MEKONG - U.S. PARTNERSHIP TRACK 1.5 POLICY DIALOGUE ON CONNECTIVITY

Summary Report

The Mekong-U.S. Partnership promotes the stability, peace, prosperity, and sustainable development of the Mekong sub-region. 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/.

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.

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ABOUT THE POLICY DIALOGUE SERIES

This summary report provides an outline and recommendations derived from discussions on connectivity 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.

CONTENTS

KEY ACRONYMS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CBTA	Cross-Border Transport Facilitation Agreement
CLV	Cambodia – Laos – Vietnam
CSO	Civil Society Organization
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
MRC	Mekong River Commission
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterpises
YSEALI	Young Southeast Asia Leadership Initiative

A NOTE FROM CONFERENCE CHAIRS

The third Mekong-US Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue on Connectivity was the second thematic dialogue of the Partnership Policy Dialogue series, and it took place across four virtual half-day sessions from March 15 to 22, 2022. The Partnership Policy Dialogues are a series of seven conferences taking place between 2021 and 2023, which explore solutions to key policy and sustainability challenges in the Lower Mekong. The first was held virtually in March 2021 and convened partners and stakeholders from around the Mekong region to explore gaps, needs, and opportunities for collaboration on addressing key challenges. This third dialogue built on connectivity concerns raised during those initial discussions with a deep dive into challenges related to economic, human, digital, and environmental connectivity needs.

The conference was designed to be inclusive of experts across the region and across multiple sectors, and more than 100 attendees participated in discussions across the opening plenary dialogues and parallel sessions. Over half (55%) of the conference registrants came from one of the five Mekong countries, with 33% coming from the United States. The remaining 23% were from a range of regional partners, including Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, and other countries in ASEAN and Asia. While a quarter of participants didn't want to share information on age, 19% of registrants were rising voices under 35. The majority of attendees (62%) were from non-government institutions and 38% were from government affiliated ministries or organizations. Evaluation surveys completed by conference participants show that most participants developed insights into relevant policy issues and would recommend participation in future dialogues to a colleague.

Our teams at the Stimson Center and IUCN look forward to building on the approaches from this dialogue through four additional dialogues on other topics in coming years. We deeply appreciate support from the U.S. Department of State and the Mekong-U.S. Partnership for this Policy Dialogue. In particular, the team would like to thank Nicole Smolinske, Rachel Rodgers, Alexandra Radu, and Elizabeth Evans of the U.S. Department of State; Terry Regan, Stephanie Fischer, and Eng Gin Moe with the Department of Transportation; Dr. Chayanis Krittasudthacheewa and Agus Negroho from the Stockholm Environment Institute Asia; and Mr. Mario Masaya from the U.S. – ASEAN Business Council for helping to coordinate speakers and pull together an impactful and interactive virtual conversation. We would also like to thank our more than 40 presenters and all our participants for engaging actively during the discussions.

Sincerely,

Brian Eyler
The Stimson Center
Conference Co-Chair

Raphael Glemet
IUCN
Conference Co-Chair

SUMMARY

Across four half-day meetings held from March 15 to 22, 2022, the Stimson Center and IUCN facilitated the third Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue to explore challenges and opportunities related to economic, human, digital, and environmental connectivity in the Lower Mekong.

The third dialogue was a deep-dive into connectivity needs and challenges in the Mekong Region with particular focus on how COVID-19 has impacted human, economic, and digital connectivity. Participants explored policy challenges and best practices from the US, Mekong countries, and development partner countries such as members of the Quad (Australia, Japan, and India) related to transportation and cross-border connectivity, multi-stakeholder collaboration, migratory labor, the digital marketplace, information access, data privacy, and ecosystem connectivity, among other areas. Cross-cutting values of inclusivity, resilience (including climate), and collaboration framed presentations and discussions and were woven into the recommendations. The conference's 11 sessions used Zoom Webinars and online tools like Mentimeter and Jamboard to maximize engagement of all participants and panelists.

PRIORITY ISSUES & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE POLICY DIALOGUE ON CONNECTIVITY INCLUDE:

- Chambers of Commerce, business associations, and training programs should provide greater support to managers of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) on e-commerce marketing and operations through programs like the ASEAN SME Academy. During the pandemic, SMEs were disproportionately affected by a sharp drop in demand, supply chain disruptions, and contract cancellations. COVID-19's impacts on domestic markets severely affected SMEs—but those SMEs that were able to move their marketing and operations online were resilient, and many even increased earnings and market position. However, SMEs which did not have that capacity suffered.
- Civil society and think tank networks should develop processes for enabling locally-based community groups to communicate and interact with similarly affected groups in other countries. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are generally small and operate locally, but the greatest problems are transboundary and require cross-border collaboration. There is often a lack of resources and coordination among local CSOs, which prevents them from accessing and engaging in political dialogue at the national or the regional level. Development partners and other funders should provide flexible multiyear funding to support effective, long-term networking.
- Mekong governments should work with software and communication companies to sponsor equipment for online learning programs in schools and Ministries of Education should build digital skills into school curriculum. Gaps in information and communications technology (ICT) adoption, digital connectivity, and the digital divide have been further exacerbated by the pandemic. COVID-19 has supercharged online communications and hastened ICT adoption—but has also further exposed the gap between those who do and do not have access to these tools.
- Governments and private sector actors should reduce over-exploitation of rivers and recognize the value of keeping rivers free-flowing. River fragmentation is often a by-product of water resource infrastructure development, particularly hydropower. The economic benefits of water infrastructure are concentrated and easily quantifiable—for instance, income from energy generation or irrigated agriculture—whilst those from free-flowing rivers, particularly sediment and nutrient transport and fisheries, are disperse and can be difficult to quantify. As a result, cost-benefit analyses tend to systematically overemphasize the benefits and underestimate the costs from irrigation and hydropower projects.

Photo: *Baiyoke Bangkok View, taken by Flickr user GAry Wong and used under a Creative Commons license.*

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

DAY 1	Mar 15 from 8:30-11:40am ICT Mar 14 from 21:30pm-00:40am EDT

8:30–10:00am ICT	### Opening Plenary
	Keynote Addresses
	• Senior Advisor Laura Stone, U.S. Department of State
	• Ambassador Nguyen Quoc Dzung, Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam
	
	High level plenary panel with Q&A
	Each speaker delivered a 10-minute presentation followed by a brief and focused Q&A:
	   • Ramesh Subramaniam, Southeast Asia Director at the Asian Development Bank
	   • Neha Misra, Solidarity Center
	   • Thao Nguyen Griffiths, Meta
	   • Zeb Hogan, University of Nevada - Reno
	   • Facilitator: Brian Eyler, Stimson Center Southeast Asia Program Director
	
	Conference overview and expectations:
	   • Brian Eyler, Stimson Center Southeast Asia Program Director
	   • Raphael Glemet, Senior Programme Officer for Water and Wetlands, IUCN

10:10–11:40am ICT	### Opening Plenary Breakout Discussion: Regional Economic Connectivity Speakers from the opening plenary joined facilitators in breakout rooms, with each room representing one of the four conference sub-themes. The facilitator led the speaker and breakout room participants in a guided discussion exploring regulatory pathways to addressing challenges to their respective themes. This set the scene and raised questions for discussion in the following days. Topics of discussion varied by panel but included the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Cross-Border Transport Facilitation Agreement (CBTA), integration under the ASEAN Economic Community, environmental protection regulations on transboundary projects, international transit policies and quarantine, etc.

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

DAY 2

Mar 16 8:30-11:40am ICT
Mar 15 21:30pm-00:40am EDT

| CONCURRENT SESSIONS 2

8:30–10:10am ICT | **A1 Economic Connectivity**

Panel: Transportation, commerce, and regional economic connectivity

Facilitator: Terry Regan, U.S. Department of Transportation Volpe Center

Panelists:

• David Yessen, FMCSA
• Phan Ngoc Mai Phuong, Vietnam Institute of Development Strategies
• Mr. Madhurjya Dutta, Director of Trade and Investment Facilitation Department, Mekong Institute | **B1 Human Connectivity**

Panel: Encouraging Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Facilitator: Chayanis Krittasudthacheewa, Stockholm Environment Institute Asia

Panelists:

• Agus Nugroho, Stockholm Environment Institute Asia
• Veerawit Tianchainan, Chief of Party, USAID Mekong for the Future
• Dr. Kanokwan Manorom, Associate Professor, Ubon Ratchathani University
• Brian Eyler, The Stimson Center |
| CONCURRENT SESSIONS 3

10:20–11:40am ICT | **A2 Economic Connectivity**

Panel: Economic Transition and Labor

Facilitator: Rebecca Napier-Moore, ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

Panelists:

• Hnin Phyu Phyu Aye, Helvetas Myanmar
• Trang Dinh and Rowena Reyes, Sweef Capital
• David Welsh, Solidarity Center | **B2 Human Connectivity**

Panel: Health Security and Pandemic Response

Facilitator: Nicole Smolinske, U.S. Department of State

Panelists:

• Mr. Gurdit Singh, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State
• Ms. Jintawadee Suksri, Thailand Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning
• Ms. Soytavanh Mienmany, Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australia National University |

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

| DAY 3	Mar 18 8:30-11:40am ICT Mar 17 21:30pm-00:40am EDT	
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 4 **8:30–10:10am ICT**	**C1 Digital Connectivity** **Panel: E-Commerce and the Digital Marketplace** **Facilitator:** Mr. Mario Masaya, Director of Digital Policy, U.S. – ASEAN Business Council **Panelists:** • Pisal Chanty, ASEAN ICT Center, Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications of Cambodia • Caroline Rubin, Chief of Party for USAID – IGNITE, Nathan • Ruici Tio, Meta	**D1 Environmental Connectivity** **Panel: Terrestrial Corridors** **Facilitator:** Anish Andheria of Wildlife Conservation Trust **Panelists:** • Duncan Lang, Senior Environment Specialist, Asian Development Bank • Ms. Sutasinee Saosoong, Tiger and Leopard Research SWEFCOM Project Manager, Panthera • Harry Jonas, Senior Director for Conservation Areas, WWF
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 5 **10:20–11:40am**	**C2 Digital Connectivity** **Panel: Technical Solutions to Optimizing Water-Food-Energy Resources** **Facilitator:** Matthew Baird, Director of Asian Research Institute for Environmental Law **Panelists:** • Yan Naung Oak, Thibi • Pyrou Chung, Open Development Initiative and East-West Management Institute • Johanna Kao, International Republican Institute	**D2 Environmental Connectivity** **Panel: Nature Based Solutions for Forest, River, and Wetland Conservation** **Facilitator:** Danielle Neighbour, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs **Panelists:** • Natalie Shahbol, Program Officer, WWF Free Flowing Rivers • John Bright, KESAN • Thim Ly, Mekong River Commission • Pianporn Deetes, International Rivers

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

DAY 4	Mar 22 8:30-11:40am ICT Mar 21 21:30pm-00:40am EDT
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 6 **8:30–10:20am**	**Synthesis Workshop** **Closing Remarks:** Peter Lohman of the U.S. Department of State Following the remarks, the conference organizers held an interactive poll using Mentimeter where participants ranked the importance of key issues that were identified in presentations and discussions across each of the sub-themes on Days 1, 2, and 3. The top three key issues and associated policy recommendations were then workshopped in parallel tracks, where participants joined one of four parallel breakout rooms and participated in interactive discussion sessions using Jamboard to flesh out the context, key actors, and specific recommendations for each set of key issues. Each breakout session focused on one of the four conference sub-themes on connectivity: economic, human, digital, or environmental. The Jamboard results were directly reviewed and prioritized for inclusion in the summary report.
11:10–11:40am	**Final Plenary: Summary Statements and Closing Remarks**

THEMATIC AREAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The key concerns and recommendations in each thematic section below were drawn from the session presentations and discussion and then prioritized during the synthesis workshop. Throughout the conference the organizing team tracked the specific concerns, key actors, and recommendations that were raised during session discussions. These were each formatted into an interactive Jamboard template which tracked the broad issues, contextual notes, key actors, and policy recommendations that had emerged from the discussions.

Using an interactive live-ranking poll via Mentimeter, participants in the Synthesis Workshop identified the top three priority issues for each of the four sub-themes at the dialogue: economic connectivity, human connectivity, digital connectivity, and environmental connectivity. The following issues and recommendations emerged from the in-depth workshopping process. The brainstorming sessions often identified a wide range of relevant recommendations; the top policy recommendations as finalized and identified by votes of support from participants are included in this summary report._____
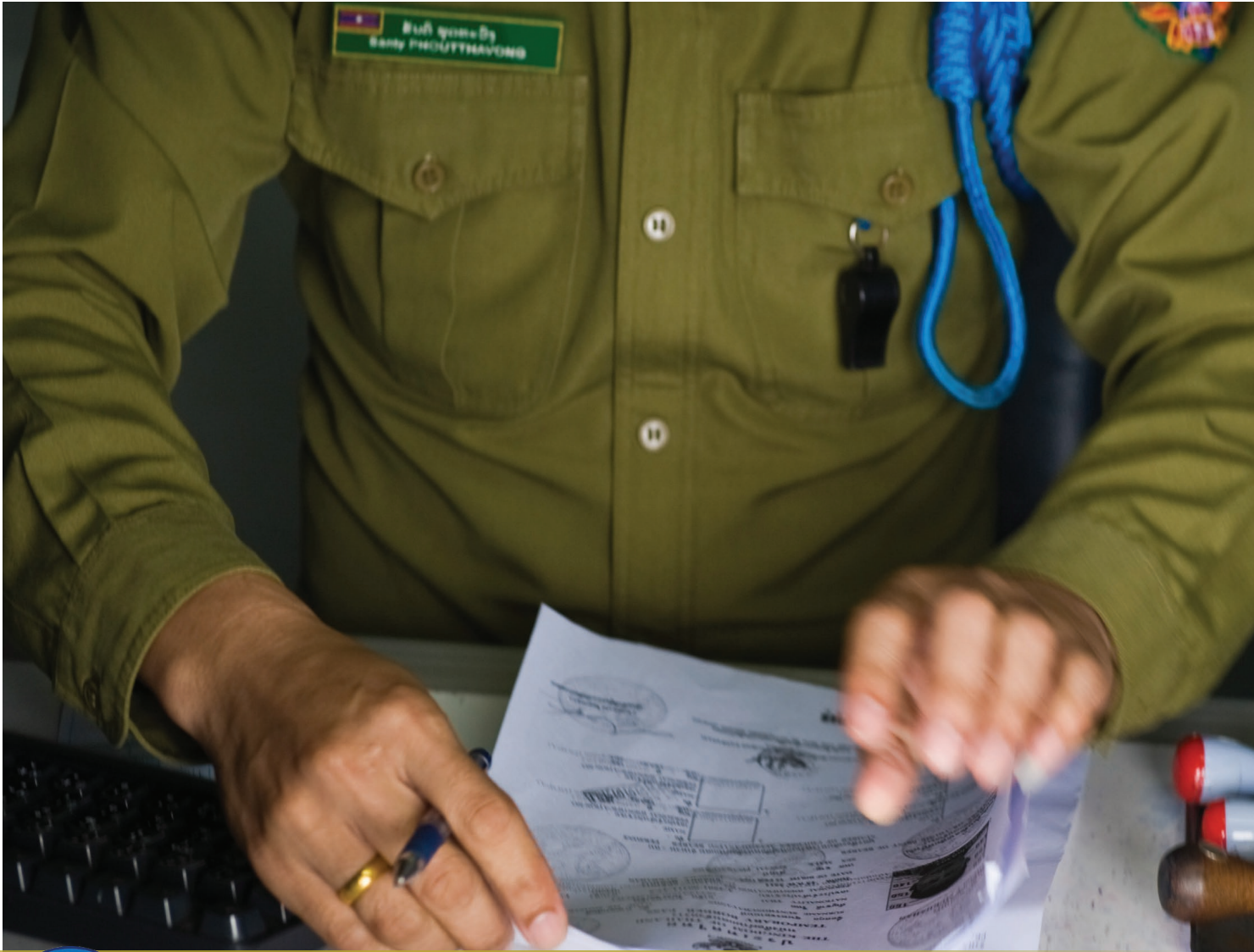
ECONOMIC CONNECTIVITY

While Mekong countries have established many mechanisms to increase connectivity and move towards shared economic growth, such as the GMS Economic Corridors Program, the Cross-Border Transport Agreement (CBTA), and ASEAN Economic Connectivity, regulatory and institutional hurdles still pose challenges. Such obstacles limit the safe and efficient mobility of people and goods. Migratory labor cohorts actively move across borders seeking work and are a driver of regional economic development. However, the pandemic's impacts on the regional economy and migratory laborers reveals rapid changes to the economy that will particularly impact unskilled laborers, and which hinder equitable access to the benefits of regional economic growth.

Sessions at the Dialogue explored challenges and regional initiatives related to cross-border transport and security and the way that labor and migration in the Mekong region is challenged by disruptive factors. Both sessions considered the lessons learned through the COVID pandemic such as impacts to supply chains and migrant laborers.

Photo on page 10: *Border Check Point at GMS East-West Economic Corridor in Lao PDR, photo courtesy of the Asian Development Bank's Flickr account and used under a Creative Commons license.*

ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **During the pandemic, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were disproportionately affected by a sharp drop in demand, supply chain disruptions, and contract cancellations.** SMEs account for more than 90% of enterprises in the region and generate approximately 70% of employment but are only responsible for a small portion of exports.[1] COVID-19's impacts on domestic markets severely affected SMEs—but those SMEs that were able to move their marketing and operations online were resilient, and many even increased earnings and market position. However, those which did not have that capacity suffered.
    - International businesses and business associations should provide consumers with digital skills to better use e-commerce.
    - Relevant ministries—such as Ministries of Investment and Trade—should investigate the current challenges in the region related to e-commerce and improve baseline understanding among policymakers of what needs to be done to capitalize on digital opportunities.
    - Chambers of Commerce, business associations, and donor-supported training programs should provide greater support to managers of SMEs on e-commerce marketing and operations through programs like the ASEAN SME Academy. Successful U.S. businesses can be used as case studies in training programs.
    - Government ministries should provide new businesses with training and resources on managing disruptions when they register.

- Most of the Mekong countries did not invest sufficiently in pandemic research and prevention given pressures to invest in more recurring development needs. There was already a significant infrastructure gap of billions of dollars annually prior to the pandemic, and **COVID-19 has led to less financial resources for infrastructure as countries reprioritized resources to combat the pandemic.**
    - Regional governments and international development partners should encourage greater involvement of the private sector in the implementation of connectivity programs and projects.
    - The United States and other development partners should actively coordinate to provide funding for infrastructure to avoid overlap in some areas and failure to fill gaps in other areas. When appropriating and allocating funding, development partnres should consider the needs on the ground in prioritizing assistance.
    - The CLV countries (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) should enhance trilateral cooperation mechanisms, focusing on plans and programs which benefit all three countries and could identify attractive infrastructure investments.
    - In the long-term, each Mekong government should allocate sufficient funds for research and prevention of future pandemics.

- **Trade benefits from multilateral Cross Border Trade Agreements are not spread equitably across countries.** In volume, most trade in the GMS takes place in China and Thailand, and there are concerns that other countries would not gain equitable benefits from CBTAs.
    - National government should promote cross-border economic zones to encourage investments that link across the value chain and help ensure broad access to benefits of increased trade.
    - The region should promote investment collaboration and Cross Border Trade Agreements to strengthen e-commerce through connecting transboundary infrastructure such as fiber optics and 5G to enhance digital connectivity
    - Regional governments should develop high-quality, parallel investment regimes.
    - Mekong countries should collectively clarify what distribution or sharing of benefits should look like, what is acceptable, and what is the right approach to growth, in order for development partners to effectively provide assistance in this space.

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[1] For more information on SMEs and micro SMEs in ASEAN, see Giulia Marsan and Lina Sabrina, ASEAN MSMEs in a COVID-19 World: Lessons from ERIA MSMEs Talks 1-5, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia.

HUMAN CONNECTIVITY

Many of the greatest economic and policy challenges facing the Mekong region are inherently multi-sectoral in nature, requiring a cohesive and coordinated approach between independent groups of stakeholders. Building bridges between government, private sector, civil society, and academic actors who have historically worked in isolation is crucial to ensure long-term buy-in and success. U.S. programming for people-to-people connections runs deep in the Mekong region, spanning several decades. Notable programs include the Young Southeast Asia Leadership Initiative (YSEALI) program, International Visiting Leadership Program, and Mississippi-Mekong sister river programming. While participants often find these experiences both life-changing and enriching, the range of outcomes after the program ends is varied. Some participants put their experiences to effective use translating to measurable impact, and others having a less successful experience. One session explored existing successes and challenges in collaborative efforts between government and civil society stakeholders in the Mekong region. The second session discussed best practices from both participant and programmatic perspectives achieving higher levels of long-lasting impact with people to people programming.

ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Civil society organizations (CSOs) are generally small and operate locally, but the greatest problems are transboundary and require cross-border collaboration.** There is often a lack of resources and coordination among local CSOs, which prevents them from accessing and engaging in political dialogue at the national or the regional level. Governments lack trust in transnational non-government organization (NGO) networks and sometimes view their activities as a threat to national sovereignty.
    - The U.S. Department of State, USAID, and international development partners should deliver capacity and exchange programs for a range of stakeholders from different backgrounds to facilitate cross sector connections. These programs should focus on effective communication

through providing language training in English as well as the social and physical sciences.

- Civil society and think tank networks such as SUMERNET, the Mekong Environment Forum, and Mekong People's Forum should develop processes for enabling locally-based community groups to communicate and interact with similarly affected groups in other countries. Development partners, international non-governmental institutions, and other funders should provide core flexible and multiyear funding to networks and convening institutions to support effective, long-term networking.
- Stakeholders should replicate and support regional networking initiatives for CSOs and facilitate opportunities for cooperation between governments and CSOs to improve trust between these key stakeholder groups.

- **Meaningful participation by non-government stakeholders is lacking in the policy decision-making process.** Many governments claim to welcome multi-stakeholder engagement and local participation, but it is often limited to a practical level and doesn't reach policy making levels. Regional disparities exist: non-urban areas often have low levels of accessibility for public engagement, and the civic landscape varies widely by country.
  - Non-government stakeholders should encourage governments and private sector to actively participate in CSO-led forums. The four Water, Land, and Environment Forums between 2014 and 2018 was highlighted as a particularly valuable starting example for effective government and non-government dialogue.
  - The region should establish a Lower Mekong Basin NGO Forum that can effectively bring common local but transboundary issues to the attention of all regional governments. This provides a safe space for sharing concerns and can help amplify the voices of CSOs.
  - Stakeholders should provide support to creat an intergovernmental platform to review operational guidelines and a legal framework to include government-CSO dialogues.

Notably, one policy recommendation was echoed as a preferred solution to both of the priority issues above: regional governments should create active public participatory mechanisms within policy formulation processes. Attendees suggested that this could involve integrating CSOs into local committees and/or national and regional-level steering groups, effectively institutionalizing their participation in policy-making.

- **Insufficient linkages between civil society and academic projects and government ministries, leading to less-than-optimal developments.** It is worth recognizing that CSOs, academic institutions, and governments may have differing priorities. Many scientific research projects have long term horizons that both NGOs and government agencies do not see as relevant. In some cases, there may be competing interests between stakeholder groups. Within that context, policy recommendations include:
  - Aid agencies and donors should encourage research project designers to support policymakers through co-identifying problems, co-designing theories of change, as well as co-production of knowledge. This should be followed by clear communication of research and policy engagement approaches.
  - Investors and researchers should ensure meaningful multi-stakeholder consultation by ensuring that materials and proceedings are provided in local languages and that invitees can participate without fear of harm or retribution. Donors should encourage local language and localization for supported projects.
  - The region should develop a shared standard on criteria like governance, prior consent, evidence-based decisions, etc. to support meaningful CSO and academic participation.
  - Stakeholders should facilitate interaction so that government, CSOs, and academic stakeholders are all speaking the same language. Build capacity of government officials to understand why academic projects are important and how they can work towards synergistic goals.

Photo on page 12: *Photo of the YSEALI Generation: Earth workshop in Siem Reap, photo taken by Un Yarat and used courtsey of the U.S. Embassy Phnom Penh Flickr account under a Creative Commons license.*

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

The pandemic has caused skyrocketing growth in Southeast Asia's digital economy, with the internet economy growing from $72 billion in 2018 to more than $170 billion in 2021. In addition, there has been a massive growth in digital consumption through food and grocery delivery, digital financial services, and online shopping. Yet not all in the Mekong region have equal access to digital services, and relative fragmentation across markets and regulations in terms of data protection, consumer protection, data-sharing, and privacy inhibit e-trade among those stakeholders who do have access. And while digital technology and social media drive economic growth, they also serve as increasingly important platforms for expressing views. Regulators and industry often struggle for balance over information access, freedom of expression, and content control.

Digital connectivity sessions explored recent national and regional efforts to grow and regulate the digital space, including opportunities and risks related to increased information access and inappropriate regulation of digital technology, marketplaces, and social media.

ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Users lack trust in online platforms and governments have not yet implemented regulations to ensure data protection for users and data providers.** Perceptions of trust and concerns differ between social media, online businesses, and other data platforms and services. However, across the board legal and regulatory frameworks surrounding data protection and customer privacy are still limited in most ASEAN countries and are not standardized.
    - Data projects should facilitate the dissemination of tools, platform and services that embed data protection and ownership by design. Examples include tools like Mapeo and HydroShare. Mapeo allows communities to document, monitor, and share data in an offline manner which allows control over datasets. HydroShare shares information on what data is available while

- still allowing users to manage direct access to the data.
  - Educators should build media literacy resources and trainings for school curriculum to train social media users and citizens for detecting fake news.
  - The mass media, social media influencers, and other public commentators should promote dialogue about the extent to which data protection matters and understand the concerns and requirements between different actors, governments, making sure to include vulnerable and/or marginalized groups.
  - Government and intergovernmental bodies must establish national and international laws that ensure personal data protection and enforce digital security measure. The United States and other development partners can share best practices.

- A governmental culture of data secrecy and non-sharing inhibits reforms to the data landscape. Traditionally and in a non-digital setting, data is kept proprietary and is not shared because it provides power and benefits, which has led to a system where data access requires negotiation and time investment. Even when government agencies are willing to share data there is often no mechanism to do so. A history of departmental and/or ministerial silos has led to contrasting policies on data, which can carry over into a digital context. Modern technologies such as satellite imaging or mapping can move control over certain types of data beyond the government's capacity to control.
  - Government actors should provide legal clarity and guidance on what data can be shared and how to share it, making it easier and safer to share data. Ideally this would be done at the national level, but could be done at the ministerial or departmental level. Such policies could have cascading effects.
  - International NGOs and development partners should investigate the motivations, institutional constraints, risk aversion, objectives, strategies and wills behind limited sharing and lack of will to reform in order to better understand how to work through constraints on data sharing. This could be used to help worth through constraints for regional organizations such as the Mekong River Commission.

- **Gaps in information and communications technology (ICT) adoption, digital connectivity, and the digital divide have been further exacerbated by the pandemic**. COVID-19 has supercharged online communications and in many cases has helped ICT adoption—digital learning, meetings, entertainment, online buying/selling, etc. While this has provided flexibility and economic growth in many cases, it has also further exposed the gap between those who do and those who do not have access to these tools. Internet access varies widely among countries and even between rural and urban areas inside each country.
  - Mekong governments can work with communication device companies to sponsor schools with their physical or software products to support online learning.
  - Digital platforms such as Facebook and other social media companies should provide small-business oriented training seminars and workshops and/or dedicating a point of contact for SMEs. The ASEAN SME Academy currently provides such trainings, and the government should make it more accessible and promote it more widely to local stakeholders.
  - Use the transparency that comes with the digital economy for empowerment—for instance, to track fair payment for suppliers or track support for women-owned businesses. Governments and the private sector should create public-private partnerships opportunities that support provision of digital training and equipment support for women entrepreneurs and other underserved groups. International development programs should prioritize training for these groups.
  - Ministries of Education should consider building digital schools and training into educational curriculum.

Photo on page 14: *USAID and INTEL Tech Innovation Workshop, photo courtesy of the USAID Asia Flickr account and used under a Creative Commons license.*

ENVIRONMENTAL CONNECTIVITY

Over the last 30 years, the natural habitats of the Mekong region have been increasingly fragmented and degraded, a process that has resulted in the extinction of many species and has brought humans closer to wildlife, with increased potential for zoonotic disease transmission. This fragmentation applies to both terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems, and fragmentation threatens the region's agriculture and fisheries by disrupting the flood and nutrient cycles that form the basis of the Mekong's extraordinary natural productivity. Maintaining the Mekong's integrity, including conserving its remaining large free flowing tributaries, is central to food security, adaptation to extreme weather events, and regional stability.

Sessions in this track looked at best practices and practical ways to connect fragmented habitats. For land habitats discussion focused on connectivity as a means to allow species to disperse naturally and at new approaches to expanding conservation outside of the national protected area system, including in cities, through the use of nature-based solutions. A river connectivity session explored pressures on the region's major rivers including the Mekong and Salween and discussed policy responses.

ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The true value of free-flowing rivers needs to be better recognized by governments and private sector actors in order to reduce over-exploitation.** River fragmentation is often a by-product of water resource infrastructure development. The economic benefits of water infrastructure development are concentrated and easily quantifiable—for instance, income from energy generation or irrigated agriculture—whilst those from free flowing rivers are disperse and can be difficult to quantify. The environmental and cultural benefits of various resources are even hard to account for, especially when they are not commercially exploited.
 - Development partners should build capacity among national governments and the

private sector to analyze the actual value that ecosystem services, indigenous values, and nature-based solutions provide to people who depend on a river's resources. This requires recognizing the value of resources that are not commercially exploited and supporting new studies to fill in critical data gaps.
- Promote cross-sector planning, inter-agency processes, and alternative studies as a way to minimize the impact of river fragmentation.
- Stakeholder platforms such as SUMERNET can better localize and socialize existing data and data collection efforts.
- Financiers, developers and governments should adopt a 'No-Go Policy' to limit investment and maintain connectivity of key ecosystems in major rivers.

- **Cooperative management, the involvement of multiple sectors of stakeholders, is required to effectively manage the pathway of infrastructure development on and around rivers.** Rivers provide multiple benefits to both nature and people which cannot be represented by a small number of stakeholders. Policymakers often have limited incentive to co-manage infrastructure processes when different stakeholders have competing interests, and only in some countries are institutional actors strong enough to reconcile these interests and coordinate development.
    - Project funders and NGOs should use existing case studies of co-management processes to show how multi-stakeholder engagement can lead to more effective outcomes in capacity building with government and non-government stakeholders. Development partners should promote programming that increases opportunities for multi-stakeholder dialogue.
    - National governments should legislate the role of co-management and multiple stakeholder involvement in water resource development with an emphasis on preserving free flowing rivers. This may require improving transparency and accountability of the policy process.
    - Project funders—whether government or private sector—need to recognize that co-management includes long term goals and outcomes and not just immediate commercial gain.
    - Project funders should prioritize engaging and incorporating the expertise of indigenous populations into infrastructure planning processes while ensuring they feel safe and receive no negative repercussions.

- **Resources are needed to protect loss of income, livelihood, and heritage and avoid, mitigate, or compensate riverine communities or losses.** Riverine communities that rely on natural resources from the river are most impacted by river fragmentation, and those relocated for infrastructure development often wait well past guaranteed timelines for reparations. An unanswered question is where the resources will come from and who will manage and implement compensation programs when multiple actors are involved in resource losses.
    - Decisionmakers should mandate stronger protection clauses for local communities and include a range of community stakeholders and not just leaders through all stages of the life-cycle of project design and implementation.
    - CSOs and researchers should circulate major study results in multiple languages to key stakeholders in the basin.
    - Riverine development projects should recognize that the loss of traditional livelihoods cannot be simply replaced with economic and physical translocation.
    - Governments should mandate that indigenous values are mainstreamed into accounting processes and develop methods to mitigate the loss of indigenous values. This requires identifying and working with qualified intermediaries and translators who can translate local values for external stakeholders.

Photo: *Fishermen on Mekong River in Vietnam, courtesy of Lawrence Sinclari's Flickr account and used under a Creative Commons license.*

WORD CLOUD

This word cloud was created using the key takeaways identified in the synthesis workshop which ultimately fed into this report. The larger the word, the more often it appeared in the discussions.
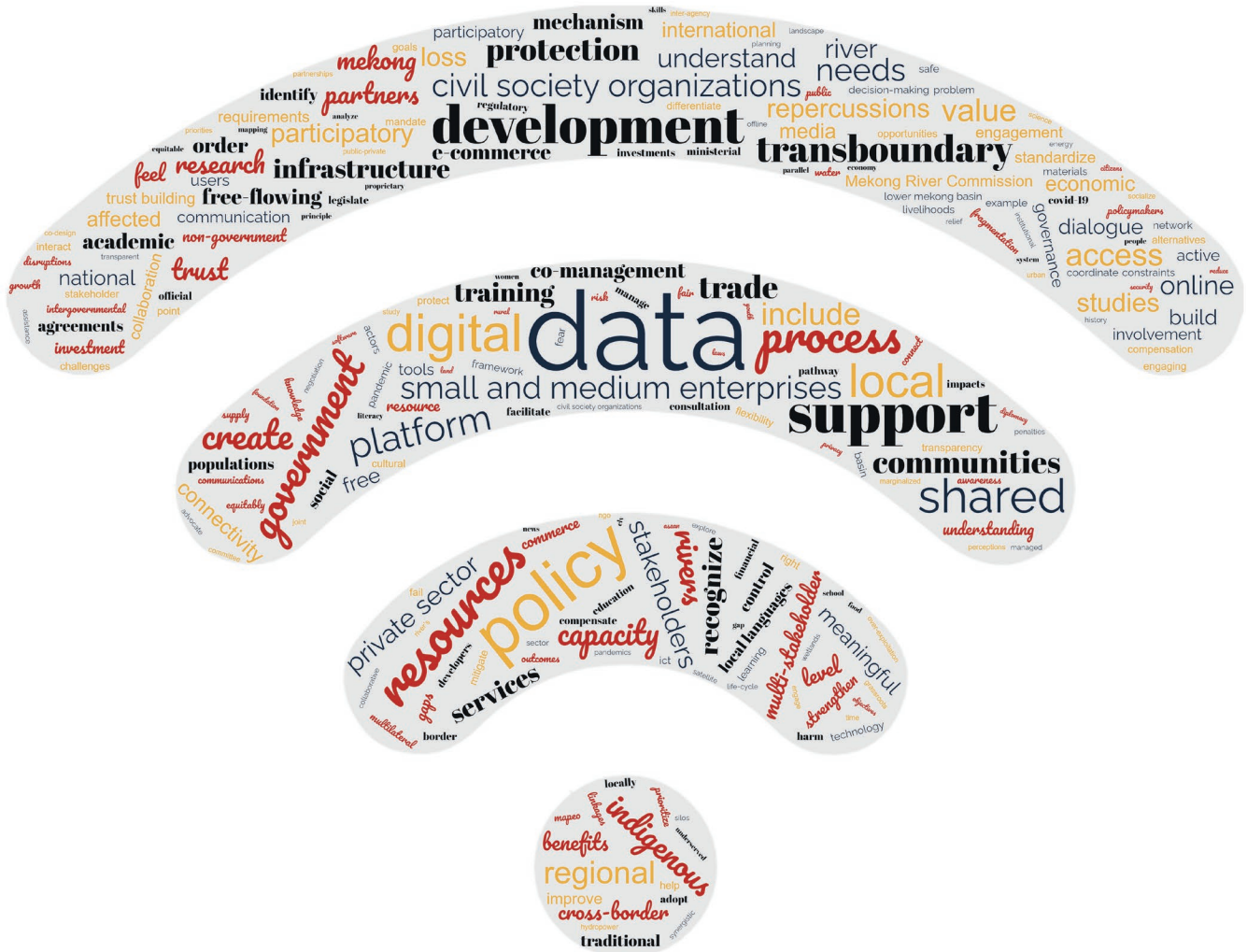
FEEDBACK

Attendees participated in a survey following the dialogue, and feedback indicates that most attendees felt that the dialogue was successful in introducing new information on various aspects of connectivity. Of the anonymous evaluation surveys from attendees:

- 90% of attendees indicated that they learned some or a lot of new information through participating in the Dialogue
- 65% indicated that they would definitely or probably use the knowledge gained in their work
- 85% would recommend participating in the Dialogue to a colleague
- 80% felt that they developed insight into a relevant policy or sustainability challenge facing the region
- 90% said that the Dialogue helped them identify a local Mekong stakeholder(s) with whom they shared common interest

Many participants noted in comments that they felt the Policy Dialogue was very useful for getting insights into U.S. engagements and approaches; valued the approach that convened experts across sectors and bridged stove pipes; and enjoyed the interactive approach.

Some participants did identify some areas for improvement for future dialogues: a number of participants emphasized that they hoped the next Dialogue could be in-person. One participant mentioned that it would be useful to deliberately set up some commentators to question the status quo on specific issue sets in order to have a more thought-provoking discussion. A few participants suggested having more government officials in attendance.

The participatory aspects of the workshop were largely popular: 80% of survey respondents said that they felt that the polls and synthesis workshop were organized in a way to maximize participation. One respondent noted that there was still relatively limited participation from some attendees during the synthesis workshop. A number of respondents applauded the use of online tools like Mentimeter and Jamboard to engage participation, although a few respondents noted that they felt it was confusing to have to learn to use new tools and then use them quickly.

NEXT STEPS

This was the third of seven Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogues. The final four thematic workshops will be held at roughly four-to-five month intervals through 2023. Barring unexpected changes in travel requirements, it is expected that the fourth Dialogue will be held in person in Cambodia during the summer of 2022. While future themes are subject to change, the fourth workshop will be on Human Resources Capacity, and it is likely that the following three conferences will focus on non-traditional security, water governance, and nature-based solutions. All future discussions will be designed as opportunities for stakeholders from the region, the United States, and development partners to identify lessons-learned, 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 continue to be drawn from government and non-government sectors and emphasis will be placed on gender balance, youth participation, and the under-represented stakeholder groups. When these workshops move to an in-person format, all attendees will also be presenters and will be asked to actively contribute to the discussions and breakout activities. The in-person conferences will include complementary side events to actively engage rising voices and youth on the relevant issue set and in the host country.

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 (nontraditional 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.