Stories of Change from the Mekong Region

Celebrating Ten Years of SUMERNET (2005-2015)



SUMERNET 10th Anniversary and Annual Meeting

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This booklet shares ten "stories of change" written by SUMERNET partners that provide brief profiles of research and policy engagement over the past ten years (2005-2015) that have contributed to realising SUMERNET's vision for sustainable development in the Mekong Region.

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Preface

Dr. Eric Kemp Benedict

As a development practitioner working in the area of research for development, the stories in this booklet are inspiring. They tell how teams have combined research with engagement – with both policymakers and communities – to add new knowledge and make a difference to the people of the Mekong region. Each team works across borders, combining expertise from different Mekong countries and seeking to understand regional issues.

The projects differ in their orientation, goals, and location along the research-policy continuum. On the research-focused end of the scale, the story, "How urbanization impacts the hinterlands" describes the team's research into the role of urban hinterlands – the boundary between expanding urban areas and the rural landscape – in the course of urbanization. The study team published papers in international journals, presented at international conferences, and advanced in their academic careers. The study inspired graduate students to pursue related studies in their theses.

Another example of a story where research is the dominant theme is "Directing benefits to the rural poor in contract farming", in which the team carried out original and novel research, providing extensive data on contract farming in four Mekong countries. From those data the team classified the different contract farming systems they encountered, providing a useful framework for future research. The project's influence went beyond the research community, as the results led private firms to change the way they engage with small farmers.

At the other end of the continuum we find another pair of stories. In "Green tourism pathways: Promoting climate-friendly urban tourism in Hue and Chiang Mai", representatives of Chiang Mai municipality were part of the study team. The project was very pragmatic in its orientation, engaging in action research to inform and encourage changes in policy. The project was successful in its aims, as the municipality received further funding for a non-motorized transport campaign, while the highly visible project activities encouraged further initiatives.

In "Providing insights for better forest conservation: Engaging with REDD+ policymakers in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand" we learn that the team was directly engaged in policy process throughout the project. Team members were invited to present their work, contribute to a government newsletter, author a technical working paper for a national taskforce, and speak at events. At the same time, these policy-focused projects contributed research outputs that expanded the regional knowledge base for sustainable development.

Between the extremes we find “Reducing flood risks for local communities along the Cambodia-Vietnam border”, where a research project used the livelihood capitals approach to develop a livelihood vulnerability index. The index and associated methodology have since been applied and refined, a training course has been developed, and the method has been disseminated in local languages. In “Understanding payment for environmental services in Vietnam” we learn how the team informed the legal framework for a national policy in Vietnam on the strength of their research findings. The project contributed to the careers of the team and informed training materials and curricula. In “Gender and climate risks in the deltas of the Mekong region” we hear about the challenge that climate change poses to communities with a wealth of knowledge gained over many generations. The project carried out research to identify different perceptions and understandings of risk and vulnerability in order to inform communities and policymakers.

Two stories describe studies that are currently underway. In “Chindwin Futures: Setting up a River Basin Organization” we are told how the SUMERNET regional assessment is assisting in collecting baseline data to inform the creation of a river basin organization in Myanmar. In “Co-producing knowledge to build resilience and recover regional wetlands,” we learn about the biodiverse and productive wetlands of the Mekong, which have become degraded or compromised. The study will explore ways to restore them with the help of local community knowledge.

All of these inspiring projects were carried out with support from the Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET). SUMERNET itself, which is now 10 years old, also features in a story in this booklet. The network has retained the goals it began with, and has been building an active and engaged network of regional experts expanding from an earlier 14 to 60 institutes at present.

I look forward to seeing what the current phase of SUMERNET work will produce. If the earlier phases are any guide, then we will see expanded knowledge, strengthened partnerships, enriched experiences, and real changes in the lives of people living in the Mekong Region.

Dr. Eric Kemp Benedict
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1 Reducing flood risks for local communities along the Cambodia-Vietnam border

Dr. Nguyen Duy Can

Introduction

The Lower Mekong Basin is considered prone to flood hazards both due to the Mekong River ecosystem with its ebbs and flows and, increasingly in the recent past, by climate variability.



In general, about 4 million hectares (ha) in Cambodia and 2.7 million ha in Vietnam frequently experience flooding that can be especially severe during the rainy season. Thousands of villages, especially in the more remote areas along the Cambodia–Vietnam border suffer the extreme hardships caused by floods damaging their homes and often washing away people, crops and livestock.

Assessing livelihood vulnerability

Towards providing solutions to the risk of flood, this SUMERNET research project assessed the "livelihoods vulnerability" of local communities in two provinces in the border areas beginning in early 2010.

Assessing Livelihoods Vulnerability (ALV) is a measuring tool which involves a combination of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), household surveys, and the use of a Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) to construct the Livelihood Vulnerability Index (LVI). It provides users with a means to understand, and to overcome, their environmental constraints. The approach examines five livelihood assets: natural, human, physical, social and financial capital. The Livelihood Vulnerability Index (LVI) helps to estimate the different impacts caused by floods on these assets.

Five years of project work resulted in this approach being used as a tool to assess the sources of livelihoods vulnerability and improve understanding of conditions in the flood-prone provinces along the Cambodia-Vietnam border.

The approach showed that vulnerability to flooding of households differed among the different social groups with the poor households bearing the brunt of the suffering caused by floods. On the basis of these findings, the study could also propose some measures to cope with the floods. These include: adjusting the cropping system and patterns; preparing an effective early warning system, planning and providing aid relief, putting in place a flood management and mitigation program, using mobile phones for flood information, and building needed infrastructure.

The empirical findings of the livelihood study provided a better understanding of the local livelihoods and coping strategies, and helped provide recommendations on how to strengthen

Cross-border use of the livelihoods-based approach

A key feature of the project was the participatory method using a livelihoods-based approach that was cross-border, collaborative and built capacity. This study brought togeth-





er a community of scientists and local people across two neighbouring countries to solve and share a common problem of flooding and then to use their knowledge for taking measures to adapt to floods.

The project has developed training courses on how to use the assessing livelihoods vulnerability tool in practice at the case study site in An Giang in Vietnam; later, the tool was expanded for use in many provinces in Cambodia and Vietnam. Over the last five years, the project has conducted trainings for local partners including local officials and farmers on how to use the LVI.

Benefiting farmers, younger researchers and local partners

Since the project began in 2011 with SUMERNET support, we have published five papers of which 900 copies were disseminated to local partners and farmers in the local language. Four students (three from Cambodia and one from Vietnam) have benefited from training on the Assessing Livelihoods Vulnerability (ALV) and Livelihood Vulnerability Index (LVI). At present, over ten students who joined the initial trainings have completed either their bachelor's or master's degrees. The project team has also written a range of policy briefings, articles, and book chapters to provide a better understanding of the ALV and its uses for assessing local livelihoods in flood-prone areas for the wider public.

Key changes at local and institutional levels

The dissemination of the research findings and the ALV trainings have directly improved people's livelihoods and helped reduce flood damages in the provinces along the Cambodia-Vietnam border.

The project partners have used their skills to bring about institutional change. For example, Vietnam's Department of Agricultural and Rural Development (DARD) secured their own funding to start training courses for their officers on how to use LVI and to apply it in practice in their field sites. Similarly, Cambodia has set up a course for local partners to introduce LVI in the border areas. The project has also had a major influence on the provincial Flood Control Programme among communities in Vietnam and Cambodia.

In Vietnam, the research findings were accepted by the local authority and were integrated in the local planning for flood control and livelihoods improvement at the community level.

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Vulnerability assessment of livelihoods in Lower Mekong Basin: Adaptation options for enhancing capacity of people living in the most vulnerable flood-prone areas in Cambodia and Vietnam, SUMERNET Phase 2 (2010-2013) (http://sumernet.org/content/vulnerability-assessment-livelihoods-lower-mekong-basin-adaptation-options-enhancing).

Pictures credit: Dr. Nguyen Duy Can

2 How urbanization impacts the hinterlands

Dr. Maniemai Thongyou

Introduction

This research project studied the perceived impacts of urbanization in two urban centers, one in Thailand and the other in Lao PDR. The project also studied the responses of local communities and households to the urbanization process and its impacts, and attempted to formulate policy options to enhance a more balanced and sustainable urbanization.



Urbanization in the Mekong Region

Urbanization is defined as a massive growth of, and migration to city, that yield positive and negative consequences. Urbanization is driven by a combination of population growth, migration, and incorporation of rural areas into urban areas

In the Mekong Region, urban areas are growing at the rates of 4.9 per cent in Lao PDR, 4.3 per cent in Cambodia, 3.6 per cent in Vietnam, and 2 per cent in Thailand. These rates are around 2.5 times the national population growth averages. At present in the Mekong Region, 31 per cent of the population lives in urban areas, and this is expected to exceed 50% by 2050 as the urbanization continues.

However, concerns about rapid urbanization are not centred in the city but extend their impacts to the peri-urban and urban hinterlands, as rural and urban economy and social life are becoming increasingly intertwined given factors such as the growth of peri-urban areas, migration, longer commodity chains, extraction of resources from rural areas for consumption and processing in urban areas, investment of income earned from urban areas back in agriculture.

Urban hinterlands

Urban hinterlands are defined as the landscape interface between town and country, or the transition zone where urban and rural uses, interact and often clash. Alternatively, it can be viewed as a landscape type in its own right, one forged from an interaction of urban and rural land uses.



The documented impact of urbanization on rural hinterlands include, for example, changes in ecological balance, loss of agricultural land, land speculation, changes in farming practices, livelihoods and life-styles, and pollution.

Urbanization also has many positive impacts on the hinterlands such as greater income and job opportunities, better access to education and health care and other services. Such impacts are expected to increase, particularly in the hinterlands areas of small and medium-sized cities, which form the major characteristics of urban areas in the Mekong Region.

Professional impacts from our study

The key positive impacts of our research was in enhancing academic research and impart-



ing knowledge to the younger generation. Our research undertaken from July 2011 and conclusively completed on 13 February 2013, our team completed a comparative cross-country research, published two papers in two international journals (which were indexed in ISI and Scopus), one book chapter, and presented two papers in international conferences.

We organized two workshops to discuss the research results and policy implications with our stakeholders in Thailand and Lao PDR.

We also got an additional SUMERNET grant to translate the research monograph into Thai and Lao languages and published 1,000 copies of the three-language book, about 700 copies of which were disseminated to libraries, governmental offices, non-governmental groups and people's organizations in Thailand and Lao PDR. The monograph was also given to the study communities.

A community in Laos even awarded us a certificate to thank and honor us for our research efforts.. One of the Vice Presidents of the National University of Laos (NUOL) thanked and informed us that we were the first group of foreign researchers who, after obtaining research permission and completing the research, shared the results and the success of the research with the university.

After the completion of the research in 2013, all of the four members of the research team moved further ahead in their professions. Two researchers completed their PhD study, one returned to teaching, became head of Geography Department and now is the Vice Dean for Research at the Faculty of Social Sciences at NUOL, and the other became a researcher and special lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University (HUSO-KKU).

Another researcher who used to work at the Labor Department's office in Khon Kaen has taken a position as lecturer at the Department of Social Development at HUSO-KKU. The research team leader got KKU's Outstanding Research Award in humanities and social science disciplines and was awarded the associate professorship in 2015.

Passing on our knowledge to the next generation

Finally, one of the most important professional impacts for our team, that was composed mainly of university teaching staff was the passing on of our knowledge and experiences to our students. All of the team members teach at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels in the programs of Social Development (BA and MA), Sociology and Anthropology (BA), Mekong Studies (MA), Sociology (PhD), and Development Studies (PhD).
The knowledge on the impacts of urbanization, and the attitudes and responses of communities as well as the contestation and

conflicts over scarce resources among the state, business, industry and people, and efforts to reach a resolution – all these were important inputs and real examples which helped us to effectively guide our students to understand development issues and problems, social concepts and theories, and the way to seek knowledge or understand the research process.

Some of our graduate students were inspired and decided to conduct their thesis to further advance understanding of urbanization in the Mekong Region. We see this as truly an important professional impact that will have deep and long lasting effects – the creation of the next generation of researchers, development professionals, and scholars with conscience, who will contribute to the progress and sustainable development in the Mekong region.

For all these above achievements, we are indebted to SUMERNET.

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For more information:
Impact of Urbanization on the Hinterlands: Perceptions of Households in the Hinterlands of Khon Kaen, Thailand and Vang Vieng Lao PDR), Phase 2 (http://www.sumernet.org/content/impact-urban-expansion-rural-hinterland-and-local-responses-mekong-region-study-khon-kaen).

Pictures credit: Dr. Maniemai Thongyou

3 Green tourism pathways: Promoting climate-friendly urban tourism in Hue and Chiang Mai

Mr. Trinnawat Suwanprik

Introduction: Sustainable urban tourism in Chiang Mai, north Thailand

This research explored strategies for low carbon emissions in urban tourism by conducting case studies in Hue city in Vietnam and Chiang Mai municipality, Thailand, both of which are important urban centres in the Mekong Region with an increasing tourism (also called hospitality) sector. The project offered technical support ie using a carbon accounting tool (Bilan Carbone) to measure greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of the urban tourism sector in these cities.

The project first estimated GHG emissions generated by the tourism sector. A Greenhouse Gas (GHG) inventory study conducted



by Chiang Mai Municipality (CMM) on tourism related activities showed that the transportation sector contributes to significant emissions. The stakeholders in the tourism sector related activities identified Non-Motorized Transport (NMT) in CMM as one option that can not only reduce emissions from transport, but also promote income generating opportunities for the poor.

The project showed that different kinds of actions for low carbon development (i.e. GHG emission mitigation) could be developed to

create green jobs in the tourism sector in the two cities especially for the poorer sections of the people. Overall, the project fostered the development of action plans and policies for climate compatible urban tourism development.

Non-motorized transport (NMT) in Chiang Mai

In 2011, Chiang Mai emitted a total of 4,233,304 tones of carbon dioxide equivalent from products and services within the hospitality sector in 2011.The largest source of GHGs emissions was the transport sector.

The study did not directly analyse the larger carbon footprint created by travel to and from the city to external areas but focused mainly on progress made in reducing GHGs within the city limits.

The research provided scientific information that could be used by policy makers to reduce GHGs in the city's tourism sector.
One of the key policies to emerge from



the research was to improve the policy of "Non-Motorized Transport (NMT) system in Chiang Mai. Through consultations and workshop discussions among the various boundary partners including local authorities, tourist business associations, nongovernmental organizations, and local communities, the project ensured the city would make a firm commitment to improving and expanding the NMT system in Chiang Mai.

Traditionally, NMT i.e. walking and cycling has been one of the major modal shares in developing countries. But increasing motorization and decreasing inclination to use non-motorized methods have resulted in decreasing interest in designing measures and incentives for non-motorized traffic.

NMT is mostly used for short-distance trips, with cycling particularly relevant up to 7.5 kms, and walking up to 2.5 kms. As up to 70% of cars trips cover less than 5 kms, NMT has a large potential to replace car travel. Facilitating NMT, particularly walking and cycling, will directly lead to the reduction of carbon-dioxide (CO_2) emissions. Cycling and walking are also access modes for public transport, and thus their promotion could lead to increased public transport use. Promotion of NMT also delivers important co-benefits, such as noise and pollution reduction, better health, and a greener environment.

Key changes achieved: The NMT campaign and green tourism

The NMT initiative addressed other issues such as traffic congestion, air pollution, and income generation for the poor and long-term development on tourism industry in the region. Consequently, Chiang Mai prepared an "NMT campaign" by increasing the area for biking and trying to improve connectivity of biking routes and footpaths among the major urban areas.

The research team worked closely with the Chiang Mai municipality which launched the NMT policy under their project "Sustainable Urban Transport in Chiang Mai Project" supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) of the World Bank.
This project provided technical support on sustainable transportation and land use at a demonstration site at the "The Three Kings Monument" which is an area in the heart of the city that is popular for tourism.

It is expected that the non-motorized transport will reduce 230-570 tons of CO_2 emissions annually or 0.6-1.6 % of GHGs from local transportation within the city perimeter. The demonstration project also aimed to increase the biking areas from 4% to 10 % in the inner city.

The NMT project has also helped to catalyse other greening approaches especially among the business sector and further cooperation among tourism businesses and the local government. For example, the Chiang Mai municipality launched the "Energy Efficiency Initiative for Hotels in Chiang Mai" in 2015. A number of initiatives for public bike sharing in Chiang Mai have also subsequently emerged after the SUMERNET research project.



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A policy brief from the research is available here: http://www.faculty.ait.ac.th/kumar/files/Updated-Green-Pathway-Booklet-CM-February.pdf. More information on the research, also see: http://sut.ait.asia or http://worldbank.org/Thailand-Chiang Mai.

Pictures credit: Mr. Trinnawat Suwanprik

4 Understanding payment for environmental services in Vietnam

Mr. Bui Duc Tinh

Introduction

With increased economic development and growing demand for energy and timber resources are putting increasing pressure on Vietnam's forest areas. As part of its approach to forest conservation, in 2010, the Government of Vietnam initiated the payment for forest environmental services (PFES) where "users" such as hydropower or water companies need to make payments to "suppliers" of these services like communities living in upland forested areas.

Between 2009-2010, the Government of Vietnam piloted a PFES scheme in the Lam Dong and Son La provinces. Service users in the pilot PFES scheme were identified as hydropower plants (including Dai Ninh Hydropower plant in Binh Thuan province, Da Nhim Hydropower plant in Ninh Thuan province), water supply companies (the Water Supply Company of Ho Chi Minh City (SAWACO), the Water



Supply Company of Bien Hoa City of Dong Nai Province), organizations and individuals doing ecotourism business in the areas of the special use forests and protection forests within the administrative boundaries of Lam Dong province.



Recognising the importance of better understanding how PFES can work in practice, SUMERNET initiated its PFES research study in Vietnam. The project involved four different stakeholders: forest households, PFES users, PFES policy implementers and early career researchers.

Key successes of the PFES study

The key result of the study was to help develop the legal framework for a national policy in Vietnam on PFES. The PFES study helped policymakers to understand about institutional arrangements, generating revenue and the importance of gaining the political commitment and support for PFES at all government levels and among the local people who are living in forest areas.
The study also looked at the implications and potential for application of PFES in Lao PDR and Cambodia. The study developed "model forest partnerships" by providing technical advice and guidance notes, and linkages to other forest management networks.

Building wider understanding and influence on PFES

Our team presented the results of the project in both international and national arenas. In Vietnam, we presented the project findings to local representatives of eight provinces in the Lower Delta areas.

Involving policy implementers from the beginning of the project is an important factor for the success of the project. In our study, Nguyen Dinh Tho, director of Lam Dong provincial PFES Fund, was involved in the project and played an important role in the implementation of the project and helped disseminate the project results to policy makers in the central government.

Nguyen Dinh Tho worked as one of the researchers in this project. He presented his findings for policy implications at various workshops in Vietnam. His most important presentation was at the final workshop for piloting PFES organized by the central government and also in other provinces that were scaling up PFES. Thus, the findings and policy implications were disseminated widely to policy makers and policy implementers.

Key benefits for policymakers and researchers

There were three key levels of change due to the PFES study. One was the professional level where the project helped enhance the team's research capacity and expand our research collaboration among the three countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam. The Hue University Research Team expanded its network of researchers from domestic and foreign universities and institutes such as Can Tho University, An Giang University, Royal University of Phnom Penh, National



University of Laos, Chiang Mai University, Lao Economic Research Institute, and Asia Development Research Institute

At the researcher level, the project was integrated as a case-study in the training curriculum for graduate and undergraduate

students in Vietnam. The project outputs have become case studies for our undergraduate and graduate students in environmental economics and resource management major in particular.

The project findings helped students to understand how market-based instruments for forest and natural resources management can be designed and implemented in practice. At the policy level, the study helped close the gap between PFES policy makers, policy implementers and policy influencers by helping them understand the key policy issues for implementation and the challenges in scaling-up from the pilot stage.

At a personal level, after starting as an early career researcher in 2010, I was later promoted to Associate Professor in Economics. I believe that without the experience and knowledge as well as publications produced by the SUMERNET project, I would not have attained academic success.

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Further reading:
1. http://www.gms-eoc.org/uploads/resources/539/attachment/PFES%20in%20Vietnam.pdf.
2. http://www.cifor.org/library/4247/payments-for-forest-environmental-services-in-vietnam-from-policy-to-practice/

Pictures credit: Mr. Bui Duc Tinh

5 Directing benefits to the rural poor in contract farming

Dr. Yanyong Inmuong

Introduction

Increased regional integration along with greater foreign investment has resulted in rapid economic growth for the countries of the Mekong Region during the last few decades. Economic integration and growth has created both opportunities and challenges for farmers, the majority of whom remain small land holders.



As changes occur in agricultural production in the region, commercially-oriented agriculture is likely to continue to play a critical role in rural livelihoods in the Mekong Region. One such driver of change is contract farming that is already become prominent in expanding large-scale crop production in rural areas with formerly subsistence crops like rice and sugarcane now being produced by large firms using contract farmers.
Despite its emerging influence, however, there is still very limited information whether the contract farming system really benefits the rural, small-scale and poor farmers.

Our study

We initiated the research project entitled "Making economic integration work for the rural poor through contract farming practices in the GMS" (2011-2012).

Our research members came from four countries: Cambodia (Men Prachvuthy), Lao PDR (Saykham Voladet), Myanmar (Win Set Aung), and Thailand (Yanyong Inmuong). Our Mekong contract farming teammates also worked with the Australian volunteer researchers: Graham Eagleton, Angela Bush and Pippa Featherstone, in co-conducting the study.

We tried to address three questions: (i) what is the current status of contract farming?, (ii) what are the positive and negative impacts of contract farming on rural households? (iii) how can contract farming be made more beneficial to rural households?



The team selected two commercial crops for detailed study on the contract farming system: rice for Cambodia and Myanmar; sugarcane for Lao PDR and Thailand. The study collected and analyzed field data using standardized methods of in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions, and household surveys in the four countries.

Key findings and features of the study

We found that the contract farming system operating in the four countries is a mixed system: centralized, nuclear estate, and multipartite models.

The provision of credits, agricultural inputs, farmer training services, and the pre-season set price of the crop to pay farmers by the contractors are all common practices in the four countries. The rural farmers get the benefits of having a guaranteed crop price as well as technical support and soft loans. However, the contractees have to bear the production risks, for example, crop loss from climate and pest attacks, labour shortages, high costs of transport to the company buying station, crop quantity and quality not meeting prior requirements, etc.

We also found that the large-scale farm owners get more benefits than the small-scale farmers. The large farmers find it more viable to hold contractual volumes or large quotas of crop while the small-scale farmers cannot as their land size is limited.

The small land holders can join contract farming only if they make a connection with the quota holders by doing sub-contract. In most cases, the company does a contract with the large scale farmers and independent crop purchasers, and these groups also need to bear the risk of unmet crop volume as agreed with the company. This provides an opportunity for the small-scale farmers if they form groups or become a member of farmer associations or even as individuals to open direct negotiation with large contractees to supply crops in order to meet their desired quota. It then becomes a matter of production and financial risk management by the contractees while merging the opportunity of individual or group of small land holders to engage into the system if they wished.



Does contract farming benefit the small-scale farmer?

We concluded that the present contract

farming system does not directly benefit the small-scale rural farmers but it provides an opportunity for those smaller land owners to share in the profits by negotiating with the large contractees.

The quota holders bear the high risk of not meeting targets for crop quantity and quality as required by the contractors. This opens an opportunity for the small scale farmers to form a group or become part of agricultural cooperatives to supply the produce with support from the government.



Original and extensive study on contract farming

This contract farming study is the first research project of its kind in which extensive data was collected in the four Mekong countries. The study also produced policy briefing for the study counterparts including state and private decision-makers to make use of for the improvement of the contract farming policies and practice.

Many efforts have been done especially by the private contracting firms and government agencies towards incorporating rural small-scale farmers into the system. The private firms later initiate new contract schemes for a group of small land holders to enter the contracting system leading to those rural poor farmers to later get access to credits, input, equipment, and market. This subsequent change was not likely to happen for the small-scale farmers if the SUMERNET had not supported the research team financially and technically in this study.

Clear impacts

At the professional level, the individual researchers experienced for the first-time how to undertake a cross-country research project. Each researcher learnt many lessons on how to collectively understand and manage barriers and limitations of individual researchers' different backgrounds, thoughts, values, and expectations. Eventually, each team member could go through in handling the project activities until we achieved success.



At the institutional level, the various institutions affiliated with the individual researchers highly valued the project and felt grateful that the project outcomes would benefit the rural poor farmers as well as enabling individual organizations jointly to form and complete the regional research project.

At the policy or strategy impact, the project produced a set of policy recommendations on sustainable contracting farming in the Mekong.

Likewise, the study results showed the adverse impacts from heavy fertilizer use and high water demand from the large sugarcane farms particularly in Thailand. This resulted in the environmental and water authorities bringing the recommendations made by the project to initiate land and water conservation practices to farmer groups. For Myanmar, the private companies that were engaged in this research study recently adopted a friendly contract farming practice and offered a better and more comprehensive extension service for contract farmers as influenced by

the project findings.

Challenges in the study areas

All individual researchers perceived that the contract farming project is challenging as the team needed to deal with regional mega-enterprise companies (Mitr Phol, AKR, Gold Delta, Khon Kaen Sugar, Yingmao) or even the international NGO such as CEDAC.

The contract system operated by those private agencies is somewhat complex and has



different features between countries even in the same company. For example, the Mitr Phol goes for land concession for sugarcane growing first in Lao PDR but not in Thailand.

The Lao contract farming system relies on tripartite (farmer, company, and local government) while the Thai system has no government agency involved while relying on the free market mechanism. The rice contract farming policy in Myanmar is intended to help the victims of Cyclone Nargis in the Delta areas to access to credits with no interest rate, crop inputs, and technological services. In Kompong Speu in Cambodia, CEDAC initiated organic rice products for the market.

The farmlands of the four countries under investigation face similar problems and risks; climate uncertainty, shortage of labor, soil degradation, more agriculture inputs, and high cost of transportation of farm products.

All of the contract farming systems in the Mekong region could help the rural poor farmers, while these small-scale holders could help the contractors or quota holders by selling their products to the contractors to meeting the target volume as agreed with the company. The small rural farmers could do so by formulating a farmer production network/association to make them eligible to make contract with the company.

Benefits of SUMERNET collaboration

The team gained knowledge of research and publishing from the SUMERNET mentoring and writing system. The collaboration with



SUMERNET enabled individual researchers to form a small research network in the four countries to manage their research activities.

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More information:
Making economic integration work for the rural poor through contract farming practices, Phase 2 (2010-2013) (http://sumernet.org/content/making-economic-integration-work-rural-poor-through-contract-farming-practices).

Pictures credit: Dr. Yanyong Inmuong

6 Gender and climate risks in the deltas of the Mekong Region

Mr. Ngo Cong Chinh

Introduction

The impacts of climate change on low-lying delta areas in the Mekong Region are already severe. Floods, drought, storms and threats to water supplies all represent a significant set of risks. This research project aimed to identify effective ways to improve and share diverse understanding of water-related climate change risks and uncertainties in selected delta communities in Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia.

In particular, the study looked at gender and socio-economic class as important variables for understanding climate risks.

Communicating climate risks by sharing local knowledge

The projected impacts of climate change on the densely settled, low-lying coastal and delta areas of Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam make the Mekong Region one of the most vulnerable areas to climate change in the world. Moreover, while technical knowledge of climate change risks and hydrological implications is growing, uncertainties remain high.

While local residents are familiar with current climate risk and exposure profiles, they often do not recognize how these risks are likely to change in future, or the impacts of climate change.

The decisions on adaptation to climate change will be made not only by local governments, but also by households, community groups and private enterprises. Thus, improved and shared understanding of changing hydrological risks from hazards such as flood, drought, storm, and sea level rise will be essential to ensure collective and private adaptation responses. This understanding will also be important to empower the most vulnerable communities in making informed decisions.

So far, communication of climate change information and uncertainty to non-scientific



audiences has been insufficient. Better tools and processes for communicating climate risk and uncertainty and sharing knowledge from different sources is necessary, as they will provide a shared local platform for adaptation decision making.

Key findings and features of the study

Often, local communities in flood and disaster prone areas have substantial experience and local knowledge about their vulnerabilities, and how to adapt. However, they may lack understanding about additional or changed risks arising from climate change is usually very low both among residents as well as officials.

This study helped to share the knowledge between the communities and the climate experts to improve understanding of both the science of climate-related risks and local knowledge about risks or vulnerabilities and their local capacities to respond in particular situations.

Gender and social equity

The study obtained a better understanding of the gender and socio-economic variables that are often important variables for understanding climate risks.

In order to ensure gender and social equity, the study pro-actively involved women and other potentially marginalized social groups in the research process and as a dimension of analysis. A reasonable balance in numbers of women and men was sought for risk communications working groups, key informants and other steps in the research process.

Also, the study gave special attention to understanding gender-related differences in perceptions and understanding of risks and their causes, apparent actual levels of risk and vulnerability, and the effectiveness of different communication modes for sharing knowledge about risks and risk responses.

Gender-sensitive climate policy

The findings of the study have contributed to climate action and disaster risk management plans and mass communication on water-related climate change risks and adaptation measures of local governments in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

One of the key achievements of the study was to enable understanding of how gender relations may affect access to key resources that are important to reducing risks and vulnerabilities. These research findings were presented to administrators and policy-makers to enable them to become more gender-sensitive in their plans and policies.

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Further reading: http://sumernet.org/content/sumernet-outreach-local-communities-about-climate-change-adaptation-samut-sakon-province

Pictures credit: SEI Asia/Mr. Roengchai Kongmuang

7 Providing insights for better forest conservation: Engaging with REDD+ policymakers in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand

Dr. Pheakkdey Nguon

Introduction

As countries of the Mekong Region undertake increased economic development, the region's forests have come under increasing pressure from a range of activities especially commercial logging, expansion of cash crops and infrastructure development. The decline in forested areas has resulted in negative impacts on the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities. Increasing recognition of these issues has resulted in growing attention on forests at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).



Starting in 2007, within the broader context of climate adaptation and mitigation discussions, member countries of the UNFCCC have been actively negotiating a policy initiative that entails development and implementation of projects that would contribute to solving these forest-related problems. That initiative is now known as REDD+, which stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation, and (+) the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries. As of 2016, REDD+ has been implemented in various stages in countries in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Since 2014, the SUMERNET project on REDD+ has been collecting data on the national REDD+ strategy development process in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. The main objective of this research project is to document insights for REDD+ policymakers in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand on how policy barriers can be overcome and opportunities seized to implement key components of national REDD+ strategies in order to ensure effective, efficient and equitable REDD+ implementation in their countries.

Working closely with both policymakers and non-government groups

Since the beginning, the team has worked to ensure this research would generate "useful knowledge", defined as knowledge that would be perceived as salient, credible and legitimate by relevant stakeholders but especially policy makers involved in drafting the National REDD+ Strategy (NRS). We have worked closely with both government and non-government representatives to discuss findings from the research.

Members of the research team have been collaborating with, and providing (in)formal inputs to, key boundary partners with responsibilities for drafting technical working papers or policy documents that will contribute to the drafting of the National REDD+ Strategy.

The research team has also been invited to present our work at various technical meetings or conferences held by boundary partners at the national and local level in the three countries. In addition, the team in Myanmar published an article in the Department of Forestry's newsletter on the research findings. A policy meeting was also organized to discuss with stakeholders at the national level preliminary findings from our research in Myanmar.

Providing "useful knowledge", engaging with key state partners

The main boundary partners are the REDD+ policymakers in each country. The project has also engaged with academic discussions on the science-policy interface, market-based



approaches to forest governance in developing countries, and assessments of policies on climate change.

The key impact of the project is that knowledge and findings on the above issues presented to these key boundary organizations were accepted and used by these organizations in their work. For example, findings from our research were published as part of the Cambodia's National REDD+ Taskforce Secretariat's newsletter. Seven ministries in Cambodia are members of the Taskforce Secretariat, thus providing us an influential platform to widely disseminate our findings.

One of our team members was invited to be an author for a technical working paper commissioned by the Cambodia's REDD+ Taskforce Secretariat entitled National Framework for Safeguards Information System that assessed the different approaches to design REDD+ safeguards for Cambodia. Findings from this technical working paper were used to draft Cambodia's national REDD+ strategy.

Our partner in Thailand has frequently interacted with the main author of the design of Thailand's REDD+ National Safeguards Strategy.

Throughout the research, members of the three country teams have provided inputs to the national policy making processes by being participants or speakers at various events organized by boundary organizations, in particular government institutions.

Key changes: Benefiting the researchers themselves

Some of the key changes achieved by the project have been internal among the researchers themselves and included learning about different country contexts, better engagement with policy and academia, and perspectives on different approaches to engage with a variety of stakeholders.

For example, our partner in Thailand stated that the structure of this project contributed greatly to their ability to carry out independent research by challenging them to think critically during the fieldwork in Thailand.

The project provided a valuable opportunity for the researchers with their various backgrounds to learn about REDD+ implementation in Cambodia and Myanmar, and about issues relevant to climate change and sustainable forest management in particular.

The work also helped us to better learn how to select appropriate methods to study the



research questions while discussions on project methodology have helped many of the younger researchers to better conceptualize their research and approaches for effective engagement.

As the team collaborated across three countries, and learnt about the socio-political contexts, new entry points for engagement were revealed especially with academia in these countries and the various national institutions working on REDD+ in the region as well as changing some of our perspectives on how to engage with different groups of stakeholders. The data collection process in itself was a learning process for both the researchers and the boundary organizations.

In addition to gaining new knowledge and enhancing the research capacities of both researchers and the research assistants, we have also expanded the research network between the universities in the region. Through the opportunity offered by SUMERNET, our team has been able to conduct empirically rich research in the region.

Impacts of our findings

At the academic level, we believe that findings from our research has been contributing to conversations on evidence-based decision-making processes in the Mekong. Our findings have proven valuable for these countries to explore market-based approaches to mitigate impacts of climate change through the forestry and land use sectors, and improve efforts to link knowledge and policy for sustainable forestry management.

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Pictures credit: Dr. Pheakkdey Nguon

8 Chindwin Futures: Setting up a River Basin Organisation

Daw Khin Ohnmar Htwe

Introduction

In early 2013, Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) proposed the Ayeyarwady Futures (AF) program to engage with state and non-state actors both in Myanmar and with regional networks in the Mekong Region. AF is intended to support Myanmar to move towards sustainable development through evidence based participatory planning processes for their water resources in the Ayeyarwady River Basin.



During 2014, with the close cooperation of SEI and the Myanmar Environment Institute (MEI), the AF program team carried out consultation meetings, field studies, expert group meetings, in-depth interview and series of trainings.

A key focus of the AF work is the Chindwin River Basin. The Chindwin River, the biggest tributary of the Ayeyarwady River, rises in northern Myanmar at the junction of several smaller rivers in the Hukawng Valley. Due to rapid economic development in Myanmar, the Chindwin River in northern Myanmar is facing various types of pollution, river bank erosion, sedimentation and decreasing river flows. Through scientific assessments and trainings to support water governance, the scoping study for a "Chindwin Futures Assessment" was completed in 2014. In November 2014, the stakeholders in the consultation meeting in Yangon strongly recommended the AF team to convene another stakeholder consul-

tation in the Sagaing Region (in Monywa) to plan for the full Chindwin Futures (CF) program and support the establishment of the Chindwin River Basin Organisation (RBO) in 2015.

The AF and Chindwin Futures are part of the Regional Assessment (RA) work of SUMERNET.

Establishing the Chindwin River Basin Organisation

In the long-term (3-5 years), the Chindwin Futures (CF) program is attempting to build awareness of the values and limitations of particular tools, to strengthen the capacity of state and civil society actors to engage in concerned deliberations, and to guide the design of emerging institutional frameworks for water governance. CF is engaging in in-depth scientific assessment studies and wide-ranging stakeholder consultations in collaboration with Myanmar government agencies, academics, civil society and local representatives.

Efforts to establish the Chindwin RBO is now well in progress with the close cooperation of the Sagaing Region's government authorities. The technical workshop and stakeholder consultation meeting in Monywa was held during 6 -7 October to further increase collaboration and understanding of the environmental issues facing the Chindwin River towards setting up the RBO.

Exploring the setting up of the Chindwin RBO

From the consultation meetings, it has emerged that the mission of the RBO would be to address the key environmental issue and problems in the basin to "manage water and river systems of the Chindwin River Basin sustainably for the future generations".

The goal of the Chindwin RBO is to achieve sustainable development in the Chindwin River Basin by improving the management of water resources and the health of the river.

The key aims are:

1. Help coordinate collaboration related to water resource management issues among different sectors, groups and areas; 2. Encourage and recognize local initiatives that can provide bottom-up input to the Chindwin RBO; 3. Build public awareness and education about river conditions and management; 4 Support the integrated water resources management focusing on issues of concern including water allocation in the dry season, sedimentation and bank erosion, and water quality in the basin.

The main activities in the first three years would be as follows:

- Develop decision support tools/ systems to support water resource management under future uncertainties related to climate conditions
- Serve as a multi-state holder platform for dialogue among relevant stakeholders
- Explore robust strategies for drought management
- Assess the state of the Chindwin Basin and monitor water quality



Lessons learned: Designing institutional frameworks for water governance

The extensive meetings and consultations done by the CF team with the people in the Chindwin River Basin has allowed us to learn a number of lessons relevant to designing institutional water governance frameworks like the Chindwin River Basin Organisation.

Data collection is important as one of the main constraints in the Chindwin Basin is the lack of good data on various socio-economic, institutional and hydro-meteorological issues. During two years of work, the CF team collected data through field work, field interviews and consultation meetings as well as by satellite imagery analysis, water sampling and hydraulic modeling.

Setting up robust strategy or policy is crucial so that these strategies or policies can do



well under many different uncertain conditions. Law enforcement after the establishment of Chindwin RBO is essential, along with setting up rules and regulations.

The many water-related decisions that have to be made in the Chindwin, such as national development policies, trade and investment, can lead to water-related problems. Moreover, it is difficult to predict climate change and if the basin will be wetter or drier in the short and long term, so these are uncertainties in considering water policies.

The wide participation of key groups such as the business or townships will be crucial to the RBO's success. Given that the upper part of the basin has many mining and transport activities, the business sector especially from mining and transport should be involved in the CRBO. In addition, the involvement of townships is key since the tributaries of Chindwin River flow across many states such as Phar Kant and TaLine Township in Kachin State, Tee Tain Township and Pha Lan Township from Chin State.

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For more information:
Chindwin Futures Programme (http://www.sei-international.org/news-and-media/3186; http://sumernet.org/content/chindwin-futures-co-host-4th-stakeholder-consultations-improving-chindwin-river-basin).

Pictures credit: Daw Khin Ohnmar Htwe and SEI Asia

9 Co-producing knowledge to build resilience and recover regional wetlands

Dr. Carl Middleton

Introduction

Across the Mekong Region, a great diversity of wetlands and the agro-ecological farming that they support are central to many rural communities' livelihoods and culture, and contribute to local and national economies. Unfortunately, many areas have been degraded or lost as a consequence of large-scale infrastructure development, including for irrigation and hydroelectricity.

Our project, supported by SUMERNET phase 3, is working to build partnerships between local communities, government agencies, civil society groups, academics and others through joint participatory action research projects to contribute towards recovering wetland agro-ecological systems affected by past development projects.

We are working in three locations:

- The Rasi Salai and Hua Na Irrigation projects and wetlands areas in Sisaket Province, Northeastern region of Thailand on the Mun River
- Floodplain floating rice-vegetable agro-ecological systems in Vinh Phuoc and Luong An Tra communes, Tri Ton district, and My An commune of Cho Moi district of An Giang province, and Tan Long commune of Thanh Binh district of Dong Thap province, Vietnam.
- In Xaybouri district of Savannakhet Province in several villages along the Xe Bang Fai River, where farmers would like to transition to organic rice

From a policy perspective, each project team has engaged closely with local community, civil society, state, and private sector attempting to link local and scientific knowledge on the value of wetlands and agro-ecological farming within a participatory evidence-based decision-making.

Although we are only mid-way through our project, we highlight some initial positive impacts of the project.

Participatory zoning of wetlands in North-east Thailand

Ever since its completion in 1993, the Rasi Salai dam has evoked conflict between the communities whose livelihoods were harmed by the project and the government agencies that built and operated it. Due to the dam,



local communities have lost farmland, river resources, and wetlands important for rice, fisheries and other products.

Since the late 2000s, however, the conflict has gradually thawed as a participatory social impact assessment was produced supported by the Royal Irrigation Department (RID), the government partly compensated affected communities, and negotiations began on how lost livelihoods could be recovered.
In our project, Dr. Kanokwan Manorom and her team from the Mekong Sub-region Social Research Centre, Ubon Ratchathani University have worked together with community leaders and affected villagers, community-based organizations and non-government organizations, local authorities, and government officers from RID and the Office of Natural Resource and Environment. Several



rounds of meetings and three workshops have helped the project to initiate a process to categorize a wetland area affected by the Rasi Salai dam, and designate permitted uses within it which may range from rice and cassava growing, to fish or forest conservation areas.

In northeast Thailand, joint-mapping of the wetlands was undertaken in Nong Kae Sub-district area in June and July 2015, and the project partners are currently planning how to utilize the zones. Given the past history of conflict in the area, the project partners were proud and pleased to be part of the joint field survey as they had never made this happen before.

Conserving the benefits of floating rice in Vietnam

Deepwater rice – also known as floating rice – is native to the Mekong River Delta, and in the past was grown widely across its floodplains in Vietnam, particularly in the Long Xuyen Quadrangle and the Plain of Reeds. Floating rice held significant cultural, ecological, environmental and historic value, yet since the mid-1970s the area of production has been greatly reduced due to the extensive building of dykes and the introduction of high yielding rice varieties. Despite increased food production, intensification of the agricultural system has increased water scarcity and agro-chemical pollution, and reduced soil fertility.

In the Mekong Delta, Dr. Nguyen Van Kien and his team at the Research Centre for Rural Development (RCRD), An Giang University, Vietnam have been collaborating with farmers and local authorities in documenting the value of an agro-ecological system that consists of floating rice during the rainy season and upland vegetable production during the dry season.

Values identified have included: safe food production, maintaining biodiversity, recovering inland fisheries, improving the environment, and maintaining good soil quality and other necessary resources (straws) for upland crop production. Given the drought in the delta this year, the research is now documenting its impacts on floating rice production and asking what strategies can be adopted to increase resilience

The project is also working with local rice companies who sell floating rice as nutritious and safe food to explore how consumers understand the value of floating rice. They report that there is a growing demand for such healthy food amongst Vietnam's consumers. Finally, through working with the local authorities, the project is also targeted towards informing rice production policy in An Giang province.

Rediscovering organic rice production in Savannakhet Province

Dr Outhai Soukkhy and his team from the Northern Agriculture and Forestry College, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR has been working with farmers and local authorities in Xaybouri district of Savannakhet Province, downstream of the Nam Theun 2 hydropower dam.

Through a series of jointly held meetings involving farmers, the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO), and the Nam Theun 2 Resettlement Management Unit (RMU), the project introduced and supported the production of organic rice in Phonethan and Dong Yang villages, which farmers believed would offer higher market prices, safer production, and healthier final products that will support community resilience in the context of their changed socio-ecological situation.

Between May and October 2015, 25 farmers



from Phonethan and Dong Yang villages grew organic rice with the support of the Xaybouri District DAFO. The organic rice production was designed to use local resources and utilized low quantities of input. Various trainings were also provided on making compost, bio extract (BE) and soil improvement techniques. The farmers have been producing organic rice and vegetables during the dry season since December 2015 (and will finish in April 2016).

In Laos, aside from successfully growing rice organically, one of the most significant changes identified by the farmers interviewed was how the project has helped build a constructive relationship between District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO), and the Nam Theun 2 Resettlement Management Unit (RMU), and the farmers.

Co-producing knowledge to build resilience in wetland ecosystems

Agroecological farming has long been practiced in the Mekong region's productive and biodiverse wetlands. The contemporary challenge faced both by policy and on-the-ground practices is how to support wetlands and associated agroecological farming practices as an important foundation for regional resilience.

Although we are yet to complete the project, our experience so far has highlighted the benefits of a "co-production of knowledge" methodology where the project team try to act as catalysts to bring together boundary partners to undertake research themselves over shared problems. In each case, we have been able to bring together our boundary partners and work together with them to co-design research projects that meet their shared expectations and goals.

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Pictures credit: Dr. Carl Middleton

10 Building credibility in a regional network: Our ten year journey towards sustainable development in the Mekong Region

Dr. Chayanis Krittasudthacheewa

SUMERNET

The Mekong Region today is experiencing one of the world's fastest economic growth rates. The returns from economic growth have been, for the most part, channeled into improving people's well-being. Rapid economic changes are also taking place alongside regional integration and the closer inter-dependence among Mekong countries.

Despite economic progress, however, a number of social and environmental challenges remain that pose a challenge to building long-term sustainability. In order to meet these challenges, there is a strong need for a regionally-based and owned knowledge production and management community or think tank to recommend and support policies towards increased sustainability. The Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET), a regional network was established in 2005 to meet this need.

The long-term goal of SUMERNET remains the same since its inception: to achieve sustainable development through strengthening knowledge-based policy processes. Building a long-term regionally owned research network is not an easy task. Attempting to influence policy for sustainable development is even more difficult. This needs the long-term commitment of the network's members and supporters.

The past 10-year journey of SUMERNET demonstrates how the collective effort of this growing community can lead to making positive benefits and changes in the Mekong Region.

Expanding the membership and cross-border collaboration in the Mekong Region

SUMERNET's goal is ambitious. It therefore cannot be achieved by only few individuals' or agencies' contributions, however hard and good their work may be. The network recognizes the importance of having a critical mass of people from different backgrounds, expertise, levels, and countries to contribute, based on their unique capacities, towards our common interest in supporting sustainable development.

The lessons learnt from our Phase 1 (2005-2009) lead us to put emphasis on policy-relevant collaborative research among multi-country researchers in the region. SUMERNET has been encouraging researchers to develop collaboration with researchers from other countries in the Mekong Region. Therefore, the typical feature of SUMERNET research projects in Phase 2 is one project would have the researchers originate from at least two countries. Some project has research activities up to four countries. At the beginning, this created some pressure on the researchers who used to work in his/her own area within one country. The languages, cultures and contexts are different and thus needed greater effort in understanding and coordination. But later on this effort has proven to be rewarding.

> "My research institute had attempted to engage in transboundary research in the past, but not very successfully. Our research has been more country-based, with expertise on country-specific and border-area research. SUMERNET has provided a mechanism to support researchers in developing transboundary networks, which has led to success in cross-country collaboration..."
> (Dr. Maniemai Thongyou, Khon Kaen University, Thailand, 6th March 2013)

The cross-country collaboration has strengthened the relevance of SUMERNET research findings beyond the sub-national and national levels into the regional policy level.

While maintaining the diversity of its membership, which is a key feature of the network, SUMERNET has also expanded its partner institutes from 14 in 2005 to more



than 60 institutes in 2015. This includes more than 130 individuals working in the Mekong and Southeast Asian countries.

Improved scientific research and policy influencing capacity

The researchers from different countries in the Mekong have different levels of skill and experience in conducting the research and writing the results. In general, writing grey literature including the research project reports is doable for an experienced Mekong researcher. Publishing a high quality peer review paper however is a very different and difficult task.

In Phase 1 (2005-2009), SUMERNET produced mainly grey literature including 2 monographs of literature analysis, 9 working papers and only 2 peer review articles. SUMERNET has invested its resources to develop capacity of researchers in the region by incorporating mentoring support and supporting several workshops to enhance their capacity to generate outputs specifically intended for the academic and specific-interest audience as well as the public. The success of the capacity building support for researchers was illustrated by the generation of more than 100 project products including also about 20 peer-review publication outputs, and manuscripts at various stages of formal acceptance, as well as a high-quality book published in Phase 2 (2010-2013). Most of these products are led by the researchers from the Mekong countries. A number of similar products will also be produced in the current Phase 3 (2014-2017).

Our success in strengthening the network members' capacity and credibility can be observed from their attribution to SUMERNET's support in their professional progression in the academic community and policy arena.

> "The research project in SUMERNET Phase 1 on labour migration was conducted in cooperation with the Anti-Trafficking Unit of the Police Force and the Special Branch of Myanmar. The recommendations provided in the research papers have contributed a lot to the policy decision process in this area. Furthermore, the research director of the ADRI has been appointed as an Economic Advisor to the President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and as a result, the policy advocacy role of ADRI has become even more significant in Myanmar. This is mainly due to its empirical research and findings that are based on the

policy decision-making process..." (Mr. Aung Winston Set, former SUMERNET project implementer from Asia Development Research Institute, former Vice Minister of Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, and current Bank of Myanmar Vice Governor, dated on 4 March 2012).

Increased visibility as credible regional research network in the Mekong Region

As a network, SUMERNET has developed into a research player with greater visibility in the region given the active participation of SUMERNET researchers and boundary partners[1] in policy and research engagement at multi-levels: sub-national, national, regional and international. The increased number of relevant policy and research fora and debates conducted and participated in by SUMERNET partners illustrate this positive change. Additionally, SUMERNET has also received many requests for hosting and convening policy and research engagement events. This is also shown in the increased capacity and confidence of Mekong researchers in policy and research arenas and initiatives.

Influencing policy and practice through strengthening boundary partner engagement

To address a specific weakness in policy engagement process for policy impact in Phase 1, the researchers were introduced to the concept of "Outcome Mapping", which centers around the monitoring through behavioral changes of boundary partners.

From the very beginning of their proposal development stage, SUMERNET researchers are requested to identify the boundary partners and engage them in the design and the implementation of the research projects. With this boundary partner approach, SUMERNET is ensuring that the results generated from the research projects are highly relevant to contribute to, and influence, policy changes.

There are observed patterns within SUMERNET, where projects which actively involve the boundary partners throughout the project life cycle will have more success in providing very relevant policy recommendations or even influencing policy development at the end of their projects. This result is more obvious if the boundary partner is a policy maker and at the same time a project partner, then the sense of ownership of the policy maker to research findings will consequently be high.

The "stories of change" featured in this booklet are illustrative of how promising changes at different stages have resulted from different research and activities conducted by a small regional network. We hope these stories will inspire other people and regional networks as well as researchers especially those who are in their early career researcher path to continue their important work in delivering credible knowledge towards informing policies and decision making based on the best available evidence.

While keeping our long-term goal, SUMERNET has been and will continue to be the regional research network of learning and adapting for addressing the sustainable development challenges in the Mekong Region.

On behalf of the SUMERNET Secretariat, I also take this opportunity to convey our grateful thanks to all the members and supporters of the SUMERNET family who have contributed to our success and will continue working with us for future generations in our beloved Mekong Region.

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Pictures credit: SEI Asia/Mr. Roengchai Kongmuang

[1] Boundary partners are defined as those individuals, groups, or organizations with whom the programme interacts directly and with whom the programme can anticipate opportunities for influence.


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