

## ROK-Mekong Economic Assistance: A how-to for Latin America

### Asistencia Económica en ROK-Mekong: Una guía para Latinoamérica

### Assistância Econômica na ROK-Mekong: Um guia para a América Latina

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#### Abstract

Economic development is one of the main objectives of international cooperation. Based on that concept, the Mekong alliance, composed of developing Asian countries, was established in 2011. In response, South Korea, Asian economic leader, has architected several strategies to propitiate development among these nations using niche diplomacy. This investigation paper intends to evaluate the impact of said methodology as well as proposing a replication strategy in Latin America (Latam) while making use of Sequential Transformative Design. The results indicate that the areas of infrastructure and human capital are the ones that share the most similarities between Mekong and Latam and that the cooperation intervention from Korea has generated a positive impact in the development of the countries in the Southeastern region. Thus, it can be concluded that these mediations build up a role model for development policies to be implemented in Latam, guaranteeing regional growth.

#### Keywords

Niche Diplomacy; Economic Development; International Cooperation; South Korea; Mekong; Latin America.

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## Resumen

El desarrollo económico es uno de los objetivos principales en la cooperación internacional. De allí nace la alianza Mekong en 2011, compuesta por países que se encuentran aún en vías de desarrollo. Debido a esto, Corea del Sur, como líder económico asiático, ha implementado estrategias para propiciar el desarrollo de estas naciones a través de la metodología de diplomacia de nicho. Por medio de un análisis de tipo mixto basado en el Diseño transformativo secuencial (DITRAS) se pretende evaluar el impacto de esta metodología y proponer su réplica en países de América Latina (Latam). Los resultados indican que las áreas de infraestructura y de desarrollo del capital humano son las que visibilizan mayor similitud entre Mekong y Latam y que las intervenciones de cooperación de Surcorea generaron un impacto positivo en el desarrollo de los países de la región del sudeste asiático. Por ende, se concluye que estas mediaciones constituyen un modelo a seguir para las políticas de desarrollo a implementar en América Latina y así garantizar el crecimiento de la región.

**Palabras clave:** Diplomacia de Nicho; Desarrollo Económico; Cooperación Internacional; Corea del Sur; Mekong; Latinoamérica.

## Resumo

O desenvolvimento econômico é um dos principais objetivos da cooperação internacional. A partir daí nasceu a aliança Mekong em 2011, formada por países que ainda estão em desenvolvimento. Devido a isso, a Coreia do Sul, como líder econômico asiático, implementou estratégias para promover o desenvolvimento dessas nações por meio da metodologia da diplomacia de nicho. Por meio de uma análise de tipo misto baseada no Sequential Transformative Design (DITRAS) pretende-se avaliar o impacto desta metodologia e propor sua replicação em países da América Latina (Latam). Os resultados indicam que as áreas de infraestrutura e desenvolvimento de capital humano são as que apresentam maior semelhança entre Mekong e Latam e que as intervenções de cooperação da Coreia do Sul geraram impacto positivo no desenvolvimento dos países da região do Sudeste Asiático. Portanto, conclui-se que essas mediações constituem um modelo a seguir para as políticas de desenvolvimento a serem implementadas na América Latina e, assim, garantir o crescimento da região.

## Palavras-chave

Diplomacia de Nicho; Desenvolvimento Econômico; Cooperação Internacional; Coreia do Sul; Mekong; América latina.

## 1. Introduction

Ever since the formation of the Mekong-ROK Alliance in 2011, the importance of the areas of cooperation has shifted slightly, showing the countries' current top concerns. Infrastructure was originally the most critical concern, and it is still a top priority today. However, as the measures were applied and the results were analyzed, it became clear that the human aspect was becoming just as important, and that a direct impact on human resource development was the key to reaching the specified goals. As a result, infrastructure and human capital have risen to the top of South Korea's cooperation agenda with the Mekong alliance countries.

South Korea has applied its niche diplomacy strategy of cooperation not only to the Asian area but has extended it to the Latin American region mainly since 2000 (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016, p. 14). There are similarities between the Mekong region and Latin America (hereinafter Latam) in terms of levels of development, resources and purposes. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to evaluate the replication of South Korea's

cooperation strategy with Mekong in Latam, analyzing existing policies and impacts on economic development.

Previous studies have focused mainly on the analysis of cooperation related to economic aid for social development. However, this research pretends to add an analysis focused on infrastructure and human resources development (hereinafter HRD) based on the similarities between Mekong and Latam to take maximum advantage of the open attitude of cooperation that South Korea has towards both regions. To achieve this, the paper will be structured as follows: 1. Analyze the specific aspects of infrastructure and human resource development; 2. Assess the impact of cooperation on domestic economic development; 3. Expose the similarity between the Mekong and Latam regions; and finally, 4. Propose the replication of strategies in Latin countries.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Korea's foreign policy has been centered on developing-country cooperation and assistance. ROK has sought to be one of the most developed countries in the Asian continent throughout its diplomatic history, pursuing “a more ‘internationalised’ role for the country throughout all the different administrations, albeit with different specific focus, from the regional to the global level” (Milani, 2022, p. 357).

In this context, this research approaches the concept of **niche diplomacy**, understood as the main strategy adopted by the Korean government for its international relations, analyzing its activity within the **regional innovation systems** in both Mekong and Latam by the providing of **official development assistance** for the mutual economic development.

### 2.1. Niche Diplomacy

This concept was primarily developed for the so-called "middle powers," but in the case of South Korea, it stems from the country's foreign policy desire to address specific challenges and sectors relevant to the economic development of other countries one at a time.

The term derives from the niche concept of business administration applied in foreign policy (Wallace, 1987). It was first outlined by the Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans as “concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover the field” (Evans & Grant, 1991, p. 353). Later was widely used by Andrew Cooper in diplomacy analysis and the study of the countries that “choose to allocate their technical resources to particular international policy issues” (Cooper, Higgott y Nossal, 1994, p. 26). In terms of international assistance, this method “focuses on the ability of individual countries, like biological species or firms, to identify and fill niche space on a selective basis through policy ingenuity and execution” (Cooper, 1997, p. 5).

Following this strategy, countries should be selective in the areas in which they extend their assistance. “There is no prestige, or likely result, in enthusiastically pursuing ideas which are premature, over-ambitious, or for some other reason unlikely to generate any significant body of support” (Evans & Grant, 1991, p. 324). Therefore, a constant evaluation of the implemented policies shapes “the niches in which a country plans to operate and reap the benefits of its own specialization” (Fromm, 2019, p. 25).

South Korea, given its particular history of rapid poverty overcoming, has sought to replicate the domestic strategies in the countries it supports, which makes it one of the countries that “have built up economic niches using well-planned strategies and a focus on education and technological infrastructure development” (Cooper & Shaw, 2017, p. 4). According to Taulbee (2014, p. 12) “it involves a specific pattern of statecraft based upon entrepreneurial skill, technical leadership directed at coalition building to generate political energy around a particular issue set”, but Korea has managed to identify these particular issues and “has become an artful proponent of finding functional niches with which it can run” (Cooper, 2012) focusing in interdisciplinary fields “such as development, environmental, and security studies” (Cooper et al., 2006) setting mutual development as the main objective of its foreign policy.

According to Cooper (2011), countries like South Korea “form a natural constituency for a liberal global economic order, having benefited so much from one in the past. They have the credibility to defend those principles” and its main strategy to achieve said order has been to transform the paradigm of international assistance from energy linked to non-energy or non-string condition to being completely human centered (Ahn, 2019, p. 108) setting not only infrastructure for people development but training programs to secure enough HRD.

In this sense, South Korea's application of niche diplomacy is distanced from the ‘middle power’ framework and is more related to the strategy of identifying the most relevant niches for economic development, which are infrastructure and HRD.

## **2.2. Regional Innovation Systems (RIS)**

Regional innovation systems (hence referred to as RIS) are systems that encourage enterprises (or parties) in a region to innovate, with the goal of improving economic and social development and competitiveness (Hudec, 2007). Nonetheless, this notion is constantly growing, and it is now a frequently utilized analytical framework in the development of innovation policy. Several parties collaborate in a RIS to help a specific region target certain regions with high growth potential.

When discussing a RIS, it's also vital to recognize that there are two main bodies of theory and research. The first is “built on evolutionary theories of economic and technological change” (Edquist, 2004). These systems can be viewed of as evolutionary and social processes in this way. In fact, “the social aspect of innovation refers to the collective learning process between several parties” (Cooke et al., 2000), implying that it is a collaborative task involving multiple actors.

Regional science is the second conceptual body to be examined as part of a RIS. “From a regional perspective, innovation is a regionally entrenched, rather than a placeless, process” (Storper, 1997) . The concept of proximity between areas is considered a crucial point in regional science. This also takes into account “the benefits deriving from localization advantages and spatial concentration, and the territorially prevailing sets of rules, conventions and norms through which the process of knowledge creation and dissemination occurs” (Kirat & Lung, 1999).

As a result, regional innovation systems are born out of the need to promote “interactions between different innovative actors that (should) have good reasons to interact, such as interactions between firms and universities or research institutes, or interactions between small

start-up firms and larger firms" (Cooke, 2001). They also promote the acceptance of "common norms, expectations, values, attitudes and practices, where a culture of innovation is nurtured and knowledge transfer processes are enhanced." (Cooke, 2008). Simply put, RIS are defined as collaboration between two or more parties that "enables them to evolve over time" by leveraging an innovation-friendly culture and proximity (Doloreux, 2004).

### 2.3. Official Development Assistance (ODA)

"Government aid designed to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries" is what official development assistance (ODA) is defined as (OECD, 2019). Several studies have interpreted ODAs as "a response to either the donors' interests, which are those criteria that serve the donors' strategic and/or economic interests, or the low standards of living of the recipients" in the context of international progress and diplomacy (Wall, 1995).

According to the OECD Development Assistance Committee, "ODA remains the main source of financing for development aid, and it is (1) provided by official agencies and (2) Concessional and administered with the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as the main objective" (OECD, 2021b).

Korea has a long history of taking use of ODA, both as a beneficiary and as a giver. The flood of foreign finance helped the country rebuild quickly following the devastation of the Korean War. "Korea's development is recognized as an exemplary model for economic and social development based on ODA from the global community" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Korea officially joined the Development Assistance Committee in 2020, establishing itself as a donor country and serving as a link between developed and poor countries.

Korea's ODA is organized as follows: "1) ODA policy making and coordinating institution, 2) supervising institutions, and 3) implementing agencies" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Korea's bilateral ODA in 2019 was mostly focused on Asia. According to the OECD Korea's Development Cooperation Profile, USD 1.0 billion was committed to Asia (OECD, 2021a).

Korea's ODA policy will be one of the key frameworks used throughout this study to quantify and qualitatively examine the impact it has on Mekong countries, how this has shaped their RIS strategy for reciprocal growth, and how it may be replicated in the Latam region.

## 3. Methodology

This study combined quantitative data with qualitative analysis. "The inherent assumption of mixed methods research is that the combines qualitative results lead to additional insights not gleaned from the qualitative or quantitative findings alone" (Creswell, 2015). As a result, applying the Sequential Transformative Design methodology to the cross-analysis of quantitative data resulting from investment and the formation of new organizations, as well as the qualitative impact and changes in the areas, was required.

"The results of the quantitative and qualitative stages are integrated during interpretation" according to this methodology (Hernández Sampieri, 2014, p. 556). On the quantitative side, numerical data on the parties' infrastructural and human development conditions before and after international collaboration demonstrated demonstrable changes in these countries. On the

other hand, the qualitative examination of the impact and appraisal of the policies adopted in the region indicated the policies' viability in boosting the region's economic development.

To determine the relationship between the following quantitative and qualitative elements, this methodology was required and utilized as follows:



**Figure 1.** Methodology  
**Source:** The authors

External resources from the United Nations and major Mekong-ROK institutions were used to acquire quantitative data. Qualitative dimensions, on the other hand, were tackled via the lens of niche diplomacy by assessing the impact of aid in the countries involved and changes observed in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (Hereinafter SDG).

Finally, data analysis and visualization were carried out using a novel humanistic data perspective. This idea was mostly popularized by Giorgia Lupi (2017) who stated that "to really understand data and their true potential, sometimes we actually have to forget about them and see through them instead" As a result of the grouped and transversal structuring of the data, a specific picture of the points of success was possible. Laura Lara (2020), has developed her own types of data visualization based on Lupi's work, which influenced the ones shown in this article.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Evolution of Mekong Priorities

The priority areas of the agreement have changed according to the Han-River (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012) and de Mekong-Han River (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) declarations:

2011	1		Infrastructure	4		Water Resource development
	2		Information and Communications Technology (ICT)	5		Agriculture and Rural Development
	3		Green Growth	6		Human Resource Development (HRD)
2019	1		Culture and Tourism	4		Infrastructure
	2		Human Resources Development (HRD)	5		Information and Communications Technology (ICT)
	3		Agriculture and Rural Development	6		Environment
		7		Non-traditional Security Challenges		

**Figure 2.** Evolution of Mekong Priorities

Source: The authors

Despite the fact that Korea's Mekong diplomacy has focused on topics such as water resource development (Mekong River Commission, 2020) and production facilities (World Bank, 2021), the country's plan "tends to make huge different contribution to the existing literature of ODA" (Ahn, 2019, p. 108). ). Because the ultimate purpose of Korea's ODA is to help recipient nations achieve true development, the government not only provides financial resources, but also mobilizes a full system of ongoing evaluation and intervention through specialized organizations. This will assure mutual advantage in the short, medium, and long term. Infrastructure (Rogers, 2022), communications technology (Hwangbo & Park, 2021) and human resources development (Sangkhamanee, 2019), have all had a direct impact on company capacity, communication efficacy at many levels, and individual technical and professional training.

### Quantitative Impact on Mekong of Korea’s ODA

Changes in the indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the number of programs and organizations developed for the Mekong countries, were observed.

### Indicators of Development

**Table 1**  
SDG indicators analyzed for infrastructure, ICT, HRD and ODA

Goals and targets (from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development)	Indicator(s)
<b>Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all</b>	
4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.	4.3.1 Participation rate of youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months, by sex.

4.b By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries.

4.b.1 Volume of official development assistance flows for scholarships by sector and type of study.

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**Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation**

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9.5 Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending.

9.5.1 Research and development expenditure as a proportion of GDP.

9.5.2 Researchers (in full-time equivalent) per million inhabitants.

9.a Facilitate sustainable and resilient infrastructure development in developing countries through enhanced financial, technological and technical support to African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States.

9.a.1 Total official international support (official development assistance plus other official flows) to infrastructure.

9.b Support domestic technology development, research and innovation in developing countries, including by ensuring a conducive policy environment for, inter alia, industrial diversification and value addition to commodities.

9.b.1 Proportion of medium and high-tech industry value added in total value added.

9.c Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries.

9.c.1 Proportion of population covered by a mobile network, by technology.

17.1 Strengthen domestic resource mobilization, including through international support to developing countries, to improve domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection

17.1.1 Total government revenue as a proportion of GDP, by source

17.1.2 Proportion of domestic budget funded by domestic taxes

17.3 Mobilize additional financial resources for developing countries from multiple sources

17.3.1 Foreign Direct Investment, official development assistance and South-South cooperation as a proportion of gross national income

17.10 Promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization, including through the conclusion of negotiations under its Doha Development Agenda

17.10.1 Worldwide weighted tariff-average

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*Note. Adapted from "SDG Indicators" by United Nations 2022*

**Source:** The Authors

The following are the differences between ROK's pre-intervention and post-intervention statistics for the SDG indicators (United Nations, 2022b) and SDG Country profiles (United Nations, 2022a) in the most recent data available for each of the Mekong Alliance's five countries: (Figure 3)

Country Indicator	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Vietnam	Overall
4.3.1	+1,20% ↑	+0,7% ↑	+0,4% ↑	+0,5% ↑	+0,20% ↑	+1% ↑
4.b.1	+271,1% ↑	+154,9% ↑	+473,3% ↑	+1180% ↑	+117,3% ↑	+732,2% ↑
9.5.1	+300% ↑	+0,03% ↑	+0,03% ↑	+500% ↑	+250% ↑	+350,02% ↑
9.5.2	+172,2% ↑	+15,8% ↑	+238,2% ↑	+484,5% ↑	+616,6% ↑	+509,1% ↑
9.a.1	+594,5% ↑	+203,4% ↑	+8580% ↑	-24% ↓	+125,3% ↑	+3159,7% ↑
9.b.1	+0,3% ↑	-63,3% ↓	-38,7% ↓	+107,4% ↑	+164,7% ↑	+56,8% ↑
9.c.1	+892,2% ↑	+2150% ↑	+816,1% ↑	+466,6% ↑	+1878% ↑	+2067,6% ↑
Overall	+318,79% ↑	+351,65% ↑	+1438,48% ↑	+387,86% ↑	+450,3% ↑	

● Significant increase   
● Increase   
● Less significant increase   
● Decrease

**Figure 3**

Changes in SDG indicators before and after ROK's ODA

Source: The authors

Cambodia had the least significant increase of 318% across all metrics. In terms of indicators, the one with the most significant overall increase was 9.a.1 related to infrastructure flows, which increased by 3142,4% in the five countries, while the one with the least significant overall increase was 4.3.1 for participation in formal and non-formal education, which increased by only 1%. Finally, the indicator with the greatest growth in a country was 9.a.1 of international ODA for infrastructure in Myanmar, which increased by 8580%, while the indicator with the greatest decrease in a country was 9.a.1 in Thailand, which decreased by 76%.

## Programs and Organizations Created for Mekong

Organizations	Programs	Events
 ASEAN-Korea Center	 Capacity Improvement & Advancement for Tomorrow	 Asean-ROK CEO Summit
 Korea International Trade Association	 ASEAN'S Smart cities Network	 Asean-ROK Startup Summit
 Export-Import Bank	 Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program	 High Level Forum on A Effectiveness in Busan
 Economic Development Cooperation Fund	 ASEAN-Korea Infrastructure Fund	 GMS Forum
 Regional Development Policy Committee	 Knowledge Sharing Project	 G-20 Seoul Summit
 Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy	 Mekong Training Center	 Mekong-ROK Summit
 Vietnam-Korea Institute of Science and Technology		
 Myanmar Development Institute		
 Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy of the ROK		
 Mekong Institute	 KOICA	

**Figure 4.** Organizations, Programs and Events related to Mekong

**Source:** The authors

These Mekong-related organizations and events are emphasized for their connections to infrastructure, ICT, and HRD. The organizations were established, some before the alliance was formed, to have a national and regional influence, overseeing the continuous review of ODA in order to change and adapt to the needs of the nations. The events have allowed for simultaneous sharing of data and issues that define the next stages in terms of ODA, and the programs have had an impact on the creation of government agendas connected to the alliance's aims.

### Qualitative impact on Mekong of Korea's ODA

#### Impact of Assistance

The impacts of the assistance in each of the Mekong alliance countries in terms of HDR and infrastructure have been visible and described in the Voluntary National Reviews done for the United Nations and other resources.

## Cambodia

For education, the reforms “have enhanced life opportunities for youth and created an improved supply of quality human resources and skills to the job market.” (Ministry of Planning, 2019, p. 3) while life-long learning is recognized as the key for a “structural change of the economy” (Ministry of Planning, 2019, p. 35). This shows that the Korean human centered approach in its ODA has been reflected domestically and has been applied in special governmental efforts for education. As for infrastructure, the government, development partners, and private sector have targeted “essentially roads, rail, bridges, ports, hydropower, solar farms, power transmission lines and irrigation systems” and the Foreign Direct Investment has been mostly used for “real estate and tourism development” (Ministry of Planning, 2019, p. 66). This shows that development is accompanied by investment, not only in human capital, but also in better infrastructure that becomes the means to achieve the development objectives.

## Lao PDR

The Lao PDR Government “is investing in infrastructure and human resources to establish, by 2021, centers of excellence for (i) agriculture in Champasack, (ii) logistics in Savannakhet, (iii) engineering and tourism in Luang Prabang, and (iv) engineering and environmental studies at the National University of Laos” (National SDG Secretariat, 2021, p. 42). Additionally, the Government has launched the National Human Resource Development Strategy and “increased efforts in private sector development [that] will include R&D cooperation and innovation promotion” (National SDG Secretariat, 2021, p. 79). Lao PDR's unique combination of linking infrastructure with education has enabled great advances. In terms of infrastructure alone “Lao PDR's total road network has more than doubled over the last decade” (National SDG Secretariat, 2021, p. 78) confirming that a twin-track human and infrastructure approach is the key to a faster development.

## Myanmar

The national efforts for education have resulted in a “dramatic increase in literacy rates, and many more girls are in school than ever before.” (United Nations Myanmar, 2022), the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan has focused also in improving the quality of the human capital “that will be needed for the emergence of a modern developed economy and improving and expanding vocational education and training” (Ministry of Planning and Finance of Myanmar, 2018, p. 6). This evidences the connection between education, equality, and development that the government considers for their internal policies. On the other hand, the Government has taken infrastructure development as a priority and are undertaking “a massive scale-up in electricity infrastructure under their National Electrification Plan (NEP)” (Burgess, 2018). This as a result of the Korean interest on improving these areas for Myanmar, although there have been some difficulties for the implementation after the coup, the most recent updates for the development plan of Myanmar continue to set both human resources and infrastructure as top priorities.

## Thailand

Thailand's implementation of the goal 4 of SDG has experienced good success, especially “with regards to the provision of inclusive and equitably quality education, the improvement of the capacities of the education system and teachers, and application of technology in the education system” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, 2021, p. 25). At the same time “the Government has promoted lifelong learning in order to raise the capacities of the population as a whole and

to develop human resources that respond to the needs of the 21st Century as a means to advance the economy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, 2021, p. 27). As for infrastructure, “Thailand has made significant progress. Particular progress has been made in expanding road coverage throughout the country and connecting travel in the ASEAN sub-region” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, 2021, p. 42). This shows a uniformity in the impact that foreign assistance has had internally, since in the other countries HRD and infrastructure have also been set as main issues within government agendas.

## Vietnam

According to the Ministry of Planning and Investment (2018, p. 38) “The percentage of trained labourers has increased steadily over the years. In 2000, this rate was 10.3 per-cent and by 2016 it had doubled. In 2017 alone, 2.69 million people received vocational training, including 600,000 rural labourers”, revealing the constant effort in the improvement of its human capital. “Investment in expanding and upgrading energy infrastructure to serve people, especially those in remote, mountainous and island areas has been significantly encouraged” (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2018, p. 48) showing the connection between development, especially in remote regions, and infrastructure investment and development. Like this, it is evident that the idea present in Korea's ODA and its emphasis on HRD and infrastructure has been reflected in the domestic policy and development rationale of each of the five Mekong countries. The impact of these actions and policies on the global position in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals will be shown below.

## Changes in the Region

In terms of Sustainable Development Goals, there were changes in the 5 countries of the Mekong Region according to the annual report of the Goals generated by United Nations since the establishment of the new goals in 2015. In the rankings of all the member states the 5 countries performed as follows:

Year Country	2016		2021		Change	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
 Cambodia	119	44.4	102	64.54	↑ 17	+ 20.14
 Lao PDR	107	49.9	110	63.01	↓ 3	+ 13.11
 Myanmar	117	44.5	101	64.95	↑ 16	+ 20.45
 Thailand	61	62.2	43	74.19	↑ 18	+ 11.99
 Vietnam	88	57.6	51	72.85	↑ 37	+ 15.25

● Significant increase  
 ● Increase  
 ● Less significant increase  
 ● Decrease

**Figure 5.** Changes in SDG rankings before and after ROK's ODA  
**Source:** The authors

The comparison between the 2016 annual report (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2016) and the 2021 annual report (United Nations, 2021) showed positive changes in the development of the 5 nations, even for Lao PDR that showed a decrease in the ranking of 3 places, it had 13.11 more points on the score for accomplishment of the overall development goals. This shows the positive impact of the ODA received by the Mekong countries that along with the national efforts for improvement changed the internal realities and better positioned the countries in the world ranking. Below, the similarities between the Mekong region and the Latin American region are going to be described.

### **Similarities Between the Mekong and Latam Regions**

According to Ahn Se Hyun (2019, p. 105) the four reasons why Korea takes Mekong so seriously are as follows: 1) it is considered a vast blue ocean of a huge economy, 2) the region is full of young and dynamic population with a potential of fast growth rate, 3) the region is selected for Foreign Direct Investment and has a big consumer market, and 4) It has a continuously growing middle class population. All these reasons are also applicable to Latam, since it is a region that has vast natural resources, with a young and dynamic population that has a growing potential, has a consumer market as well as having a growing middle class.

More than that, Korea has also been present in the region with the ODA through agencies like KOICA and supporting the HRD through scholarship programs like the Global Korea Scholarships and with other institutions such as foundations and organizations that have social programs and offer financial aid to face different problems and finding solutions in terms of development.

The Latam region as well as the Mekong one is composed by developing countries that share weather, resources, economic and demographic conditions that make suitable a replication of the Korean niche diplomacy strategy that aims to ensure development that not only benefits the donor nation, but also mutual development, and the ultimate goal is to ensure that, just as Korea has gone from being a recipient of foreign aid, the countries it supports can become donor countries.

### **Conclusion**

South Korea's purpose as an international development assistant is to help developing nations by utilizing the principles of niche diplomacy, RIS, and DOA to promote reciprocal growth in line with the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The Mekong-ROK collaboration has shown to be a high-level example of how a developed country may help developing ones with strong development potential to advance as a nation. Latin America has proven itself to be a developing region that shares similar traits to Mekong countries and that can learn a lot from the assistance that they've received from Korea.

In terms of infrastructure, Latam region "is spending less than 2% of GDP – but 4 - 6% per annum is needed if it is to catch up or keep up with countries that once trailed it, such as Korea or China" (Fay & Morrison, 2005, p. i). Also, any type of investment needs to be utilized to increase productivity and competitiveness, without neglecting the basic social goals. This is not far from the situation in which Mekong countries used to be but that, thanks to the collaboration from South Korea and evidenced in the above analysis of the impact on ODS 9, are taking

steps to grow as a region and replicate best practices. This is something that needs to happen in Latam, not only from the private sector, but as a governmental initiative. According to the World Bank, the government “must leverage their resources to attract as much complementary financing as possible” (Fay & Morrison, 2005, p. i).

This by no means states that there is no infrastructural progress in Latam, but rather that it hasn't been enough and that, as a region, it still has a long way to go. It is also important to highlight that not only aspects related to infrastructure will be benefited, but society related issues as well, since it is essential to improve health and quality of life of the residents of those regions. If a strategy similar to the one utilized in Mekong countries is replicated in Latam, not only there would be economic results but it would “significantly contribute to reduce inequality” (Calderón & Servén, 2004).

Now, referring to HRD, in Mekong countries there has been an urge of implementing new strategies that can assist in nurturing the workforce in those regions through different programs. There is a continuous need of creating HRD programs that aim towards these countries' citizens in both non-formal and formal education. According to the OECD's Policy Framework for Investment (2015), technical field training is required in the industrial environment, and HRD should be made “to enable and encourage enterprises to invest in human resources, for example through on-the-job training and employer involvement in education.”

Latam finds itself in a very similar situation as the one mentioned above and, given the fact that a big amount of the population is not able to afford undergraduate nor graduate education, it is urgent for programs that aim to train citizens in technical fields to be created and implemented. It has been mentioned that Korea has, through their niche diplomacy strategy, created several ways to aid HRD in Latam. Nonetheless, and given the high density of population that resides in this region, there still is a latent need to utilize incoming ODA to further qualify workforce and follow the steps of developed countries. According to Dr. Ashraf, “This human capital should be properly utilized so that it could stimulate scientific and economic progress” (Ashraf, 2005).

The Mekong-ROK collaboration is a definite guide on how Latam can utilize all the concepts aforementioned: RIS, ODA and niche diplomacy to work their way through economic development. However, this example is set as a 1:1 relationship whereas Latam holds several diplomatic partners. That being said, this investigation and proposals hold much value for this specific region, but it is needed to understand that some limitations might come up in the practical aspect of them since a specific donor or development assistant needs to be defined first.

Overall, the cooperation between South Korea and the Mekong countries is commendable from the aspect of international diplomacy and is of great teaching towards all the countries that compose Latam. Korea's ability to recover economically and socially during the Korean War, using ODA and its own national resources (economic and human), demonstrates that there are no limits for developing countries trying to develop further. The fact that Korea has opened itself to collaborate with developing regions such as Mekong, opens new lines of research as of how that reciprocal strategy can be replicated in different parts of the world to propitiate economic development. This paper sets an initial one focused on the Latam region, but as new diplomatic tools start getting more and more utilized, the sector of multilateral collaborations will generate further branches of knowledge, specifically when Latam is economically ready to migrate from being a recipient to a donor under the ODA framework.

## Abbreviations List

HDR: Human Resources Development  
 ICT: Information and Communications Technology  
 Latam: Latin América  
 ODA: Official Development Assistance  
 RIS: Regional Innovation System  
 ROK: Republic of Korea  
 SDG: Sustainable Development Goals

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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