantage of them. Ultimately, the governments must phase lockdowns based on priority areas, create national guidelines to ensure uniformity within their territory, effectuate response levels and strict health measures based on empirical data collated by the relevant ministries, and use technology such as geo-location and contact tracing to track the spread of the virus.


PILLAR II. REVIVAL

Firstly, in order to revive the travel and tourism industry, the governments of the MGC nations must advance the developments and outcomes of the Working Groups to a new level, by institutionalizing a New Sub-Regional Travel and Tourism Agreement. The process of institutionalization will seek to set specific travel guidelines, develop best practices and replace any inconsistent rules and policies with new, innovative and relevant ones. By signing a New Sub-Regional Travel and Tourism Agreement and working together as a region to build a better tourism industry, the MGC nations will prove “How Cooperation Triumphs Over Self-Interest” amidst a looming protectionist environment. The agreement will seek to establish laws that will guide trade, travel and tourism during COVID 19.

Secondly, we propose that the governments must under the same sub-regional initiative, systematically devise and open a new travel corridor.\textsuperscript{15, 16} We name it the Mekong-Ganga Blue Ocean Strategy. According to Per Block, an Oxford University researcher in social mobility a travel bubble is, “The idea to start reallowing travel is not to open up all borders to everybody, but that countries form free travel zones”. Adding to it, he said, ”Countries don’t need to have zero cases of COVID-19 to form a travel bubble, but all countries involved should be at a similar stage of reopening”.\textsuperscript{17}

MEKONG GANGA BLUE OCEAN STRATEGY

According to IATA, the month of April recorded an astonishing decline of 94.3% year-on-year in the Revenue Passenger Kilometers (RPKs),\textsuperscript{18} simply known as the global passenger demand. Similarly, the month of June saw Asia-Pacific airlines ’plummet 97.1% compared to the year-ago.\textsuperscript{19} The regional aviation industry is presently in financial distress and expects to lose approximately $29 billion\textsuperscript{20} this year. Moreover, the World Health Organization’s recent study about air and aerosols as a possible modes of transmission for SARS-CoV-2\textsuperscript{21} has led to a growing mistrust amongst air passengers relating to the regulation of air in the confined spaces of aeroplanes. Hence, to regain consumers trust in outbound travel we propose “Travel by SEA”.

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\begin{tabular}{c c c c}
\textbf{SIMPLE} & \textbf{S} & \textbf{SOUTH} \\
\textbf{EASY} & \textbf{E} & \textbf{EAST} \\
\textbf{ARRIVAL} & \textbf{A} & \textbf{ASIA}
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Figure 2: Mode of Transport-wise distribution of Indian National's Departures (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2019, p. 85)\textsuperscript{22}
Figure 2 shows that the Indian nationals are least inclined to travel by sea and hence remains an untapped market.

SEA: SIMPLE EASY ARRIVAL

Simple Easy Arrival leverages India’s established sea links to South-East Asia thereby providing an alternative to air travel and improving sub-regional transport value chains. Factors such as open deck with natural wind currents and private rooms may convince travellers to prefer travelling by ships over aeroplanes. Also, ships running at slow speed are found to be less polluting compared to other modes of transport. Eco-conscious shipping companies have started using “scrubbers” or the Exhaust Gas Cleaning Systems (EGCS) to remove particulate matter in the gases emitted by ship engines in order to regulate pollution. Last year, Megan King, a spokeswoman for a trade group named Cruise Lines International Association said that the scrubbers fully comply with the new 2020 standards for air and water quality set by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Adding, she said what is undoubtedly true that “...jet is just a transportation vehicle while a cruise ship is a floating resort and amusement park”. To increase the likability and build a sense of security within the travelers, the ports must come up with SANI - STATION, a person-less, yet mandatory steam sanitizing booth where travellers ought to sanitize their hand, travel luggage, shoes and any other travel accessory that they may be carrying with them.

SOFT INFRASTRUCTURE

Admittedly, the Mekong-Ganga Blue Ocean Strategy will also provide the MGC nations with a very good opportunity to create and deliver soft infrastructures such as pre-booked time-sharing E-Visas, Sub-Regional Tourism Packages and Sports Attractions which will, in turn, change travelers perceptions in terms of likability and security and allow easy and smooth passenger movement within the MGC Blue Ocean Corridor. The Working Group on Tourism should engage with global digital private players such as Amazon, Google, Netflix, Disney, Discovery to make movies and series in order to promote trade and tourism in the region. The companies, in turn, may be rewarded with several incentives subject to terms of the contract. Similarly, the governments may also come up with a Working Group on Financial Inclusivity which would approach digital payment giants to devise a Mekong Ganga Financial Inclusivity Plan 2030.
SMALL AND MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES

Seemingly, businesses are struggling to adapt to new health and safety standards while maximizing profits and productivity. Effective and structured management in Small and Medium Scale Tourism Enterprises will be the key to maintain liquidity and stability in the industry. Thus, the European Commission’s proposition of using patronage and travel vouchers to maintaining liquidity among Small and Medium Scale Enterprises should make an attractive alternative to cash reimbursement in the Mekong-Ganga Region.


PILLAR III. REMODELING MEKONG GANGA PLAN OF ACTION

CREATING TRAVEL BUBBLES WITHIN A TRAVEL BUBBLE

Not all Mekong-Ganga Cooperation nations are presently at the same level of pandemic containment. As a result, it becomes difficult for the governments to create and open a travel bubble within the region. Hence, we propose a bubble within a bubble model where nations create national and sub-national travel bubbles based on static and dynamic variables and then integrate these travel bubbles to make a whole new regional bubble.

INSTITUTING SUB-REGIONAL REGULATORY AUTHORITIES

Any measures to reinvigorate the tourism industry will remain unavailing unless the governments instill a sense of security within the business and travelling community. The pandemic event has made it even more necessary to inspect points of zoonosis such as kitchens, meat markets, sewage water and drainages to prevent future zoonotic disease outbreaks. Thereby, we propose that the Mekong-Ganga nations institute a new regulatory authority that inspects any such zoonotic points. This Regulatory Authority may use the existing mandates of the Working Group on Health for sharing information and cooperation in pandemics management. The governments must also note that COVID 19 is an emerging public health issue in MGC countries and is mainly impacting the economically weaker sections of the region. Hence, the Authority must make sure that such people are provided with basic yet good healthcare. In order to address the problem of rising unemployment, the governments along with the private partners and relevant regulatory authority must provide vocational training programs and MGC regional language lessons to make such sections market-ready. Lastly, the Authority must be also be responsible for border and on ships checks and controls. Under the Mekong-Ganga Blue Ocean Strategy's Safe and Easy Arrival, such authority may partner with several hospitals in providing free onboard testing and treatments between departure and arrival points, recording any relevant data and sharing it with the relevant ministries and departments immediately.
The member nations must organize a Public-Private Partnership and set up a Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) to remodel the travel and tourism industry in the Mekong-Ganga Region. The core activity of the DMO should be and not limited to creating awareness about health and hygiene guidelines during and post-COVID, promoting responsible tourism, marketing and sending regular communication about changing business or emergency guidelines to all businesses, especially small and medium scale businesses to avoid or reduce any economic shocks. The DMO may partner with hospitals, insurance issuing companies, travel agencies, tour operators, and visa service providers to come up with new people-centric travel packages packed in a single mobile application. The mobile application will be a one stop-shop for searching tours packages, COVID hotspots and places to avoid in a particular city, relevant guidelines, and discounts and incentives for following those guidelines. Discounts and incentives may include extended stays at hotels, complementary meals at partner restaurants and alike. Such packages may include a travel medical insurance, a pre-approved visa, travel itinerary, free medical checkup at boarding, onboard or debarking ships, free legal and consultancy services, medically certified and crisis management trained tour guides and an E-Health certificate that must be re-issued every seven days. The DMO must also set up a new website, help-line number and a new mobile application for tourists and businesses to resolve their queries, and provide legal and consultancy services in partnership with law and consultancy firms in the region. For travellers, such services will be covered in the travel package. Businesses may have to pay nominal charges to avail the services. The DMO may organize online trade exhibitions by bringing local produces by communities, small businesses and entrepreneurs and use techniques of e-commerce to create an online market for such regional specific products. Sports such as cricket and football are celebrated in the MGC nations. The governments must come up with a plan to utilize the existing infrastructure to host major sports events in MGC countries such as the Indian Premier League (IPL) or the ASEAN Football Federation Championship. The governments must make sure while they host such events, they need to create mass awareness about the events may take and what are the guidelines to be followed. Lastly, the DMO may partner with regional tourism management schools and arrange MOOCs, webinars, full-time and part-time programs and offer scholarship grants to promote tourism studies in the region.

ONLINE TOURISM

The governments must create an online regional website that provides online tourism products which may range from virtual audio and video guided tours, online cultural fairs, food and literature festivals to virtual traveller group meetings, beginner and professional certificate courses in subjects such as history, arts, gastronomy. The governments may also conduct Online Technology x Tourism Forums to promote innovations in health, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and sustainable travel and tourism.

MGC FINANCIAL INCLUSIVITY PLAN: 2030
The pandemic has upended the economic systems across the world. Hence, the Mekong-Ganga nations must respond to the consequential economic downturns in a cooperative and synchronized manner by decisively organizing a two-phased ten-year Financial Inclusivity Plan: 2030. In Phase I, the regional nations must work towards achieving greater financial inclusivity by delivering wide-ranging pecuniary products and services to Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs). In the same phase, the members must also seek to raise awareness among new and old businesses about digital payments and digital trade and establish a new MGC Working Group for Sub-Regional Financial Inclusivity and Integration, Digital Payments and Dispute Resolution. In phase two, the members must promote competitiveness and consider partnering with global players in providing Fin-Technology services. One strategy is to empower the existing digital payment applications with instant-real time payment system such as the Unified Payments Interface to allow online payments in all MGC currencies by levying nominal charges. For instance, an Indian citizen maintaining a bank account with Indian Rupees will be able to make payments in Vietnamese Dong in Vietnam by using a UPI mobile application. Such payments system must always be regulated by the Reserve Banks of the MGC member nations.

**IMPROVING SUB-REGIONAL TRANSPORT NETWORKS**

The Mekong-Ganga nations must revise the existing mandates and create new rail-road-sea links to deliver a seamless travel experience to avid travellers. The member-nations must also seek to expeditiously conclude stalled sub-regional agreements on transport and tourism. The countries may, as an instance extend the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Motor Vehicle Agreement to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam under the New Sub-Regional Travel and Tourism Agreement proposed by us. Under the same agreement, the countries may also add several clauses to accommodate new provisions on using Electric Vehicles (EVs) and incentivize their use by waiving highway tolls and rewarding points via the Sub-Regional Travel and Tourism Mobile Application. The travellers will be able to reclaim the accumulated points at partner stores and restaurants.

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29. The ASEAN Secretariat. (2016). Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. ASEAN.


**PILLAR IV. REBUILD**

Under the Mekong-Ganga Working Group on Plan of Actions, the governments must devise a cleanliness benchmark for services and a new pandemic benchmark to measure the resilience of cities within the region. The region must also set up Emergency Budgets and build a new
Medical Equipment and Supplies Bank to address the shortage of medical goods in times of crises. Under Vision 2030 and Agenda 2030 of the SDGs, the governments, in cooperation with the International Solar Alliance (ISA) must strive to harness clean energy and encourage businesses to incorporate the use of clean energy into their daily business operations. In our final pillar, we propose to rethink tourism by involving communities and rebuild the tourism industry using the ABCD of technology.

**SPARKING TOURISM USING THE ABCD OF TECHNOLOGY**

COVID 19 has extensively changed people’s habits and perceptions over the course of seven months since its outbreak, inevitably giving rise to new patterns of behavior and business models. The pandemic event has not only stimulated the progress of technological innovation but also reinforced the significance of having a digital presence. And yet businesses are struggling with what Accenture terms as a “Tech Clash”. Willingly or unwillingly, businesses will need to adapt to the technological changes, if they wish to thrive in a post-COVID world. Hence, we propose an action plan to use “Technology x Sustainable Tourism (TxST)” under Vision 2030 to promote responsible tourism and seek digital alternatives to address the most prominent and deep-rooted problems in tourism namely climate change, over congestion, sustainability and the very recent health insecurity arising while traveling in the MGC Region.

A - ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE:
Artificial Intelligence can be used to rebuild regional environmental, political and health security. The governments may build an Artificially Intelligent Alert and Response system by training AI to go through global vernacular papers and magazines, social networking sites, capturing a list of all the catastrophic events occurring worldwide and providing threat assessment reports, guidelines and real-time policy recommendations for individual nations and the Mekong-Ganga region. AI may also be used to detecting active patients, measure their recovery in percentage and give guidelines on where and how the person could travel. Another way in which AI can be used to build a better and safer travel industry is by using it in Remote Health Monitoring. The Remote Health Monitoring technique involves a wearable device that uses biometric sensors and computer vision models that run on low power devices to monitor a person's health anywhere in the world. Lastly, AI must be wholly exploited to address the problems of dis and misinformation.  

**B - Big Data**

The governments must consider using Big Data Technology in devising a pandemic risk management system. Recently, the government of China used Big Data Technology in a Public-Private Partnership to track active COVID cases in 900 million Chinese residents. Similarly, South Korea used Big Data to dynamically track and retrace movements of individual suspected cases. Constructively, the system helped in decongesting and monitoring crowded places which later eased the reopening of the South Korean economy. The governments may also use Big Data Technology to improve governmental services and business operations by providing better and personalized services to travellers.

**C - Cloud computing**

Integrating Cloud Computing with AI and Big Data in governance and business operations will opens doors for quick exchange of real-time information, automating security in numerous computing machines, and flexibly processing large chunks of data to anticipate traveller needs.
The Democratization of Technology is the most crucial element for rebuilding the Mekong-Ganga tourism industry. The DoT is a process in which businesses and individuals can massively access rapidly advancing new technology and actively participate in the development of such products. Hence, the governments must first institute a Working Group in New and Emerging Technologies. Then, under the Technology x Tourism policy the Working Group on Tourism and New and Emerging Technology must work together in integrating new and sophisticated technologies create an engaging ecosystem with academia, entrepreneurs, governments and public and private businesses as the main stakeholders.


ABCD +3

Internet of Things (IoT)

The hospitality sector in the tourism industry must partner with technology giants such as Amazon Web Services, Azure and Oracle and provide a hassle-free and smooth hospitality experience to their customers. The IoT and Recognition Technology will allow customers to
contact-less check-in, lock and unlock their rooms, control lights, heaters, air conditioning, check-out, and pay for their meals. Essentially, IoT removes the possibility of fomite transmission of any viruses.

3D Printing

This emerging technology can extensively be used in the medical sector to Achieve Good Health and Wellbeing, SDG Goal 3. The technology is already being used to produce 3D printed respirators, ventilators, and other medical equipment. And now the technology is being used to develop a 3D bioprinter for testing COVID 19 vaccines. For all we know, the technology may even allow us to develop COVID 19 and other vaccines on a very large scale.

Virtual Reality

VR is a new technology that allows its user to enter an artificially created environment which is an exact replica of the real world. Such a technique could be used to promote tourism at homes and hotels by allowing users to enjoy Music Concerts and Sports Matches using VR boxes or glasses.


REGIONAL EMPOWERMENT THROUGH COMMUNITIES

Communities have time and again proven that crises can be solved by taking collaborative and coordinated actions. The Mekong-Ganga nations have a common civilizational history yet the region lacks a sense of community. In order to uplift the tourism sector, the communities must pursue membership, fulfil and influence the needs of each other and integrate well by sharing an emotional connection. The practise of leadership and management during crises must be
thought again. The governments must develop a new Feedback Mechanism and include communities in order to improve ground-level performance and augment indispensable resources.\textsuperscript{39} With communities working together harmoniously, the Mekong-Ganga Region is bound to build back better.

\section*{SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS 2030}

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\section*{BIBLIOGRAPHY}


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ANNEX

A FOUR PILLAR MODEL FOR BUILDING BACK BETTER UNDER THE NEW SUB-REGIONAL TRAVEL AND TOURISM AGREEMENT