

MEKONG - U.S. PARTNERSHIP TRACK 1.5 POLICY DIALOGUE

Summary Report



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The Mekong – U.S. Partnership promotes the stability, peace, prosperity, and sustainable development of the Mekong sub-region and cooperation in addressing transboundary challenges among Mekong countries and the United States. It further reinforces the strong and longstanding relationship among the United States, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam. The Partnership builds upon 11 years of cooperation and progress from 2009-2020 through the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) to expand collaboration in the face of new challenges and opportunities. The Partnership supports the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and is an integral part of support and cooperation between the United States and ASEAN.

Find more about the Partnership at mekonguspartnership.org/.

STIMSON

The Stimson Center promotes international security, shared prosperity & justice through applied research and independent analysis, deep engagement, and policy innovation. For three decades, Stimson has been a leading voice on urgent global issues. Founded in the twilight years of the Cold War, the Stimson Center pioneered practical new steps toward stability and security in an uncertain world. Today, as changes in power and technology usher in a challenging new era, Stimson is at the forefront: Engaging new voices, generating innovative ideas and analysis, and building solutions to promote international security, prosperity, and justice.

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International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a membership-Union composed of both government and civil society organizations. It harnesses the experience, resources and reach of its more than 1,400 Member organizations and the input of more than 18,000 experts. This diversity and vast expertise makes IUCN the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it.

ABOUT THE POLICY DIALOGUE SERIES

This summary report provides an outline and recommendations derived from discussions held as a part of the Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue series. The Partnership Policy Dialogues are a series of seven conferences taking place between 2021 and 2023 that are generously supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of State’s Mekong-U.S. Partnership. Cross cutting principles of inclusivity, resilience (including climate), and collaboration will be applied to all conferences in this series.

The U.S. Government launched the Mekong-U.S. Partnership in 2020 to expand cooperation with the five countries of the Mekong sub-region on strategic challenges and shared priorities under the Partnership’s four areas of cooperation (non-traditional security, natural resources management, economic connectivity, and human resource development). The Mekong-U.S. Partnership builds on the strengths of the Lower Mekong Initiative’s development-focused agenda by cooperating on strategic sub-regional issues and challenges. Each area of engagement under the Mekong-U.S. Partnership is supported by a flagship project. The Partnership’s Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue series serves as the flagship program of the Mekong-U.S. Partnership’s human resources development area of engagement.

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KEY ACRONYMS

ACMECS	Ayeyawaddy-Chao Phraya – Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CLV	Cambodia – Laos – Vietnam
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
ICT	Information and communications technology
MRC	Mekong River Commission
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SUMERNET	Sustainable Mekong Research Network
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
TOC	Transnational Organized Crime

A NOTE FROM CONFERENCE CHAIRS

The first Mekong-US Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue took place across four virtual half-day sessions organized by the Stimson Center and IUCN and supported by the U.S. Department of State between March 19 – 26, 2021. The Partnership Policy Dialogues are a series of seven conferences taking place between 2021 and 2023 which will explore solutions to key policy and sustainability challenges in the Lower Mekong. The first was held virtually and convened partners and stakeholders from around the Mekong region and from development partners to explore gaps, needs, and opportunities for collaboration on addressing key challenges in the Mekong River Basin.

The conference was designed to be inclusive of experts across the region and across multiple sectors, and we're delighted to report that conference participation ranged from 174 to 72 attendees across the four days, with an additional 81 participants from the general public attending the opening plenary. Fifty percent of conference participants were nationals of Mekong countries, 30% were from the United States, and 20% were from other development partner countries. Importantly, young leaders were also engaged as 28% of participants were under the age of 35. Attendance was relatively gender balanced: 49% of all participants were female and 51% were male. Most attendees (65%) were from non-government institutions and 35% were from governments. Evaluation surveys completed by conference participants show a high degree of satisfaction in both the range of issues discussed and the mix of stakeholders who represent these issues.

The Stimson Center and IUCN are excited to build on this successful interactive dialogue through six additional dialogues in coming years. We gratefully acknowledge support from the U.S. Department of State and the Mekong – U.S. Partnership for supporting this Policy Dialogue. In particular, the team would like to thank Nicole Smolinske, Jocelyn Roberts, Theodore Meinhover, Jenna Shinen, and Allison Davis of the U.S. Department of State for helping to pull together an impactful virtual conversation during the COVID19 pandemic. We would also like to thank all of our speakers and participants who shared their expertise through presentations and breakout group conversations.

Sincerely,



Brian Eyler
Conference Co-Chair



Jake Brunner
Conference Co-Chair

A photograph of a river scene. In the background, a village with various houses on stilts is reflected in the calm water. The houses have different colored roofs, including red, blue, and orange. In the foreground, a person is sitting in a long, narrow wooden boat, looking towards the village. The boat is green and has an outboard motor at the back. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is clear.

SUMMARY

Across four half-day virtual meetings held between March 19–26, 2021, the Stimson Center and IUCN facilitated the first Mekong-US Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue to explore solutions to key policy and sustainability challenges in the Lower Mekong.



The first dialogue was designed as an initial exploration of local stakeholder perspectives on five regional cooperation themes: Mekong connectivity; energy and infrastructure; non-traditional security; water governance; and nature-based solutions. Each session was aimed at identifying gaps, needs, and opportunities within the relevant sector. Cross cutting principles of inclusivity, resilience (including climate), and collaboration will be applied to all conferences in this series. Twenty-eight of 35 speakers representing government and non-government organizations were nationals of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, or Vietnam. The conference's 16 sessions were designed to maximize engagement of all participants and panelists in order to collaboratively identify needs, gaps, and opportunities related to the key topics.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FIRST POLICY DIALOGUE INCLUDE:

- Regional development frameworks and initiatives should increase communications and coordination in order to reduce redundancies and maximize benefits for the Mekong countries. Future policy dialogues like the Mekong – U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue should coordinate with other ongoing policy dialogues and conference series to construct an ongoing and iterative conversation.
- As ASEAN moves towards establishing a regional power grid, government regulators and national utility companies should work to cooperatively reform and open up the electricity markets in order to take advantage of improved connectivity. This will have benefits in terms of improving efficiency and helping individual countries and ASEAN meet national and regional renewable energy targets.
- Transnational crime and trafficking networks share numerous common drivers and venues, and development partners, international organizations, national line agencies, and NGOs should collaborate to build cross-issue linkages and strengthen investigation and enforcement methods to address common drivers.
- The Mekong River Commission, National Mekong Committees, and various outside partners should improve data sharing and communication processes across national boundaries and with other key stakeholder groups in order to more effectively coordinate on transboundary water management.
- The concept of nature-based solutions—defined as actions to protect or sustainably manage natural resources in a way that simultaneously addresses socio-economic challenges—is an emerging concept in the climate and environment discourse and should be socialized among policymakers.

Photo: Tonle Sap River, taken by Flickr user Teseum and used under a Creative Commons license.

AGENDA FOR OPENING MEKONG–U.S. PARTNERSHIP TRACK 1.5 POLICY DIALOGUE

DAY 1 Mar 19 from 8:30–11:40am ICT Mar 18 from 21:30pm–00:40am EDT		
8:30–10:00am ICT	Opening Plenary <i>The opening plenary was livestreamed to a public audience and is available for viewing here.</i> Keynote Address by Ambassador Atul Keshap, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs High level plenary panel with Q&A <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambassador Tina Redshaw, United Kingdom Ambassador to Cambodia • An Pich Hatda, CEO of the Mekong River Commission • Simon Lalic, Senior Officer, International Command (Bangkok), Australia Federal Police Conference overview and expectations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brian Eyler, Stimson Center Southeast Asia Program Director • Jake Brunner, Indo-Burma Hotspot Program Director, IUCN 	
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 1 10:10–11:40am ICT	Mekong Connectivity Panel: Strengthening Subregional and Regional Connectivity Facilitator: Courtney Weatherby Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Phan Ngoc Mai Phuong, Vice President, Vietnam Institute for Development Strategies, Ministry of Planning and Investment • Ms. Sunniya Durrani-Jamal, Country Director, Cambodia Resident Mission, Asian Development Bank • Ambassador Arunrung Phothong Humphreys, Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs 	Mekong Connectivity Panel: Intersections in Mekong Connectivities Facilitator: Jake Brunner Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Ho Long Phi, Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City • Dr. Yongyut Trisurat, Faculty of Forestry, Kasetsart University • Ms. Chea Seila, Project Manager and Coordinator, Wonders of the Mekong

AGENDA FOR OPENING MEKONG–U.S. PARTNERSHIP TRACK 1.5 POLICY DIALOGUE

DAY 2 Mar 23 8:30–11:40am ICT Mar 22 21:30pm–00:40am EDT		
8:30–8:50am ICT	Brief Opening Plenary <i>This opening session will summarize key takeaways from Day 1 of the conference and lay out expectations for Day 2.</i>	
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 2 8:50–10:10am ICT	B2 Energy & Infrastructure Panel: Energy Sector Needs and Trends in the Mekong Region Facilitator: Courtney Weatherby Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Twarath Sutabutr, Inspector General, Thailand Ministry of Energy • Ms. Nguy Thi Khanh, Executive Director, GreenID Vietnam • Dr. Han Phoumin, Senior Energy Economist, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia 	C2 Non-traditional Security Issues Panel: Countering Transnational Crime Facilitator: Brian Eyler Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms. Rebecca Miller, Regional Coordinator on Human Trafficking, UNODC Southeast Asia and the Pacific • Mr. Benedikt Hofmann, Regional Representative, UNODC Country Manager, Myanmar. • Ms. Dararat Weerapong, Senior Project Manager, TRAFFIC
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 3 10:20–11:40am ICT	B3 Energy & Infrastructure Panel: Addressing the Mekong's Infrastructure Gap Facilitator: Jake Brunner Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sera Koulabdara, Executive Director, Legacies of War • Naing Htoo, Mekong Program Director, Earth Rights International • H. E. Prak Thaveak Amida, Deputy Secretary General of the Cambodia National Council for Sustainable Development 	C3 Non-traditional Security Issues Panel: Health Security and Pandemic Response Facilitator: Raphael Glemet Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Winai Ratanasuwan, Associate Professor of the Faculty of Medicine at Siriraj Hospital • Dr. Walasinee Sakcamduang, Dean of the Faculty of Veterinary Science & Acting Director of Thailand National Wildlife Health Center • Dr. Thuy Hoang, Viet Nam Country Director, Wildlife Conservation Society

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DAY 3 Mar 24 8:30-11:40am ICT Mar 23 21:30pm-00:40am EDT		
8:30–8:50am ICT	Brief Opening Plenary <i>This opening session will summarize key takeaways from Day 2 of the conference and lay out expectations for Day 3.</i>	
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 4 8:50–10:10am ICT	D4 Water Governance Panel: Women in Water Diplomacy Facilitator: Courtney Weatherby Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms. Pianporn (Pai) Deetes, Thailand and Myanmar Campaigns Director, International Rivers • Dr. Tho Minh Thu, Deputy Director General of the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam • Dr. Chayanis Krittasudthacheewa, Deputy Director of Stockholm Environment Institute Asia 	E4 Nature-Based Solutions Panel: Protecting River Deltas with Nature Based Solutions Facilitator: Brian Eyler Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nguyen Minh Quang, Managing Director of the Mekong Environment Forum and Lecturer at Can Tho University • Youk Senglong, Deputy Executive Director, Fishery Action Coalition Team (FACT) • Dr. Nguyen Van Kien, Director of the Research Centre for Rural Development, An Giang University
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 5 10:20–11:40am	D5 Water Governance Panel: Technical Solutions to Optimizing Water-Food-Energy Resources Facilitator: Jake Brunner Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Le Anh Tuan, Vice Director of the Research Institute for Climate Change, Dragon Institute, Can Tho University • Mr. Gustavo Nicolas Paez, WWF Myanmar • Ms. Chayee Wongprasittiporn, Thailand Office of National Water Resources 	E5 Nature-Based Solutions Panel: Nature Based Solutions for Forest, River, and Wetland Conservation Facilitator: Raphael Glemet Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Niwat Roykaew, Chairman of Rak Chiang Khong & Mekong People's Forum • Dr. Thanapon Piman, Senior Research Fellow, Stockholm Environment Institute - Bangkok • Mr. Bo Sann, Monitoring Evaluation and Knowledge Management Specialist, IUCN Myanmar

AGENDA FOR OPENING MEKONG–U.S. PARTNERSHIP TRACK 1.5 POLICY DIALOGUE

DAY 4 Mar 26 8:30–11:40am ICT Mar 25 21:30pm–00:40am EDT		
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 6 8:30–10:20am	Synthesis Workshop: Energy & Infrastructure, Water Diplomacy, Connectivity Participants in the Energy & Infrastructure and Water Diplomacy panels will convene to discuss and prioritize a list of needs and interests generated from rapporteur notes and summaries of these respective panels. Connectivity notes and summaries will also be included to represent data collected on the first day of the workshop. A setting of small, interactive breakout groups will first be used to refamiliarize participants with needs and interests expressed during the panels and online polling will assist with prioritization. The inclusion and value of cross-cutting themes will also be weighed during this process. Preliminary results of this synthesis workshop will be presented during the final plenary.	Synthesis Workshop: Non-traditional Security Issues, Nature-Based Solutions, and Connectivity Participants in the Non-traditional Security and Nature Based Solutions panels will convene to discuss and prioritize a list of needs and interests generated from rapporteur notes and summaries of these respective panels. Connectivity notes and summaries will also be included to represent data collected on the first day of the workshop. A setting of small, interactive breakout groups will first be used to refamiliarize participants with needs and interests expressed during the panels and online polling will assist with prioritization. The inclusion and value of cross-cutting themes will also be weighed during this process. Preliminary results of this synthesis workshop will be presented during the final plenary.
10:30–11:40am	Final Plenary: Summary Statements and Closing Remarks	

THEMATIC AREAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summaries of the five thematic areas explored at the conference and their relevance are described below followed by a selection of recommendations per theme. These recommendations were developed and refined by conference participants through participatory and consultative processes.



Two sessions explored various areas of connectivity needs and issues present in the Mekong region. The many forms of connectivity—physical, human, economic, institutional—are key considerations when envisioning a comprehensive approach to promoting connectivity in the Mekong region. Breakout discussions explored opportunities to strengthen connectivity within and between three subregional development frameworks (Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam (CLV), and the Asian Development Bank’s Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS Program)) and emphasized the importance of physical and digital connectivity in supporting economic integration, human resource needs, institutional linkages, and the role of natural connectivity in providing livelihoods and food security. Additionally, discussions explored intersections between physical connectivity and natural connectivity in the region and highlighted opportunities for optimization across various forms of connectivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Development partners, line agencies, CSOs, and the private sector can increase focus of subregional and regional strategies for the three pillars of the GMS Strategy: Community, Connectivity, and Competitiveness. This can be achieved by adoption of inclusive, consultative decision-making processes that include early dialogue with community-level stakeholders when identifying gaps and exploring proposed projects; improving digital infrastructure especially to marginalized communities; and attracting investment to sustainable development initiatives.
- Line agencies, regional frameworks, and development partners should engage with a broad group of stakeholders to develop a uniform and consistent set of standards to promote infrastructure development and connectivity. Local communities should be involved in the formulation of such standards in order to provide equity and maximize benefits. Increased digital connectivity and harmonization of regulations across localities and states can also be employed to achieve this outcome.
- Regional development frameworks should increase connectivity in order to reduce redundancies and maximize benefits to recipient countries. Policy dialogues across different frameworks could be coordinated through working groups or through focus on a local framework such as ACMECS. Outcomes and outputs of development partner policy dialogues should be shared and disseminated at local fora such as ASEAN, ACMECs, or CLV.
- Use sites such as the Tonle Sap fishery conservation zones as a regional connectivity opportunity. Such demonstration areas have transboundary significance and can engage regional institutions such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC), national line agencies, development partners, and civil society groups in sustainable efforts to promote connectivity with geographies far from the Tonle Sap and facilitate the demonstration and transfer of best practices to other localities.
- Non-government research and universities should improve coordination on research and collaboration both with other institutions within the Mekong region and with external researchers and organizations. Strengthening existing academic networks like the Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET)¹ and developing more formal and informal collaborations between regional universities could help improve dissemination of research to a wider audience. Improved collaboration would allow for broad application of lessons learned and methodologies across national boundaries and build shared perceptions and consensus on next steps.
- Regional governments and research institutions should improve future modeling and use approaches that evaluate multiple future options in development planning rather than traditional approaches that rely on extrapolations from past data. The current era is one of climate and technological disruption and trends are not stationary. Planning approaches that consider multiple pathways, like RAND's Robust Decision Making Framework or an Adaptive Pathways Approach, can provide decision-makers with greater flexibility and alternative strategies if reality develops outside of initial plans and projections.

Photo on page 10: *GMS East-West Economic Corridor in Lao PDR, via the Asian Development Bank Flickr account and used courtesy of a Creative Commons license.*

¹ SUMERNET is an initiative for research and policy engagement which brings together research partners from Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. It was launched in 2005 and supports policy-relevant research on sustainable development issues.



ENERGY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

All five Mekong countries are managing rising and shifting electricity demand patterns driven by urbanization, industrialization, and digitalization. This requires a rapid buildout of new power generation and transmission infrastructure at a time when the global energy sector is undergoing significant transitions due to the rise of renewable energy technologies. Two sessions discussed the current status of the renewable energy transition in Southeast Asia, plans for regional power trade, and the needs for international support as countries in the region seek to build a sustainable energy sector. Additionally, sessions explored solutions to filling the gap between public spending and projected needs for energy, transportation, water, and ICT infrastructure in the Mekong region over the coming decades. The private sector will play a key role in filling this gap but is highly responsive to regional and national policies to promote investment including the way environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards are articulated and regulated in each Mekong country.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- As ASEAN moves towards establishing a regional power grid, differences in national regulatory regimes pose a challenge to electricity trade. Government regulators and national utility companies should work to cooperatively reform and open up the electricity market in each Mekong country in order to take advantage of improved connectivity. Key steps including the creation of independent national electricity regulators, establishment of a regional organization to promote rules-based electricity competition, and deregulations such as those seen in advanced economies will help countries to integrate renewable energy and pursue a sustainable, affordable, and

more resilient electricity future. Development agencies and utility companies in advanced economies and multilateral banks like the World Bank and ADB can play a supporting role in this process.

- National utilities and power planners should improve hardware and software to manage the intermittency of renewables to support higher amounts of grid penetration and avoid curtailment. Physical infrastructure upgrades include improvements to regional connectivity and national transmission networks to better absorb variable renewable energy as well as investment in storage technologies such as batteries, hydrogen, or pumped storage hydropower. National utilities and private sector investors will play a key role in this space by investing public funds and private investments towards transmission line upgrades and integrating backup storage technologies.
- National utilities and regional power planners can also take regulatory steps and operational shifts to ensure smooth integration of solar and wind in future. Policymakers from national energy ministries should establish clear standards, targets, and roadmaps for the deployment of storage technologies and develop flexible power purchase agreements that will allow for cross-border power trade of renewable energy technologies. Finally, there are opportunities to improve the way that national grids manage daily load and dispatch in order to make use of renewable energy when it is available and rely on traditional power sources during times of day when the sun is not shining or the wind is not blowing. These changes require capacity building and improvements to forecasting but can help forestall more expensive physical infrastructure upgrades.
- National planning agencies and project developers should adapt consultation mechanisms to better incorporate feedback from local stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle. This can be done through building capacity at the local level to understand national planning processes and standards, incorporating non-technical and non-expert data into the consultation processes, and encouraging project developers to directly engage with and listen to community and CSOs as was seen in Datang Corporation's engagements with local communities in Chiang Khong, Thailand.
- Although best practices for ESG standards are increasingly institutionalized in multinational and global banks, many projects in the Mekong region are funded by national banks in China, Thailand, and Vietnam. Tradeoffs and impacts for the Mekong region could be better managed if these banks adhere to ESG standards for project financing. Regional banking associations, national banking authorities, and human rights commissions have a role to play in building buy-in at individual financial institutions to adopt clear principles or policies on ESG standards.
- National and regional organizations responsible for reviewing and approving new infrastructure projects should require cumulative impact analysis in order to better account for interactions between projects and consider the non-direct costs that often fall on regional governments rather than project developers. These non-direct often include items like continuing support for communities after resettlement or costs for mitigation not covered under a limited environmental and social impact assessment. For hydropower projects specifically, national ministries or the MRC could legally and functionally require that dam companies utilize up-to-date information for transboundary impact assessments and cost-benefit analysis to ensure that direct and indirect costs are fully considered. One example is the Sanakham Dam, which brought forward an environmental impact assessment (EIA) that was a decade old and failed to address cumulative impacts from projects that have since been built or proposed when it underwent the MRC's Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation, and Agreement. Requiring up to date socio-economic and environmental data would better position government decision-makers and investors to understand the real costs and benefits.

Photo on page 12: *Electricity in Vietnam, provided by United Nations Photo Flickr account and used under a Creative Commons license.*



TRANSBOUNDARY WATER GOVERNANCE

Conference discussion focused on improving gender equity and women-led efforts in transboundary water governance and technical solutions to basin-wide planning. Despite playing a key role in managing and safeguarding water resources in their households and communities, women's distinct needs and voices are often under-represented in consultations at the decision-making level. This challenge persists even though women are the leaders of numerous water governance efforts throughout the Mekong region. To improve sustainability outcomes in river basins in the region, inclusive consultative processes and basin-wide planning approaches should be applied. Discussion highlighted pathways to ideal states of basin-wide or sub-basin development with emphasis on the Mekong Basin, Vietnam's Resolution 120 to sustainably develop the Mekong Delta, and water-energy-food nexus tradeoff optimization in the Irrawaddy Basin.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Equal data access is a necessary component for effective coordination and collaboration on transboundary water management. By expanding near real-time data sharing and expanding the scope of data sharing to include projects on tributaries, the MRC and National Mekong Committees (NMCs) can improve bilateral communication processes and coordination. It is important for all countries with dams in the Mekong basin to participate in information-sharing processes, and it may sometimes be appropriate to start with bilateral communications about water management on tributary rivers in order to socialize information sharing and build trust. There are also opportunities for social media and media outlets to play a role in the dissemination of information to the public.

- Women play a key role in managing water resources in households and communities but are often left out of decision-making processes. Increasing the role of women in leadership roles particularly in technical sectors such as water resource management, transportation, and infrastructure would provide opportunities for women's perspectives and interests to be represented and integrated into policy approaches. National, provincial, and local government agencies can consider quotas for gender representation not just in terms of jobs, which has been done in Vietnam, but in terms of research and professional development opportunities. Outside of government there are opportunities for civil society organizations, project developers, and donors or international development partners to provide financial support and grant schemes for women to lead or participate in working groups and professional organizations or include clauses that support co-leadership of projects by women in order to build experience and elevate women's voices. Supporting women's participation may sometimes require helping women overcome family and household responsibility pressures which currently block them from participating, such as providing temporary childcare facilities on site for conferences or meetings.
- National and provincial decisionmakers can improve engagement with local communities on development projects by holding more cross-power dialogues in places which are feasibly accessed by local communities and inclusive of marginalized voices. This could include creating more room for non-traditional or non-formal meeting engagements that take place in the areas affected by projects in order to improve accessibility. Arranging meetings with district chiefs and local level civil society organizations would ensure inclusivity and also support a collaborative dialogue which can devise shared outcomes or goals and build greater buy-in for water infrastructure projects and policies.
- Water management is most effective when it includes stakeholders from a variety of sectors who can bring multiple perspectives and priorities to the negotiation table. The MRC and NMCs can build in avenues for systematic engagement with research communities such as SUMERNET which provide valuable data and analysis and expertise as peer reviewers for official studies. Establishment of a Multi-stakeholder River Basin Organization (RBO) that includes non-government stakeholders and has an organized institutional structure and executive power could improve allocation of water across different sectors and improve coordination of differing priorities within the water-energy-food nexus. This would be best managed by the national water agency, and Thailand's Office of National Water Resources establishment of 22 RBOs inside Thailand is a good model to use as a case study.
- National line agencies should work with provincial authorities and farming communities to adapt agriculture production targets to respond to changing water availability. In the Mekong Delta, this could include reviewing agricultural production targets for rice and revising them in line with Resolution 120 to consider alternative and diversified agricultural outputs which use less water, have higher added value, and would meet shifting market demands. Consultations and awareness raising about alternatives can be done through improving communications and active engagement with farming communities. Financial institutions can provide bank loans to help farmers shift target crops.

Photo on page 14: *Social Network Analysis in Cambodia, photo taken by Leong Ching and provided by Water Alternatives Photos Flickr account under a Creative Commons license.*



NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS

Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) is an emerging approach that addresses sustainable development goals (SDGs), builds climate resilience and adaptation, and helps solve complex socio-economic challenges. Nature-Based Solutions can be defined as actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits. Discussions under this theme focused on NBS in river deltas, forests, and wetlands. River deltas from the Red to the Mekong to the Chao Phraya to the Irrawaddy face similar challenges posed by upstream impacts, poorly conceived local planning, and climate change. Restoring natural ecosystem processes in deltas can allow those who live there, whether in urban or rural areas, to adapt to and prosper into an age of uncertainty. Forests, wetlands, and rivers provide resources for a significant portion of the Mekong Region's population, as well as an important role in forming cultural identities and social practices that keep communities connected. Discussion explored the social and economic value of local forest, wetland, and river conservation efforts through best practices and highlighted challenges communities face in conserving and preserving these resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- NBS is a relatively new concept in the environment and climate discourse and needs to be socialized among policymakers. National and urban planners have an opportunity to apply NBS in research and planning approaches for land-use planning. Academic experts should improve documentation of the case studies and the multiplicity of benefits that they provide across a range of sectors, including environment and economic considerations. Private sector actors who implement NBS approaches have an opportunity to improve documentation of their effectiveness and publicize the approach in a way that will improve adoption by key decision makers. Examples include Fish

Conservation Areas in Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake, which have resulted in more fish, larger fish, and greater fish diversity. Ensuring that documentation of similar NBS projects meets national standards will be a key step in driving policy changes.

- Local and national government officials should utilize the example of Vietnam's Resolution 120 for the Mekong Delta to write nature-based solutions into national and local laws, sectoral plans, and Nationally Determined Contributions. International organizations can build NBS into the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the SDGs, and the Bonn Challenge. Non-government stakeholders can support this process by improving documentation of case studies and the multiplicity of benefits from NBS compared against traditional development approaches.
- NBS can be implemented at the local level through a bottom-up approach led by on-the-ground stakeholders. CSOs, university programs, and community leaders have an opportunity to nurture local adaptation by building NBS into capacity-building programming for local farmers, citizen scientists, and other active community members. Academic programs, CSOs, and local governments can also conduct feasibility studies with communities in order to build local buy-in, demonstrate market response, and explore NBS viability in the local context. Advocate for the adoption of NBS at the local level will eventually build an evidence base which can be used to push for adoption at national-level policies and planning approaches.
- NBS are often piloted at the local level, and there is a need to improve learning and scalability of grassroots activities such as circular adaptation when they prove effective. Universities and civil society organizations should empower stakeholders by increasing capacity building and training community members and farmers as citizen scientists and presenting the results of pilot projects at regional fora. Business organizations and private sector companies engaging in NBS for profit can empower stakeholders by networking multiple stakeholders to create local value chains.
- One challenge in implementing NBS is that it takes time before seeing the results, and oftentimes those involved will face short-term tradeoffs such as lost revenue or a decrease in income while transitioning. Approaches to adopting NBS need to directly link NBS approaches to market value and ensure that this is reflected in the supply chain—for instance, marketing non-chemical and high biodiversity rice requires building awareness among the consumer and building direct linkages between consumers and producers, ensuring that the farmer is benefiting rather than an intermediary.
- Many of the greatest contributions of nature-based solutions are non-tangible, and it is important to incorporate non-tangible economic benefits, costs, and externalities into decision-making processes about infrastructure. Financial institutions and national ministries should require cost-benefit analysis to incorporate net-present value, internal rates of return, and benefit cost ratio in their analysis. These considerations can help determine if individual NBS approaches are commercially feasible. International development partners may be able to provide assistance in terms of capacity building on best practices and methodologies for assigning values to non-tangible costs and benefits.

Photo on page 16: *Pilot project for community biogas production in Cambodia. Photo kindly provided by by Nguyen Minh Quang.*



NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY

The conference explored two non-traditional security subthemes: countering transnational organized crime and health security/pandemic response. Transnational organized crime (TOC) in the Mekong creates instability throughout the region, especially along borders. Efforts against TOC includes activities such as dismantling transnational criminal organizations, investigating and prosecuting money laundering, combatting trafficking of narcotics, weapons, wildlife, and timber, and combatting trafficking in persons (TIP). Given the cross-border nature of TOC, regional coordination among all five Mekong countries requires strong national capabilities and cross-regional communication and cooperation to deter and detect transnational crime. The second sub-theme explored threats to health security throughout the region, including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and emerging health security threats. Discussion focused on ASEAN's One Health approach to solving pressing regional health security challenges in the Mekong and applied a holistic approach identifying cross-sectoral health security risks including pandemic response, zoonotic disease risks relevant to both agriculture and wildlife, as well as urban and rural development effects on vector borne diseases.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNTERING TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME:

- The trafficking of narcotics, weapons, wildlife, timber, and trafficking in persons share numerous common drivers. Development partners, international organizations, and national line agencies and NGOs should collaborate to build cross-issue linkages and strengthen investigation and enforcement methods to reduce these common drivers. This can be achieved by more inclusive representation at relevant fora, demonstrating how such linkages have paid off in similar areas (e.g., IUU fishing and environmental degradation of the ocean), and raising awareness about how these common drivers are linked.
- Line agencies, development partners, international organizations, NGOs, and social media firms should utilize methods to reduce supply and demand of illicit goods. Local supply and demand studies can point to emerging drivers and sources of trafficking. Natural resource conservation efforts, nature-based solutions, and sustainable agriculture models can reduce the supply of wildlife trafficking through the protection of forested areas and other habitats and provide a natural resource base to reduce vulnerability. This can also reduce linkages that are co-used for human trafficking or other illicit activities. Investments in local livelihoods and employment and support for domestic migration and job transition can help reduce pressures to engage in illicit activities. Development and implementation of cross-cutting risk reduction frameworks can respond to increasing levels of environmental and climate pressure.
- Community groups, NGOs, line agencies, development partners, and the media can increase focus on border casinos and special economic zones (SEZs) to monitor and stem illicit activities happening there. Community level assessments can determine how much illicit activities at these sites affect the daily livelihoods of individuals. Raised awareness of both risks and opportunities created by these sites can maximize positive economic gains and reduce vulnerability. Working with civil society organizations, community leaders, and civic organizations to conduct community-level assessments and raise awareness about the local impacts of transnational organized crime would make organized crime a local issue in SEZs and areas surrounding border casinos. Highlighting the impacts on and risks to local stakeholders could build local political will to address these issues locally. Line agencies should strengthen enforcement of regulations governing these sites.
- Build on the success of awareness raising campaigns about illegal trafficking by strengthening accountability of law enforcement officers and judges to effectively implement regulations. In some cases, this may require strengthening other laws or regulations which can help catch criminals, such as anti-money laundering regulations, arms possession, or requiring corporations to disclose supply chain information. Improved awareness should be matched by capacity building efforts to train law enforcement officers to better detect, investigate, and prosecute traders. This may require streamlining investigation processes through allowing environmental police to conduct financial investigations or providing specialized training to judges and those involved in prosecuting trafficking cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HEALTH SECURITY AND PANDEMIC RESPONSE:

- Universities, key medical institutions, global health advisors at health ministries, international organizations, CSOs, and development partners can improve pandemic detection capabilities by strengthening monitoring centers for zoonotic diseases at the national and regional level and through increasing R&D to universities and science networks which can detect new coronaviruses. These groups can also partner to reinforce and build capacity for a One Health approach and increase focus on marginalized areas and communities. Strengthening conservation group networks and networks of national parks and protected areas can create buffers between urban areas and wildlife and reduce the risk of zoonotic disease transfer to human populations.

- People-to-people connectivity is key to successful implementation of the multi-sector, transdisciplinary One Health approach. Academic organizations and government institutions should take steps to build greater trust and confidence among key actors throughout the Mekong countries. Building multi-sector connections requires a streamlined approach to communications so that non-technical experts from other fields can effectively engage with information. Using infographics and public-oriented communications approaches can improve information sharing in this space.
- Universities, key medical institutions, global health advisors at health ministries, international organizations, CSOs, and development partners should build efforts to develop a faster mitigation response system to the emergence of new pandemics. This is done through building strong community-government relations; sharing best practices in effective contact tracing, quarantine regulations, and design for alternative care facilities; as well as providing focus on marginalized areas and communities.
- Finance ministries, foreign ministries, other relevant line agencies, the private sector, and development partners should collaborate to increase both soft and hard infrastructure for COVID-19 vaccination rollout. Improvements to the soft infrastructure side of vaccine rollout include training on how to deliver different types of vaccines and assistance with managing vaccine distribution logistics. Hard infrastructure assistance could include investment or assistance with vaccine distribution supply chain equipment. Development partners have opportunities to improve local implementation capacity through sharing lessons learned and transfer best logistical practices for vaccine distribution. This could include successful case studies with utilization of alternative quarantine sites or testing and distribution facilities. There are also opportunities to improve access for Mekong governments to obtain or purchase vaccinations.

Photo on page 18: *USAID joins visit to Thailand's Khao Yai National Park, courtesy of the USAID Asia Flickr account and used under a Creative Commons license.*

FEEDBACK

Surveys of attendees indicate that the dialogue was notably successful in sharing information, building new connections, and sparking interest in further deep dives on relevant topics. Of the attendees who responded anonymously to evaluation surveys:

- 92% learned some or a lot of new information by participating in the dialogue.
- 80% indicated that they would definitely or probably use the knowledge gained in their work.
- 90% felt that the virtual dialogues connected them to local Mekong stakeholders with whom they shared common interests and 82% indicated that the dialogues identified US-based or development partner stakeholders with whom they shared common interests.
- 98% said that they would recommend participating in a future dialogue to their colleagues, 2% were neutral, and no attendees would not recommend participation.

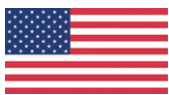
Participants particularly valued the diversity of participation across themes and from different sectors and the use of breakout rooms held under Chatham House Rules to provide comfortable space for dialogue.

Participants also suggested ways to make future virtual workshops more engaging and productive such as splitting into more targeted breakout groups for in-depth discussion on particular topics, adding facilitators to drive breakout group dialogue, and potentially sharing participant information for connection outside of the breakout rooms. Many participants noted that finding a way to engage with Chinese stakeholders during the dialogues would be valuable given the role that Chinese stakeholders play in driving and addressing a wide range of the topical issues discussed at the conference.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, one conference exploring each of these themes above will be held at roughly 5-month intervals through 2023. Given continued travel and gathering restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic, the second conference—which will be held on energy and infrastructure in the fall of 2021—will also be held virtually. Recently a sixth theme of human resource development was added justifying an additional conference. The final themes are subject to change, but instead of being designed as a listening activity to gather needs and hear interests expressed from local stakeholders, future events will be opportunities for stakeholders from the region, the United States, and development partners to build collaborative partnerships, transfer best practices, and identify joint-pathways to meeting policy needs.

As a Track 1.5 dialogue series and as a best practice to strengthening the Mekong-US Partnership at large, participants to these thematic conferences will come from government and non-government sectors and emphasis will be placed on gender balance, youth participants, and the participation of individuals from under-represented stakeholder groups. The first dialogue drew a large and diverse crowd. Future policy dialogues are likely to have more targeted invitation lists based on the specific sectoral focus, and all attendees will be asked to actively contribute in the breakout discussions in exploring best practices, case studies, and opportunities.



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ABOUT THE POLICY DIALOGUE SERIES

This summary report provides an outline and recommendations derived from discussions held as a part of the Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue series. The Partnership Policy Dialogues are a series of seven conferences taking place between 2021 and 2023 that are generously supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of State's Mekong-U.S. Partnership. Cross cutting principles of inclusivity, resilience (including climate), and collaboration will be applied to all conferences in this series.

The U.S. Government launched the Mekong-U.S. Partnership in 2020 to expand cooperation with the five countries of the Mekong sub-region on strategic challenges and shared priorities under the Partnership's four areas of cooperation (non-traditional security, natural resources management, economic connectivity, and human resource development). The Mekong-U.S. Partnership builds on the strengths of the Lower Mekong Initiative's development-focused agenda by cooperating on strategic sub-regional issues and challenges. Each area of engagement under the Mekong-U.S. Partnership is supported by a flagship project. The Partnership's Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue series serves as the flagship program of the Mekong-U.S. Partnership's human resources development area of engagement.