

MEKONG - U.S. PARTNERSHIP TRACK 1.5 POLICY DIALOGUE ON HUMAN RESOURCES AND CAPACITY BUILDING

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 mekongpartnership.org/.



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ABOUT THE POLICY DIALOGUE SERIES

This summary report provides an outline and recommendations derived from discussions on human resources and capacity-building needs held under 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	2
A Note from Conference Chairs.....	3
Summary.....	4
Agenda	6
Thematic Areas and Recommendations	
<i>Education</i>	10
<i>Labor</i>	12
<i>Health</i>	14
Youth Engagement	16
Feedback	Inside back page
Next Steps.....	Inside back page

KEY ACRONYMS

ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations

APCSS Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

CDC Center for Disease Control

CICP Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace

CSO Civil Society Organization

MUSP Mekong-U.S. Partnership

NGO Non-governmental Organization

STEM Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math

TVET Technical, vocational, and educational training

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

A NOTE FROM CONFERENCE CHAIR

The fourth Mekong-US Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue on Human Resources and Capacity-Building took place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia from July 21-22, 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 three were held virtually in March 2021, October 2021, and March 2022 and convened partners and stakeholders from around the Mekong sub-region to explore gaps, needs, and opportunities for collaboration on addressing key challenges. This fourth dialogue focused on human resources and capacity building needs and challenges in the Mekong sub-region, with a particular focus on education, vocational training, health capacity, and digitalization.

More than 50 people participated in the in-person sessions over the course of the first and second day of the Dialogue in Phnom Penh, and an additional 22 participants joined virtually for one or more sessions. Over half (73%) of the conference registrants came from one of the five Mekong countries, with 13% coming from the United States. The remaining participants were from a range of regional partner countries, including Japan, the United Kingdom, Bangladesh, and other countries in ASEAN. The majority of speakers and participants (63%) were from non-governmental institutions, while 23% were from the private sector and 14% were from government affiliated ministries or organizations. Evaluation surveys for this Dialogue indicated that most participants learned relevant new information, built new connections across sectoral and national barriers, and would strongly recommend participating in a future Policy Dialogue.

The Stimson Center looks forward to building on the progress from this dialogue through three additional dialogues on other topics through September 2023. We deeply appreciated support from the U.S. Department of State and the Mekong-US Partnership for this Policy Dialogue. In particular, the team would like to thank Nicole Smolinske, Rachel Rodgers, and Alexandra Radu of the U.S. Department of State and Jigar Bhatt from the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia for their support. The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) was our key implementing partner on the ground, and we greatly appreciated the support from my fellow conference co-chair Ambassador Pou Sothirak, Dr. Bradley J. Murg, and the entire CICP team.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to our colleagues Dr. Lori Forman and Dr. Deon Canyon from the Daniel K. Inouye Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies for their significant and meaningful contributions to the early conference design and helping implement the workshop as leads on the labor and health tracks. Finally, we would like to thank Mr. Allen Tan with WorldBridge Group and Mr. Mario Masaya from the U.S. – ASEAN Business Council for helping to bring in a wide range of private sector contributors to the Dialogue. All of these and others contributed to the Dialogue being impactful and interactive. We would also like to thank our more than 70 presenters and virtual participants for engaging actively during the discussions.

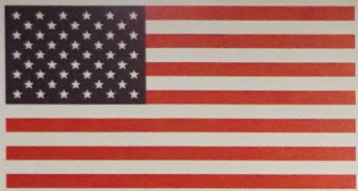
Sincerely,



Brian Eyler
Conference Co-Chair

SUMMARY

The fourth Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue took place on July 21-22, 2022, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia to explore needs and challenges related to human resources and capacity building in the sectors of education, labor migration, and health



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Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue on Human Resources and Capacity Building





This fourth dialogue was a deep-dive into needs and challenges in the Mekong sub-region related to human resources and capacity building, with a particular focus on the education sector, skills and vocational training, health, and digitalization. Participants explored policy challenges and best practices from the United States, Mekong countries, and partner countries including Japan and Bangladesh related to educational exchange, equity and inclusivity, digitalization and sustainability in education and the workforce, labor migration, innovation, and pandemic response and vaccination challenges. Cross-cutting values of inclusivity, resilience (including climate), and collaboration framed the sessions and were woven into the key takeaways and recommendations.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE:

- Soft skills are often overshadowed by hard skill training programs, leading to a mismatch between job market needs and student skill sets. Soft skills like communication, persistence, flexible problem solving, listening, and stress management are underemphasized but are a vital complement to technical skills and expertise. To address this gap, Ministries of Education should mandate curriculum review and consider making soft skills an indicator in internal quality testing. Teachers and lecturers should actively integrate soft-skills development into hard-skill educational and training programs. Donor partners like the United States should integrate soft skills training into existing programming and make soft-skill training a key part of the Mekong-U.S. Partnership agenda.
- Disruptive technologies like automation and digitalization impact women and other underrepresented groups differently and unequally. National and regional analysis on the impacts of disruptive technologies across sectors could identify emerging gaps. This gap analysis can then inform creation of a knowledge base which can inform governments about the timelines for disruption and potential adaptations. Private sector actors and international donors should prioritize support for digital training and upskilling towards women and other underrepresented groups. Legislators in Mekong countries should incentivize employers through tax breaks or other financial considerations to provide such training.
- Healthcare Information Systems are uncoordinated and lack infrastructure and resources to improve coordination through adoption of modern technology. Data sharing processes and data protection policies can be improved through the use of modern software, but the software is often difficult to use. International donors should provide technical assistance and training for healthcare workers on modern systems and invest in new electronic systems that meet local needs. Government agencies should develop technical requirements including shared dataset standards to promote data sharing and interoperability. And healthcare institutions should increase support for and the number of administrative staff.

Photo: Panel Discussion on Building a Green Worker Pipeline taken at the Policy Dialogue by CICP Staff on July 22, 2022.

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

DAY 1		July 21, 2022 from 9:00 AM - 8:00 PM ICT Phnom Penh, Cambodia	
9:00–10:00 am	<p>Opening Plenary</p> <p>Conference overview and expectations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brian Eyler, Stimson Center Southeast Asia Program Director <p>Keynote Address:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambassador W. Patrick Murphy, U.S. Embassy to Cambodia • Ms. Krisna Uk, Senior Advisor to the Board of Directors, Association for Asian Studies <p>Opening Plenary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dam Bich Thuy, President of Fulbright University Vietnam • Dr. John McArthur, Regional Director, CDC Southeast Asia Regional Office. • Dr. Chheng Kimlong, Asian Vision Institute • Facilitator: Ambassador Pou Sothirak, Executive Director of Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace 		
10:00 - 10:30 am	Coffee Break		
<p>CONCURRENT SESSIONS 1</p> <p>10:30–11:30 am</p>	<p>A1 Educational & Vocational</p> <p>Panel: Future of Labor & Workforce</p> <p>Facilitator: Dr. Lori Forman, APCSS</p> <p>Panelists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Nilim Baruah, International Labor Organization • Kristin Parco, International Organization for Migration • Dr. Surapit Promsit, Institute for Continuing Education & Human Resources, Thammasat University 	<p>B1: Medical & Science</p> <p>Session: Health Overview</p> <p>Session Lead: Dr. John MacArthur, Regional Director, CDC Southeast Asia Regional Office</p> <p>Discussion Facilitators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deon Canyon, APCSS • Brian Eyler, Stimson Center 	
11:30 am - 1:00 pm	Lunch		

<p>CONCURRENT SESSIONS</p> <p>1:00 - 2:30 pm</p>	<p>A2 Educational & Vocational</p> <p>Panel: International/Global Education and Exchange</p> <p>Facilitator: Bradley Murg, CICP and Paragon University</p> <p>Panelists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms. Porntip Kanjananiyot, Former Fulbright Director, Thailand and SEAMEO RIHED Special Advisor • Dr. Saykhong Saynasine, Director General for Higher Education, Lao PDR • Professor Nomura Nakao, Tsukuba University 	<p>B2 Medical and Science</p> <p>Panel: Healthcare and the Pandemic</p> <p>Facilitator: Caitlin Cassot, U.S. Embassy Ho Chi Minh City</p> <p>Panelists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Hien Le, Primary Health Care Program Director, Path Southeast Asia Hub • Dr. Vipat Kuruchittham, Southeast Asia One Health University Network • Dr. Vee Thongkham, Friends Hospital Luang Prabang • Dr. Thomas Brune, Friends Hospital Luang Prabang
<p>2:30 - 3:00 pm</p>	<p>Coffee Break</p>	
<p>CONCURRENT SESSIONS 3</p> <p>3:00 - 4:30 pm</p>	<p>A3 Educational & Vocational</p> <p>Panel: Ensuring Gender, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity in Education</p> <p>Facilitator: Ms. Phuong Phan, Sweef Capital</p> <p>Panelists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sisuvanv Vorabouth, UNFPA • Tin Zar, Teacher Focus 	<p>B3 Medical and Science</p> <p>Panel: Vaccine Logistics and Building Resilient Supply Chains</p> <p>Facilitator: Dr. Deon Canyon, APCSS</p> <p>Panelists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Thai Quang Pham, National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology of Vietnam • Dr. Don Ananda Chandralal Amarasinghe, World Health Organization Western Pacific Office • Makiko Iijima, WHO Cambodia Office
<p>4:30 - 6:00 pm</p>	<p>Free time and networking</p>	
<p>6:00 - 8:00 pm</p>	<p>Welcome Dinner</p>	

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

DAY 2		July 22, 2022 from 9:00 AM - 8:00 PM ICT Phnom Penh, Cambodia
CONCURRENT SESSIONS 4 9:00 am - 10:15 am	A4 Educational & Vocational Panel: Transformational Education for the Future Facilitator: Dr. Bradley J. Murg, CICP and Paragon University Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms. Panyanuch (Aom) Pattanothai, CEO of Generation Thailand • Dr. Hang Le, Duy Tan University Vietnam • Mr. Joseph Telfer, Data U Academy 	B4 Labor Session: Encouraging Innovation and Entrepreneurship Session Lead: Allen Tan, Vice President of WorldBridge Group Discussion Facilitators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utami Nugraheni, US ASEAN Business Council • Mr. Richard Yim, Quantum Engineering and Manufacturing • Ho Thai Binh, Co-founder and Director, Survival Skills SSVN Social Enterprise
10:15-10:30 am	Coffee Break	
10:30 am - 12:00 pm	A5 Educational & Vocational Panel: Building a Green Worker Pipeline Facilitator: Courtney Weatherby, Stimson Center Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Nguyen Minh Quang, Can Tho University • Kimlay Leav, UNESCO Cambodia • Ms. Sokphalkoun Out, Energy Lab Cambodia 	B5 Labor Session: Digitalization & the 4th Industrial Revolution Session Lead: Ambassador Michael Michalak, U.S. ASEAN Business Council Discussion Facilitators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Porhour Ly, Boost Capital • Rubaiyath Sarwar, Value Chain Capacity Building Network (VCBN) for Asia and the Pacific • Ayako Inagaki, Asian Development Bank • Sivaram Superamanian, ASEAN Secretariat
12:00 - 1:30 pm	Lunch	
1:30 - 3:45pm	Synthesis Workshop & Survey	
3:45 - 4:30 pm	Closing Plenary	

THEMATIC AREAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The major concerns and recommendations in each thematic section below were the result of an in-depth workshoping process with Dialogue participants during the synthesis workshop. Throughout the conference the organizing team took detailed notes on the specific concerns, challenges, or gaps that were identified during session presentations and discussions.

Key problem statements were first written out on sheets of paper by theme (education, labor, and health). Then, in synthesis workshop breakout groups, the experts for each theme collectively agreed on priority issues and worked to develop a series of potential policy recommendations and key actors involved in those recommendations. The breakout groups created a list of 12 priority issues and subsequent policy recommendations, which were all presented to the group. Attendees then voted on the top issues and recommendations. The top recommendations, as determined by votes of support from participants, are included in this summary report.

Photo: Synthesis workshop activities at the Policy Dialogue by CICP Staff on July 22, 2022.





EDUCATION

As the global economy becomes increasingly interconnected and sustainability and equity considerations are directly woven into national development goals, demands on the education system are evolving. Improving access to education for women, minorities, and other underrepresented groups is a key factor in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and ensuring broad and equal access to economic growth. Digitalization, the fourth industrial revolution, and clean energy transformations require workers to adapt to use emerging technologies. With the rate of technological advancement, it is increasingly important for education to continue beyond the traditional school system in order for workers to meet evolving and adapting needs of their industries.

The four Education themed sessions at the Dialogue explored challenges and regional initiatives related to designing effective international educational exchange programs; ensuring access to education for women, minorities, and other marginalized groups; and ways that technological advancements such as digitalization and sustainable development needs are altering what's needed from the technical, vocational, and educational training (TVET) system. These sessions highlighted a range of key takeaways which fed into the policy recommendations: Sharing of ideas, best practices, and lessons learned across sectors and national boundaries is key for ensuring that education reflects real issues and forward-looking market demands. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a shift towards online learning in ways that could help improve education access and lead to non-traditional approaches, but does not necessarily improve outcomes and impacted soft skills. There are major mis-matches between the skillsets demanded by the market and those provided by traditional educational approaches.

Photo: Group of students working at Dusit Vocational and Technical College, 2005, provided by the International Labour Organization Flickr account and used under a Creative Commons license.

PRIORITY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Soft skills are often overshadowed by hard skill training programs, leading to a mismatch between job market needs and student skill sets.** Traditional higher education approaches are often behind the marketplace, particularly for national educational institutions which lack resources and are not fully integrated into regional systems. Soft skills like communication, persistence, flexible problem solving, listening, and stress management are underemphasized, often in favor of technical skills which these soft skills complement. To address this gap:
 - Ministries of Education should mandate curriculum review, set targets to incorporate soft skills, and consider making soft skills an indicator in testing of internal quality assurance.
 - Teachers, lecturers, and university administrators should actively integrate soft-skills development into hard-skill educational and training programs.
 - Donor partners like the United States should integrate soft skills training into existing programming.
- 2. Higher education institutions largely lack effective public-private partnerships.** Many educational institutions have limited engagement with the private sector to track what is needed from the labor market. Employers often desire rapid readjustment of curriculum to keep track with market shifts, which does not match with the traditional educational approach from four-year educational programs.
 - Cross-border networks such as the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre (SEAMEO-RIHED) should work to establish baseline guidance for regional governments to promote public-private partnerships in higher education.
 - Universities should prioritize regular dialogues with the private sector, perhaps through establishing an office inside each university which is responsible for linking public education with private sector actors such as AmCham or the U.S. ASEAN Business Council.
 - The MUSP and donor countries should develop programming which shares best practices in this space.
- 3. Development partners and NGO projects in the education sector lack long-term sustainability models.** Many education program managers and implements currently do not adopt holistic planning approaches which center sustainability from the project design phase and which build active commitment from key stakeholders throughout the project's lifespan.
 - Donors and implementing agencies—whether International NGOs, local NGOs, or other not-for-profit organizations—should incorporate a monitoring, evaluation, and learning component into project timelines.
 - Donors should support capacity-building for local NGOs on long-term budget planning and effective management. This includes training on designing projects in phases, where each phase caters to the needs and demands of an evolving economic landscape.
- 4. There is a mismatch between STEM classroom approaches and current market needs.** Capacity building and training processes will be most effective if they are informed by short-term and recent surveys to provide reliable data on what specific skill sets are needed. Necessary technical skillsets often evolve rapidly, meaning that private sector engagement and identification of short-term coursework and training curriculums that respond to current market gaps are key.
 - Universities and training programs should aim to speed up the cycle for acknowledging market demand and incorporate demand-driven skills into STEM training systems and curriculum.
 - Regional Ministries of Education should create a multi-disciplinary advisory process at the education board to support decisions on curriculum. This would help governments such as Laos which have set targets to better match higher education curriculum with market needs identify a concrete pathway to meet such goals.
 - Instructors should adjust science education approaches to be more similar to project-based-learning approaches which set students up to learn skills through actively addressing real-world problems in real time.
 - Traditional classwork should be complemented by skills training available to working professionals. One good example is Generation Thailand which has 12-week courses designed in collaboration with employers.



LABOR

The future of labor in Southeast Asia is in flux: as countries across the Mekong sub-region increasingly urbanize and industrialize, the types of training and education necessary to support available jobs will adjust accordingly. Migratory labor both inside countries and across national borders plays a key role as a driver of economic development, but the COVID-19 pandemic has had an outsized impact on migratory and unskilled laborers. At the same time, digitalization and the fourth industrial revolution are transforming the way that many key drivers of economic growth—including manufacturing and agriculture, both of which benefit from migratory and unskilled labor—function.

Three sessions at the Dialogue explored the challenges and regional initiatives related to labor migration, the future of work, entrepreneurship and innovation, and the challenges of technological evolution. Key takeaways from these sessions included the need to better account for long-term demographic changes, technological advances, and climate change considerations in national policies and planning processes. Thailand has near-term challenges related to aging population and workforce shortages which migrant labor can help solve, but lack of social services and mismatches between needs and skillsets of migrant workers pose a challenge. More broadly, technological changes from digitalization and the fourth industrialization happen rapidly—and without skills-training and policy clarity, small and medium enterprises struggle to access new markets and individual workers struggle to adapt.

Photo: *Cambodian workers are seen in a local footwear manufacturing plant, 2016, photo taken by Marcel Crozet and provided by the International Labour Organization under a Creative Commons License*

PRIORITY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Disruptive technologies like automation and digitalization impact gender differently and unequally.** Labor-intensive industries—such as agriculture—face significant job displacement because of digitalization and other fourth industrial revolution advancement. Historically, this has most deeply impacted unskilled workers and women. There is a need at the national and regional level to map and define the impacts of disruptive technologies across sectors to identify emerging gaps. This gap analysis can then inform creation of a knowledge base which can inform governments about the timelines for disruption and potential adaptations.
 - Private sector actors, tech companies, and international donors should subsidize teaching for women—and other affected and often underrepresented groups—to support upskilling and digital training. Inclusive representation of women in the workforce is still a challenge in the Mekong sub-region, and they have fewer resources to adapt to job displacement.
 - Legislators in each Mekong country should incentivize employers through tax breaks or other financial considerations to provide such training when they adopt automation or do large-scale layoffs of workers.
- 2. Decision makers working on labor issues do not have sufficient gender-disaggregated socio-economic data, specifically on minorities and marginalized communities, to design effective policies.** Policymakers, academics, and civil society actors in this space can point to broad perceptions and anecdotal indications about how digitalization, the fourth industrial revolution, and other economic challenges have impacted women and minority groups—but Southeast Asia has limited detailed and gender-disaggregated data on workers to support concrete analysis and policy development.
 - Government and non-government research institutions should ensure that gender-disaggregated data is collected, standardized, detailed, and shared with other stakeholders.
 - National bureaus of statistics and other statistical bodies should integrate relevant data collection questions into ongoing data collection processes and surveys.
 - Researchers should review and analyze existing frameworks on data collection to understand the existing obstacles to widely applied data collection standards and apply existing standards to data collection processes that support the Sustainable Development Goals.
 - NGOs and Ministries of Education should identify technical focal points who can contribute to broader adoption of data collection standards.
 - International donors and capacity-building trainers should encourage local NGOs to get involved with data collection processes, providing funds and training where possible.
- 3. Outdated, biased, cumbersome, and time-consuming regulatory requirements push migrant laborers towards irregular migration channels.** ILO research shows that labor migrants from Laos can double their income when working abroad, due primarily to differences in wage and higher minimum monthly wage requirements.¹ This work benefits both the migrant laborer and the destination country—primarily Thailand in mainland Southeast Asia—as these migrant workers fill labor gaps. Irregular migration channels were already common prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic disrupted usual migratory pathways.
 - NGOs and CSOs should work alongside local government to build awareness among migrant workers about regulations before they seek employment outside of their home country.
 - Governments should seek to reduce the cost of labor migration through official channels by simplifying, streamlining, and (where possible) digitizing the formal processes. This should be done on both the country of origin and country of destination through harmonizing regulations across ASEAN countries to avoid frustrations and unequal costs for some countries and avoid passing the costs across borders.



HEALTH

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a challenge to healthcare systems and health policy responses across all Lower Mekong countries, regardless of differences in terms of baseline capacity and investment in healthcare. While countries in Southeast Asia were remarkably successful in managing the spread of COVID-19 through the first year of the pandemic through border closures, quarantine protocols, and shutdowns, these approaches significantly impacted the global supply chain. As vaccines became available, adaptive approaches to managing transportation and logistics were vital to successful deployment.

The two healthcare sessions at the Dialogue explored what the COVID-19 pandemic revealed about the healthcare system in the Mekong sub-region, with particular focus on healthcare training and educational needs for the medical workforce; challenges of balancing an immediate shortage of medical professionals with the need for a long-term path towards high-quality healthcare; vaccination rollout challenges; and ways that future supply chains can be built for greater resilience. Key takeaways from these sessions included that local healthcare and hospital staff were often overloaded during the pandemic, facing great pressure to provide treatment and respond quickly with very limited information. The healthcare system needs greater capacity to manage data tracking and information sharing, including through virtual access and greater transparency of health data as well as better preparation and training ahead of an emergency situation. Finally, ASEAN countries had uneven access to COVID-19 vaccine supply and varying approaches to procurement, which led to simultaneous challenges to lack of access and wastage.

Photo: Flu Vaccine in Vietnam, photo taken by Athit Perawongmtha in April 2012 and provided via CDC GlobalFlickr account under a Creative Commons license.

PRIORITY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Healthcare Information Systems are uncoordinated and lack infrastructure and resources to improve coordination through adoption of modern technology.** Data sharing processes and data protection policies can be improved through the use of modern software, but the software is often difficult to use. Many key stakeholders in the healthcare sector lack the capacity to master new systems without additional training.
 - Through promoting engagement via the CDC and similar agencies, the MUSP and international donors can provide technical assistance and training for healthcare workers on modern systems and invest in new electronic systems that meet local needs.
 - Government agencies should develop technical requirements including shared dataset standards to promote data sharing and interoperability between hospitals and clinics and support better integration between the private and public sector.
 - The MUSP should create and support exchange programs for healthcare professionals to the United States and invest in regional and local training facilities to support the augmentation of healthcare professionals throughout the region, with emphasis on underserved countries such as Laos and Cambodia.
- 2. Countries in ASEAN do not coordinate effectively on vaccine supply chain and production, which has led to challenges in procuring and distributing vaccines equitably throughout the region.** The approach to accessing vaccines differs country-by-country, but the government leads vaccine access efforts for most ASEAN countries through either direct procurement or the UNICEF supply mechanism. Some countries—such as Laos—had insufficient funds to procure the vaccine without outside assistance, leading to inequitable access.
 - Through MUSP coordination, the CDC can work with Ministries of Health to develop systems which more accurately estimate needs and prediction of use of vaccines and share best practices for educating vulnerable cohorts about the comprehensive benefits of vaccines.
 - The ASEAN Coordination Unit should work with national COVID task forces and regulators to eliminate obstacles to vaccine trade and allow for shared production to help reduce shortages. This could include establishing an online vaccine marketplace to improve regulation of supply and demand.
 - Government should actively work with private sector actors—including pharmaceutical companies and logistics companies—to partner on supply chain regulation and vaccine distribution.
 - Where possible, vaccine production data should be made open source to improve the timely delivery of vaccines.



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

The Policy Dialogues were originally designed to include an additional series of side events featuring on-the-ground engagement with rising scholars and students in the host country alongside each of the core Policy Dialogues to expand on the in-person workshops. As the fourth Policy Dialogue was the first in-person event in the series, the organizing team held two events on the ground in Cambodia to parallel the Policy Dialogue to actively engage rising voices and youth.

The first event was held prior to the Policy Dialogue as a teach-in discussion at the American University of Phnom Penh. Conference organizers introduced the Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogues to approximately 22 students, explored the range of issue sets covered by the MUSP and the Dialogues, and answered questions about the Policy Dialogue process. The second event was held after the Policy Dialogue as a hybrid event at the AmCam Exchange in Phnom Penh on September 13, and featured speakers from the Policy Dialogue to share some key takeaways and explore the issue set with rising professionals. The readout event had 25 people in the room and an additional 16 people calling in virtually.

Photo: Readout at AmCam Exchange in Phnom Penh, September 13, 2022, photo provided by CICP.

FEEDBACK

More than half of the in-person attendees shared feedback in a survey following the dialogue, and most attendees indicated that the dialogue was a productive experience. It is worth noting that the evaluations for this first in-person Dialogue were significantly more positive than those for virtual-only dialogues, strongly indicating that the in-person engagement improved the experience.

Key takeaways from the anonymous evaluation surveys are:

- 97% of attendees indicated that they learned some or a lot of new information through participating in the Dialogue, with 67% indicating that they learned a lot of new information. 73% indicated that they would definitely or probably use the knowledge gained in their work
- 100% of attendees said they would recommend participating in a future Dialogue to a colleague
- 93% felt that they developed insight into a relevant policy or sustainability challenge facing the region
- 93% 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 a good opportunity to build cross-sector ties and networks; gain insights into new angles of approaching shared regional issues and best practices; and explore concrete ideas for solutions.

There were a few areas of improvement identified: eight respondents noted that they would have liked more government participation, and four indicated they wanted to see more private sector participation. Five people flagged that they would like to see more attendees. A few concrete recommendations which can be considered for future Dialogues include keeping presentations shorter to maximize discussion; providing local language translation for more inclusivity; allowing for anonymous submission of questions; and providing specific opportunities for networking for participants.

The participatory aspects of the workshop were largely popular: 83% of survey respondents liked the synthesis workshop as a way to maximize discussion and generate recommendations, although many commented that they would have liked more time for these activities. A few respondents pointed to access challenges for virtual participation in small group sessions and recommended finding another way to keep virtual participants involved.

NEXT STEPS

This was the fourth of seven Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogues and the first in-person session. The final three thematic workshops will be held as in-person events in other countries around the Mekong through mid-2023 with approximately 60 in-person attendees. A virtual attendance option will be provided for those who are unable to travel. The fifth policy dialogue on Nature-based Solutions will be held in Can Tho, Vietnam in December 2022. The Policy Dialogues will continue to serve as an opportunity 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.

In order for the Track 1.5 dialogues to continue strengthening the Mekong-US Partnership at large, participants at these thematic conferences will continue to be drawn from a wide range of government and non-government sectors. Emphasis will be placed on encouraging gender balance, youth participation, and inclusion of under-represented stakeholder groups at the Dialogues.



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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.