



STIMSON

REPORT

Asia & Indo-Pacific

Southeast Asia

Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5

Policy Dialogue

# Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue on Trafficking and Cyber-enabled Crime

## Summary Report



August 2023



**The Mekong – U.S. Partnership** promotes the stability, peace, prosperity, and sustainable development of the lower 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/](http://mekonguspartnership.org/).



**The Stimson Center** promotes international security, shared prosperity and 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.

More at [stimson.org](http://stimson.org).



**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.

Learn more at [iucn.org](http://iucn.org).

---

# ABOUT THE POLICY DIALOGUE SERIES

This summary report provides an outline and recommendations derived from discussions on needs to address trafficking and cyber-enabled crime held as 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 resource development area of engagement.

## CONTENTS

Key Acronyms .....	2
A Note from Conference Chairs.....	3
Summary.....	4
Agenda .....	6
<b>Thematic Areas and Recommendations</b>	
<i>Wildlife Trafficking</i> .....	10
<i>Cyber-Enabled Crime</i> .....	12
<i>Drug Trafficking</i> .....	14
<i>Trafficking-in-Persons</i> .....	16
<i>Corruption</i> .....	18
<i>Coordination and Collaboration</i> .....	20
Public Engagement.....	22
Feedback .....	Inside back page
Next Steps .....	Inside back page

# KEY ACRONYMS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CITES	The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CSO	Civil society organization
CTIP	Combating Trafficking in Persons
DEA	U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration
FBI	U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation
INTERPOL	The International Criminal Police Organization-INTERPOL
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MUSP	Mekong-U.S. Partnership
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

---

## A NOTE FROM CONFERENCE CHAIR

The sixth Mekong-US Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue on Trafficking and Cyber-enabled Crime took place in Bangkok, Thailand from May 8-9, 2023. The Partnership Policy Dialogues are a series of seven conferences taking place between 2021 and 2023. These dialogues explore solutions to key policy and sustainability challenges in the Lower Mekong. This sixth Policy Dialogue focused on the challenges that non-traditional security issues of trafficking and cyber-enabled crime pose to the lower Mekong sub-region, with particular focus on countering cyber-enabled crimes and the trafficking in persons, wildlife, narcotics, and other illicit goods.

78 experts and community representatives participated in in-person activities throughout the two-and-a-half days of the Policy Dialogue in Bangkok. Approximately 42% of the speakers came from one of the five Mekong countries, with 36% coming from the United States. The remaining expert speakers came from Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Australia, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Just under half of the speakers (47%) were women, although women made up 51% of all attendees. Government institutions were well represented at 46% of all attendees, with 35% of attendees coming from non-governmental institutions, 9% from international organizations, 5% from the media, and 4% from academia. Evaluation surveys for this Dialogue indicated that participants learned a lot of relevant new information and developed insights into recently emerged regional challenges such as scam centers, built connections with a diverse range of sectoral and national actors, and would strongly recommend participating in a future Policy Dialogue.

The Stimson Center looks forward to building on the progress from this dialogue through the final dialogue on water governance 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, Katie Jo Younkins, and Victoria Harrison at the U.S. Department of State Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. We also appreciate deeply the substantial expertise and networking support from Matt Killian from the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and Amy Rustan Haslett from the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, as well as William Solley with the U.S. Embassy in Laos and Sylvia Shweder and Scott Bradford from the U.S. Department of Justice. The State Department's assistance in identifying and funding participation from law enforcement officials across the Mekong was invaluable in ensuring comprehensive discussions.

The organizers would also like to particularly thank Jason Tower and Aizat Shamsuddin from the U.S. Institute of Peace, Bradley Murg from the Cambodian Institute of Cooperation and Peace, and Lori Forman from the Daniel K. Inouye Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies for providing assistance on a variety of tasks to help keep the discussions running smoothly.

All of these and others contributed to the Dialogue being impactful and interactive. We would also like to thank our more than 70 presenters, attendees, and virtual participants for engaging actively during the discussions.

Sincerely,

**Brian Eyer**  
The Stimson Center  
Conference Co-Chair

**Raphael Glemet**  
IUCN  
Conference Co-Chair

# SUMMARY

The sixth Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue took place on May 8-9, in Bangkok, Thailand to explore needs and challenges related to countering cyber-enabled crimes, human trafficking, and the trafficking of wildlife, narcotics, and other illicit goods.



This sixth dialogue was a deep dive into needs and challenges in the Mekong sub-region related to countering trafficking and cyber-enabled crime, with a particular focus on issues related to wildlife trafficking, trafficking in persons, cyber-scams, drug trafficking, and challenges of coordination across sectors and national borders. Participants explored policy challenges and best practices from the United States, Mekong countries, as well as best practices from key international organizations including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and INTERPOL. Cross-cutting values of inclusivity, resilience (including climate), and collaboration framed the sessions and were woven into the key takeaways and recommendations.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE:

- **Efforts to reduce demand must tackle and respond to the traditional beliefs that drive local demand for wildlife** Long-held cultural beliefs linked to wildlife such as traditional medicine use of animal materials or mercy releases can complicate efforts to address wildlife trafficking. Governments and NGOs should collaborate with religious leaders to help educate the public about the long-term harms of mercy releases, killing animals, and animal donation. Educational institutions should introduce a more comprehensive and scientific health curriculum about the importance of conserving wildlife and modern alternative options to traditional medicine.
- **International law enforcement agencies should provide training on forced criminality and non-punishment principles to law enforcement and criminal justice agencies across the Mekong.** Law enforcement agencies often treat victims in scam compounds as criminals. National governments and regional initiatives should increase collaboration and create teams made up of specialized units working to address cybercrime and human trafficking. Civil society organizations and international human rights organizations should do public awareness campaigns with human trafficking survivors and public defenders to improve knowledge of these issues and help to identify victims.
- **Financial intelligence units and prosecutors should build capacity to conduct financial investigations to follow the money.** Police often build cases against couriers and low level offenders but have limited capacity to investigate and take down criminal networks responsible for perpetuating these crimes. International organizations should provide technical training on financial investigations to target transnational criminal organizations. National anti-money laundering agencies should improve coordination with police and customs and border officials
- **Increase capacity and resources for local authorities to combat all forms of trafficking and aid victims of human trafficking in special economic zones** Scam compounds and transnational criminal organizations often deliberately operate in areas where local authorities have limited authority or control, such as special economic zones. Mekong governments should amend and clarify licenses for SEZs in ways which allow for better access by local authorities, particularly through increasing access for labor inspections.

*Photo: Conference photo taken on May 8, 2023, courtesy of Courtney Weatherby.*



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

<b>DAY 1</b>		<b>May 8, 2023 from 8:30 AM - 8:30 PM ICT Bangkok, Thailand</b>	
<b>8:30–9:30 am</b>	<b>Opening Plenary</b>  <b>Conference overview and expectations:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brian EYLER, Stimson Center Conference Co-Chair</li> </ul> <b>Keynote Address:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kathryn Jo Youngkins, Office of Multilateral Affairs, Bureau of East Asian Affairs, U.S. Department of State</li> <li>• Steve OLIVE, USAID Regional Development Mission for Asia</li> <li>• Luejit TINPANGNA, Transnational Threats Division, Office of the National Security Council of Thailand</li> </ul> <b>Fireside Chat:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raphael GLEMET, IUCN Conference Co-Chair</li> <li>• Jeremy DOUGLAS, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime</li> <li>• Sylvia SHWEDER, U.S. Department of Justice Regional Resident Legal Advisor for Counter Wildlife Trafficking, U.S. Embassy Laos</li> </ul>		
<b>9:30 - 10:00 am</b>	<b>Coffee Break</b>		
<b>CONCURRENT SESSIONS 1</b>  <b>10:00 am–12:00 pm</b>	<b>A1 What’s worked, What hasn’t worked? Countering Wildlife Trafficking Case Studies</b>  <b>Facilitator:</b> Alfred COLBY, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  <b>Panelists:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jeremy PHAN, Lao Conservation Trust for Wildlife</li> <li>• Nuthatai CHOTECHUANG, WildAid</li> <li>• Nga BUI, TRAFFIC Vietnam</li> </ul>	<b>B1: What’s worked, What hasn’t worked? Countering Cyber-Enabled Crimes Case Studies</b>  <b>Facilitator:</b> Chris CANTRELL, FBI  <b>Panelists:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hai Thanh LUONG, University of Queensland</li> <li>• Himal OJHA, U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime</li> <li>• MECH Dara and Danielle KEETON-OLSEN, Freelance Journalists</li> </ul>	
<b>12:00 - 1:00 pm</b>	<b>Lunch</b>		



<p><b>CONCURRENT SESSIONS</b></p> <p>1:00 - 3:00 pm</p>	<p><b>A2 What’s worked, What hasn’t worked? Countering Drug Trafficking Case Studies</b></p> <p><b>Facilitator:</b> William (Bill) SOLLEY, U.S. Embassy Laos</p> <p><b>Panelists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marc LAING, Drug Enforcement Agency</li> <li>• Pol. Colonel MAK Sereivathanak, Cambodia Anti-Drug Police, General Commissariat of the National Police of Cambodia</li> <li>• Inshik SIM, UNODC (virtual)</li> </ul>	<p><b>B2 What’s worked, What hasn’t worked? Countering Trafficking in Persons Case Studies</b></p> <p><b>Facilitator:</b> Amy RUSTAN HASLETT, U.S. Department of State</p> <p><b>Panelists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kongseng PIENGPANYA, Program Coordinator, Village Focus International</li> <li>• Murat YILDIRIM, INTERPOL, Human Trafficking, Migrant Smuggling, and Online Sexual Exploitation Division</li> <li>• Meghan MACBAIN, Chief of Party, Winrock International, USAID Thailand Countering Trafficking In Persons</li> <li>• Valentina CASULLI, Project Officer at Humanity Research Consultancy</li> </ul>
<p>3:00 - 3:30 pm</p>	<p><b>Coffee Break</b></p>	
<p><b>CONCURRENT SESSIONS</b></p> <p>3:30 - 5:00 pm</p>	<p><b>A3: Countering Corruption</b></p> <p><b>Facilitator:</b> Jack MYINT, Senior Manager, US-ASEAN Business Council</p> <p><b>Panelists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cynthia GABRIEL, Senior Advisor, Center for Private Enterprise</li> <li>• Pisey PECH, Executive Director, Transparency International Cambodia</li> <li>• Torplus YOMNAK, Director of the Center of Political Economics Studies, Chulalongkorn University</li> </ul>	<p><b>B2 What’s worked, What hasn’t worked? Countering Trafficking in Persons Case Studies</b></p> <p><b>Facilitator:</b> Scott BRADFORD, U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Embassy Malaysia</p> <p><b>Panelists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rebecca MILLER, Regional Program Coordinator, UNODC</li> <li>• Puvadet PROMMAKRIT, Public Prosecutor, International Affairs Department, Thailand Office of Attorney General</li> <li>• Xaysana RAJVONG, Deputy Director General, Research and Training Institute Department, Prosecutor’s Office</li> </ul>
<p>5:45 - 8:30 pm</p>	<p><b>Welcome Dinner</b></p>	

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

## DAY 2

May 9, 2023 from 9:00 AM - 4:30 PM ICT  
Bangkok, Thailand

<p><b>CONCURRENT SESSIONS 4</b></p> <p>9:00 am - 10:15 am</p>	<p><b>C1 Investigation, Transparency, and the Role of the Media</b></p> <p><b>Facilitator:</b> Gwen ROBINSON, Chief Editor, Nikkei Asia</p> <p><b>Panelists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sokcha MOM, Legal Support for Women and Children (Cambodia)</li> <li>• Van Anh NGUYEN &amp; Uyen HOANG, Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women, and Adolescents (CSAGA)</li> <li>• Brian HANLEY, Internews</li> </ul>	<p><b>D1 Enhancing Coordination Within Borders</b></p> <p><b>Facilitator:</b> Lori FORMAN, Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies</p> <p><b>Panelists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supraneer SATITCHAICHAROEN, Thailand Anti-Money Laundering Office</li> <li>• Ha BUI, Education for Nature Vietnam</li> <li>• Felicity LEE, Mekong Australia Partnership on Transnational Crime</li> </ul>
<p>10:15-10:30 am</p>	<p><b>Coffee Break</b></p>	
<p>10:30 am - 12:00 pm</p>	<p><b>C2 Strengthening Government &amp; CSO Collaboration to Protect Victims and Advocates</b></p> <p><b>Facilitator:</b> Sara PIAZZANNO, USAID Asia CTIP</p> <p><b>Panelists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jacob Daniel SIMS, International Justice Mission Cambodia</li> <li>• Ms. Cheap SOTHEARY &amp; Ms. Mao MAP, ADHOC</li> <li>• Abdus SALAM, Humanity Research Consultancy</li> <li>• Mark TAYLOR, USAID Cambodia CTIP</li> </ul>	<p><b>D2 Enhancing Regional Coordination</b></p> <p><b>Facilitator:</b> Rosemary YU, U.S. Department of Justice</p> <p><b>Panelists:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Klairong POONPON, Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation</li> <li>• Louise TAYLOR, Global Initiative Against Trans-National Crime</li> <li>• Jedsada TAWEEKAN, WWF Greater Mekong</li> </ul>
<p>12:15 - 1:30 pm</p>	<p><b>Lunch</b></p>	
<p>1:30 - 4:00 pm</p>	<p><b>Synthesis Workshop &amp; Survey</b></p>	
<p>4:00 - 4:30 pm</p>	<p><b>Closing Plenary</b></p>	

# THEMATIC AREAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The key concerns and recommendations related to each conference theme below were the result of an in-depth workshopping 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 problems were identified across six topics covered during the presentations on Trafficking and Cyber-Enabled Crime: wildlife trafficking, cyber-enabled crime, drug trafficking, trafficking in persons, corruption, collaboration within borders, and cross-border collaboration.

Attendees ranked the top issues among these sub-sets, and then split into thematic breakout groups to collaboratively identify and draft out potential policy recommendations and key actors involved in addressing each of the top three key issues. The breakout groups collectively drafted policy recommendations and solutions for sixteen issues and presented them to the group for a final voting process. The top recommendations for each sub-theme, as determined by the participants, are included in this summary report.

Photo: Synthesis workshop activities at the Policy Dialogue in Bangkok, Thailand on May 9 2023. Photo courtesy of Brian Eyer.





## WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

There are numerous national and regional strategies and action plans to address wildlife trafficking, such as the Plan of Action for ASEAN Cooperation on CITES and Wildlife Enforcement. Donors have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on projects to combat the illegal wildlife trade and protect wildlife. However, many factors—including low levels of awareness, low probability of detection and prosecution, and weak law enforcement—have limited implementation on the ground. As a result, commercially valuable wildlife species have been extirpated from large parts of the Mekong region.

The deep dive session on wildlife trafficking explored ways that governments and civil society actors can cooperate to design and implement more effective strategies to reduce wildlife trafficking. Speakers explored case studies of what has worked and what has not, exploring some of the critical barriers to success such as traditional cultural or medicinal approaches, lack of follow-through when cases are reported, and limited coordination between efforts to reduce demand for wildlife and efforts to strengthen laws and address gaps in policy and regulatory systems.

*Photo: WildScan Thailand Launch and Training. Photo by Hamesuda Mawilai/USAID, courtesy of USAID Asia Flickr account.*

## PRIORITY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Efforts to reduce demand must tackle and respond to the traditional beliefs that drive local demand for wildlife.** Long-held cultural beliefs linked to wildlife such as traditional medicine use of animal materials or mercy releases in Buddhism can complicate efforts by international NGOs to address trafficking. The number of people engaging in wildlife product supply and demand is limited—only 2-3% in a survey of Thai stakeholders. But without working to address root causes and build local buy-in, international efforts will be hampered.
  - Educational institutions should introduce a more comprehensive and scientific health curriculum in schools to instruct children about the importance of conserving wildlife and modern alternative options to traditional medicine
  - Scientists and health and alternative medicine clinicians should educate the public by simplifying and sharing scientific research around tiger blood, bear bile, and pangolin scales to reduce demand for these traditional products.
  - Governments and NGOs should collaborate with monks and other religious leaders to help educate workshop participants on misinformation of mercy releases, killing animals, animal donation to explain the long-term harm they do.
  - Scientists and health and alternative medicine clinicians should educate the public on the potential risks associated with eating wildlife by publicizing real examples of sickness or death from consuming wildlife products.
  - Government officials and local NGOs should increase public awareness and push for demand reduction by advertising wildlife laws and endangered species conservation through social media, public billboard posts, and engagement with village heads and local community leaders.
- 2. Development programs should prioritize enabling government officials to act on tips and collaborate across silos to build cases related to wildlife trafficking.** For various reasons—lack of prioritization, lack of familiarity with investigative procedures, insufficient data and networking between localities and the region, silos between departments involved in making arrests and prosecuting cases—government officials take limited action on tips or fail to fully implement seizures or confiscations of animals.
  - Government agencies such as environmental police departments, customs officials, and prosecutors should strengthen both interagency and international collaboration by increasing understanding of roles and trust through informal and social networking meetings.
  - National governments, international development partners, and NGOs should target capacity building efforts at the local level within provincial agencies by having workshops in wildlife trafficking hotspots and with local stakeholders.
  - Police departments and government officials should collaborate with NGOs to share intelligence at a broader time and geographic scale.
  - NGOs should help high level government officials prioritize efforts to counter wildlife trafficking through frequent communications and work to raise it as an important public issue via print and social media.
- 3. Ongoing demand reduction efforts should be complemented by efforts to strengthen laws and policies and strengthened enforcement.** Silos and lack of information sharing between departments can hinder prosecution of cases. Education of prosecutors and judges about the broader impacts of international wildlife trafficking and the need to combat wildlife trafficking is key to ensure they prioritize such cases.
  - National government officials and development partners should provide capacity building specialized in wildlife law for local authorities. Students' improved understanding and capacity should be tracked, for instance, through a concluding exam that proves understanding of laws
  - Regional government officials should increase sharing of intelligence experiences to improve national legislation and approaches, such as Thailand's Wildlife Network to link together agencies responsible for customs with those responsible for tracking and conserving wildlife and plants.



## CYBER-ENABLED CRIME

Transnational organized criminal organizations across the region increasingly use online platforms to engage in new forms of human trafficking and fraud. In recent years, a new regional crisis emerged with people from over 30 countries trafficked through online-facilitated human trafficking compounds in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and even the Philippines. The expansion of social media platforms, the cryptocurrency industry, and blockchain for money laundering provide additional complications. Technology and criminal ingenuity are moving faster than the legal landscape and mandate for law enforcement agencies, and as a result the explosion of cyber-enabled crimes has not been met by increasing resources and capacity building for law enforcement agencies.

The dedicated deep dive session explored how law enforcement agencies and other organizations can stay up to date with a rapidly shifting virtual crime landscape, what types of regulatory and data gaps are emerging in the lower Mekong sub-region, and ways that authorities could effectively use data and electronic evidence to counter cyber-enabled crimes related to wildlife trafficking and trafficking in persons. Given the rise of cyber scam compounds across Southeast Asia, cyber-enabled crime was also discussed heavily within the context of human trafficking as an enabling and complicating factor.

*Photo: Regional Cybercrime Training. Photo by Un Yarat and provided ourtesy of U.S. Embassy Phnom Penh Flickr account.*

## PRIORITY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. International law enforcement agencies should provide training on forced criminality and non-punishment principles to law enforcement and criminal justice agencies across the lower Mekong sub-region.** While online fraud is not new, the intersections between trafficking in persons and cyber-enabled crime wherein victims are enslaved and forced to commit cybercrime is a new trend. Law enforcement agencies often see victims in these scam compounds as criminals and charge them with crimes. Forced criminality principles—that victims should not be charged for crimes they were forced to commit—are not widely known or applied in these instances even when clearly applicable.
  - International law enforcement agencies, such as INTERPOL, should provide training on forced criminality and non-punishment principles of victims to Mekong law enforcement justice departments at both national and local levels.
  - National governments and regional initiatives should increase collaboration and create operation teams made up of specialized units working to address cybercrime and human trafficking.
  - Civil society organizations and international human rights organizations should conduct public awareness campaigns with survivors of human trafficking and public defenders to improve knowledge of these issues and help to identify victims.
  - Civil society organizations should partner with relevant embassies to enhance support mechanisms and efforts to aid victims of human trafficking in exiting their trafficking situations.
- 2. Better information-sharing between regional governments is needed to help law enforcement agencies keep up with the evolution of transnational cybercrime.** The COVID-19 pandemic and expanding digital access have acted as catalysts for expansion of digital crime in recent years. The relatively open nature of cyberspace, including a lack of geographic impediments and relative anonymity as well as reductions of business costs, lower the barriers to criminal behavior.
  - Regional governments should work to share intelligence by signing legally binding MOUs, encouraging police-to-police collaboration, and establishing dedicated contact points such as nominated officers for key agencies. This could be done through ASEAN
  - International development partners, NGOs, and academia should support training courses in cyber-related topics such as digital literacy which bring together a diverse range of expertise linked to law enforcement, insights from former survivors and offenders of forced cybercrime.
  - NGOs should explore establishing formal and informal information-sharing mechanisms with law enforcement where they can safely provide evaluation reports or insights into transnational cybercrime and its local impacts. Where possible and appropriate, journalists could provide valuable insights and information from their work covering these issues.
- 3. National governments and development partners should build technical capacity for officials to effectively track data and legal understanding among lawyers and judges for how to interpret digital evidence in prosecution cases.** Currently many of the officials tasked with responding to cybercrimes lack appropriate procedures or technical skills for collecting digital evidence. Even if there are experts able to collect this data, it is new and difficult to interpret for many stakeholders in the justice system in lower Mekong countries.
  - National governments should establish procedures and MOUs with financial institutions to support better information and data sharing so that law enforcement can follow the money.
  - Mekong regional governments should ask the ASEAN secretariat to issue guidelines and recommendations for information-sharing and cooperation between law enforcement agencies and financial institutions.
  - The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, UNODC, INTERPOL, and other internationally engaged law enforcement agencies should support a baseline assessment of each Mekong country's legislation which will identify gaps in utilizing digital evidence in prosecution.
  - International development partners and Friends of the Lower Mekong should support improved data collection and information-sharing related scam compounds given the scale of criminal operations and online evidence.



## DRUG TRAFFICKING

Since the military takeover in Myanmar in February 2021, conflict and instability have limited authorities' ability to counter drug trafficking. Methamphetamine production and trafficking surged, and the UNODC reports Myanmar's opium cultivation rebounded in 2022. Most of these drugs are trafficked to neighboring markets and to countries like Australia, Japan, and South Korea, feeding into the global drug trade. The expansion of synthetic drugs also continues to upend traditional approaches to countering drug trafficking given the dual use nature of many precursor chemicals.

The deep dive session on drug trafficking explored ways that the shift towards synthetic drugs changes the way that law enforcement must operate, discussing data gaps and new types of technical capacity building needed to address emerging issues. This session and others discussed the challenges and needs to allow for prosecution cases against the kingpins and larger transnational criminal networks, rather than individual couriers who are often arrested and charged. One key challenge in this space which has emerged across many of the Policy Dialogues is the need for greater inter-agency collaboration and working across silos.

**Photo:** Cocaine seizure by the U.S. Coast Guard in the Pacific Ocean, photo courtesy of the Coast Guard and U.S. Department of Defense.



## PRIORITY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **Financial intelligence units and prosecutors should build capacity to conduct financial investigations to follow the money.** Oftentimes police working in the field can build clear cases against drug couriers and low-level offenders, but there is limited capacity and knowledge of investigative techniques to work to take down the broader transnational criminal networks responsible for perpetuating these crimes and benefiting from their proceeds.
  - International organizations like INTERPOL, UNODC, and international law enforcement agencies such as the FBI or DEA should provide technical training for counternarcotics units and prosecutors to build skills related to financial investigation to target the transnational criminal organizations.
  - International development partners should provide support in the form of needed software and technical tools to conduct financial investigations.
  - National agencies with the skillsets to track money laundering such as anti-money laundering units and financial intelligence units should improve data-sharing and coordination with police, customs, and border officials.
  - Political parties and civil society should continue to raise public attention to these issues, creating and fostering political will to prioritize and address drug trafficking.
  
2. **Mekong governments should increase regional law enforcement engagement opportunities to build informal networks and better facilitate information sharing.** At the regional level, there are currently no formal communication mechanisms for law enforcement to sit down and discuss issues and share intelligence. Data and trends are identified locally or nationally, but any information-sharing with neighboring agencies is ad-hoc and not institutionalized. This limits the ability of individual countries to address transnational crime related to drug trafficking, particularly related to chemicals for synthetic drug production.
  - Central authorities should facilitate improved formal channels to request and share information, intelligence, and evidence.
  - Mekong governments should work to align trade and security agendas in the region, including collaboration on risk assessment processes and mitigation measures.
  - Regional governments and international partners such as UNODC and INTERPOL should establish regular engagements and communication channels for law enforcement officials to discuss issues and promote real time data sharing on drug traffickers, and crime syndicates.
  
3. **International development partners should invest in capacity to track trade in dual-use chemicals for synthetic drug production.** Currently this is a data gap, in part because many lower Mekong governments prioritize tracking controlled substances.
  - Legislators in the lower Mekong countries should strengthen mandates for law enforcement and customs officials to identify precursor and dual-use chemicals.
  - International development partners should provide capacity-building support to develop a dynamic regulatory framework for dual-use chemicals.
  - Customs officials should invest in access and utilization of customs management systems to track shipments.
  - The private sector should provide input and feedback on approaches to reporting and tracking trade in dual-use chemicals, which will not unduly burden legitimate business investments but would address regional needs.



## TRAFFICKING-IN-PERSONS

Trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants are major concerns throughout Southeast Asia, and yet the push and pull factors for trafficking and type of person being trafficked has changed in recent years. The share of victims of human trafficking for forced labor nearly doubled between 2018 and 2020, with scam compounds revealing operations to force thousands of people in compounds to commit cybercrimes in multiple countries across the region.

The dedicated deep dive session on trafficking in persons explored existing and emerging gaps in the system to combat human trafficking in the lower Mekong countries, with particular focus on ways that different actors from all facets of society—civil society, local communities, law enforcement, and the legal system—can work together to combat human trafficking. However, the rapid emergence of and significance of scam compounds within this context received significant attention at the conference, including one session related to the role of civil society and media in addressing human trafficking.

**Photo:** Photo of a victim of human trafficking at a safe house run by the Centre for Women and Development in Hanoi, Vietnam. Photo courtesy of UN Women Asia and the Pacific Flickr account and used under creative commons license.

## PRIORITY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Increase capacity and resources for local authorities to combat human trafficking and aid victims in special economic zones.** Scam compounds and transnational criminal organizations often deliberately operate in areas where local authorities have limited authority or control, such as special economic zones. Local authorities often lack the level of training and resources that are necessary to track and investigate increasingly complex trafficking in persons cases.
  - National Mekong governments should amend and clarify licenses for SEZs in ways which allow for better access by local authorities, particularly through increasing access for labor inspections.
  - International organizations and national anti-trafficking police should provide expert training on investigative approaches, technology, and data collection for local authorities.
  - International agencies like INTERPOL, IOM, UNODC, as well as civil society organizations and NGOs should build local capacity among authorities to recognize and respond to new forms of human trafficking, such as scam compounds.
  - National line agencies should establish focal points for reporting at the local level. International partners can share best practices and lessons learned in this space for linking local and national CTIP efforts.
  - The national government and individual ministries should allocate resources to local authorities including but not limited to funding for staff, victim support, and necessary equipment and software for tracking and investigation.
  - The national government should change laws to allow outcomes of court cases to be shared publicly to improve visibility and transparency surrounding human trafficking.
  - The Ministry of Interior or other appropriate government agencies in each lower Mekong country should work to establish multi-stakeholder coordination at the provincial or local level.
  - International institutions such as INTERPOL, UNODC, and other development partners should provide capacity building and raise awareness surrounding victim identification and non-criminalization or punishment for human trafficking victims.
- 2. Hasten data-sharing and mapping of criminal networks through improved transparency and cross-border collaboration.** Mapping of criminal networks cannot keep up with evolution of those networks, particularly when these networks are able to quickly shift location of operations.
  - Anti-trafficking policy and cyber police units should increase the use of cross-border information sharing platforms to ensure that data is accessible across national boundaries.
  - The court systems should increase protection and support to human trafficking survivors to make it easier for them to share their stories, which contain key data points into how criminal networks operate.
  - Civil society organizations, researchers, journalists, and tech companies should collaborate on mapping transnational networks. International development partners such as USAID should provide greater resource support to ensure collaborative mapping in this space moves forward.
  - The national court systems should publish conviction information to raise awareness and transparency.
- 3. International embassies and local NGOs should institutionalize to provide support and aid to human trafficking victims.** Particularly for cyber scam victims, support from embassies has often been crucial in providing assistance to survivors in exiting from trafficking situations.
  - Embassies should identify a point of contact related to trafficking in persons victims and use social media to set up a hotline, particularly in countries which have recently been hosts to scam compounds.
  - CSOs, NGOs, and embassies should establish collaboration mechanisms relevant to support for human trafficking victims, including regular meetings with contacts at embassies to share information and track relevant trends or developments.
  - Embassies should coordinate with relevant line agencies domestically to increase budget and support for victims of their nationality.
  - CSOs and NGOs should effectively coordinate and cooperate on responses to human trafficking and aid support, including through social media messaging and other forms of outreach and engagement which can reach those in scam compounds.



## CORRUPTION

Human trafficking, and the trafficking of drugs, timber, and wildlife generates billions of dollars of illicit revenue, some of which is spent ensuring smooth cross-border flow of illicit goods. Corruption is a pervasive challenge at both the level of individual officials and through transnational organized criminal networks. The challenge of corruption came up across multiple themes, with references to instances of complicity related to trafficking in persons and scam compounds as well as wildlife trafficking.

The deep dive session on corruption focused on multiple levels and drew a distinct difference between petty corruption at the individual level and corruption at a grand scale among elites. At the local scale, the session explored how individuals and local officers can respond to and counter petty corruption. Grand-scale corruption is on an entirely different level, and the deep dive session explored potential policy changes which could disincentivize participation in illicit exchanges, nepotism, and where there are opportunities for the private sector to play in countering corruption.

Photo: Anti-corruption sign in Namibia. Photo taken by Philip Schuler/World Bank and provided courtesy of U.S. Department of State via GPA Photo Archive Flickr Account.

## PRIORITY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **All stakeholders should work to incentivize a reduction in corruption culture.** Petty corruption is part of the culture in some localities and is thus particularly difficult to counter. Tea money culture and social comfort with small-time corruption can inhibit efforts to crack down on larger instances of corruption.
  - National governments should simultaneously increase salaries of public officials, adopt performance-based evaluations, and enforce rules more strictly to incentivize good behavior and respond effectively when officials behave badly.
  - The media should prioritize independent reporting and citizen journalism related to corruption, and NGOs and the media should encourage citizen action through mobilizing public interest around specific corruption challenges.
  - Provincial and local governments should improve transparency through publishing information on budgets, activities, etc. to build public trust.
  - National governments should couple efforts to address petty corruption with broader efforts to tackle grand corruption.
  - Private sector actors—including multinational companies and local business community members—should collaboratively and collectively work to speak up and adopt standards which they can collectively enforce.
  
2. **A lack of political will inhibits addressing organized crime and corruption.** Anti-corruption units often have the capacity to do long-term operations but lack the ability to operate independently from those in power. Corruption undermines political, social, and economic stability, and building political will to address it is key to successful efforts.
  - National governments should provide long-term funding to anti-corruption units and strengthen their capacity to independently perform operations.
  - National government agencies should require transparency surrounding beneficial ownership through disclosure or registration laws.
  - ASEAN and individual countries should require politically exposed persons—those who currently or previously held public offices—to declare all assets.
  - Multinational companies and trade group organizations should push private sector members to cooperate with financial investigations.
  - The Financial Action Task Force, United Nations Convention Against Corruption, and the private sector—including major multinational companies and trade groups—should engage with government stakeholders to incentivize better investment climate and anti-corruption rules.
  - NGOs, independent investigators, and the public should collaboratively set up whistleblowing and corruption reporting mechanisms that can be run in parallel to systems inside the government to improve transparency surrounding corruption.
  - Social media influencers and tech companies should strengthen public space and conversation around corruption issues.



## COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

Transnational crime, including human trafficking; trafficking of illicit goods such as drugs, timber, and wildlife; and cyber-enabled crime are difficult to address in part because they are cross-sector. Domestically, individual departments have specific and targeted mandates and scopes of authority. A lack of clarity regarding mandates, jurisdictions, and responsibilities of various agencies and different levels of government can hamper effective interagency cooperation. Transnational criminal cases are complex in part because they may include transboundary elements. Transnational crime can be combated more effectively if key actors reach across institutional or national silos to communicate and cooperate with counterparts in neighboring institutions. Such coordination and collaboration allow investigators to support more in-depth operations and improve prosecution beyond individuals to criminal networks. There are numerous pledges and frameworks for regional action, but questions remain on how to translate commitments to action.

There were multiple sessions focusing on coordination and collaboration: one deep dive session focused specifically on how policymakers can effectively address gaps and incentivize inter-agency collaboration. A second session focused specifically on how to enhance coordination cross national borders, with particular focus on ways to streamline legal and administrative approaches, build multi-track networks of expertise for information sharing, and explore successful frameworks for information-sharing to combat illicit behavior. These themes were also evident in other parallel sessions, including a discussion on strengthening collaboration between government and civil society organizations.

**Photo:** Thai-Lao Ranger Training at Khao Yai National Park in Thailand. Photo courtesy of USAID Asia Flickr account.

## PRIORITY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

### 1. National leadership should institutionalize multi sectoral committees to address transnational crime.

Transnational crime issues are multi-sectoral, but rarely are multi-sectoral linkages made, and funding does not require or motivate multisectoral discourse either within the country or across national borders.

- Senior officials at relevant ministries should develop terms of reference for an appropriate multi-agency committee, including membership, scope, funding provisions, targeted outcomes, and mandates for information-sharing.
- Line agency heads should institutionalize a clear process for working-level staffers to share information.
- International development partners should incentivize multi-sectoral and collaborative work through designated funds that are only available to multi-sectoral groups and those which include roles for non-government stakeholders.
- Mekong governments and international organizations should provide a process and support for sub-national transboundary communication at the provincial level on specific themes that are relevant to local authorities. The Golden Triangle area is a good case study, where international non-governmental organizations sought to provide provincial-level coordination on wildlife trafficking challenges.

### 2. Mekong governments and international development partners should increase their understanding of best practices and standard operating procedures (SOPs) related to transnational crime, including human trafficking; the trafficking of drugs, timber, and wildlife; and cyber-enabled crime. Currently, SOPs are not shared across borders and there is a lack of harmonization which inhibits cross-border collaboration in addressing these transnational issues.

- National and provincial governments in Mekong countries should create mechanisms for working level engagement in transboundary border regions.
- International development partners such as the U.S. Department of State and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should support long-term training programs and fellowships to build strong networks among law enforcement to achieve concrete SOP alignment throughout the ASEAN region.
- Think tanks and academic researchers should support a regional policy analysis and stock-take of SOPs at the national level for all Mekong countries to identify gaps and differences.
- International NGOs, civil society, and academic actors should lead Track 1.5 or Track 2 trainings and workshops with Mekong government officials which include simulation exercises on developing regional SOPs.
- Mekong law enforcement agencies should support cross-regional learning and study tours to share lessons learned and best practices in responding to transnational and cyber-crime challenges.



## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Policy Dialogues were originally designed to include an additional series of side events featuring on-the-ground engagement with rising scholars, students and other interested stakeholders in the host country alongside each of the core dialogues to expand on the in-person workshops. The theme of this policy dialogue is more sensitive than most others and so the on-the-ground accompanying activity focused on substantive discussion of the issues at hand—cybercrime, trafficking-in-persons, wildlife trafficking, and drug trafficking—rather than on the specific policy recommendations. One day after the Policy Dialogues ended on May 10, the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand hosted a roundtable-lunch discussion on illicit economy in the Mekong region featuring four expert speakers, three of whom spoke at the Policy Dialogue: one journalist, one expert from the private sector, one expert from UNODC, and Brian Eyler from the Stimson Center. More than 25 people joined in person at the FCCT to learn about challenges in the region and some additional watchers joined online.

**Photo:** *Public session at Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand on May 10, 2023. Photo courtesy of Courtney Weatherby.*



# FEEDBACK

Approximately one third of the attendees shared feedback in a survey following the dialogue, and most attendees indicated that the dialogue was a productive experience.

Key takeaways from the anonymous evaluation surveys are:

- All attendees indicated that they learned some or a lot of new information through participating in the Dialogue, with 67% indicating they learned a lot of new information. 87% indicated that they would definitely or probably use the knowledge gained in their work.
- 97% of attendees said they would recommend participating in a future Dialogue to a colleague.
- 90% felt that they developed insight into a relevant policy or sustainability challenge facing the region.
- 100% said that the Dialogue helped them identify a local Mekong stakeholder(s) with whom they shared common interest, and 90% said the same for identifying US-based and international development partner stakeholders.

Many survey respondents emphasized the value of meeting and interacting with participants from across the Mekong region and the United States, the benefit of hearing about lessons learned and case studies from those in other sectors or disciplines, and the welcoming, solution-oriented, and collaborative nature of the engagements. The most popular sessions were the session on Countering Trafficking in Persons, followed by the synthesis workshop—which many attendees liked because they were able to rank key issues and explore policy solutions—and the C1 and C2 sessions on media and civil society engagement.

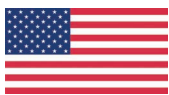
There were a few areas of improvement identified. While most attendees indicated that the right people were in the room to participate in the Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue, six respondents noted that the private sector was underrepresented. Five respondents felt that more local government stakeholders should be in the room, specifically those outside of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs. More broadly, three respondents suggested building in more opportunity for interactive discussion, including time to socialize and network with other attendees. Two participants noted that the People's Republic of China needs to be part of the discussions. One participant noted that it was difficult to attend all the sessions they felt they should because of the parallel structure.

---

## NEXT STEPS

This was the sixth of seven Mekong-U.S. Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogues. The final thematic workshop was on Transboundary Water Governance and was held in July 2023 in Chiang Rai, Thailand with more than 85 in-person attendees and virtual participation by a couple of attendees who weren't available to travel. The Policy Dialogues have served as an opportunity for stakeholders from the lower Mekong sub-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-U.S. Partnership at large, participants at these thematic conferences have been drawn from a wide range of government and non-government sectors. Emphasis has consistently been placed on encouraging gender balance, youth participation, and inclusion of under-represented stakeholder groups at the Dialogues.



STIMSON



---

## 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 lower Mekong sub-region on strategic challenges and shared priorities under the Mekong-U.S. 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.