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The Fourth Mekong Dialogue

"Water, Food, Energy, and Climate Nexus:
Revisiting Development in the Mekong Region"

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The Fourth Mekong Dialogue
"Water, Food, Energy, and Climate Nexus"
February 27-28, 2023
Mae Fah Luang University, Bangkok Office

Organizers:

Institute of Developing Economies-Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO)
Asian Research Center for International Development (ARCID), Mae Fah Luang University

Co-Organizers:

Heinrich Böll Stiftung- Southeast Asia Regional Office

Partner:

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

Program

DAY 1. February 27, 2023: 9:15-17:00

■ **Welcome Remarks**

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nantana Gajasen,
Vice President, Mae Fah Luang University, and Acting Dean, School of Social Innovation
Ms. Mayumi Murayama
Executive Vice President, the Institute of Developing Economies - Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO)

■ **Framing of the Mekong Dialogue**

Dr. Khen Suan Khai, Mekong Program, Mae Fah Luang University

■ **Unpacking the Mekong Dialogue and the way forward**

Dr. Kenji Otsuka, Senior Research Fellow, IDE-JETRO

■ **Keynote Speech**

Critical Issues for the Water Food Energy Climate Nexus in Mekong Region.
Dr. Carl Middleton, Chulalongkorn University

Short break

■ **Session 1: Revisiting Development of the Mekong Region**

• **Presentation 1**

Forming the "Mekong": How did the conflicting nations create the space for cooperation?
Ms. Maki Aoki-Okabe, Deputy-Director, Current Affairs Studies Group, Area Studies Center, IDE-JETRO

• **Presentation 2**

Mekong-Australia Partnership
Dr. John Dore,
DFAT Lead Water Specialist, Water Security and Nature Based Solutions Section, Climate Resilience and Finance Branch, Climate Development and Finance Division DFAT Lead Advisor, Mekong Australia

Partnership, Water Energy Climate, South East Asia Regional Division, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia Embassy, Bangkok, Thailand

• Q&A Session

Discussant: *Dr. Kenji Nagata*, Senior Advisor on Water Resources, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

Moderator: *Prof. Siriporn Wajjwalku*, Thammasat University

LUNCH

Session 2: Local and Transboundary Practices in the Mekong Region

• Presentation 1

Contribution of Research to Land Governance Reform before the political change in Myanmar

Mr. Bawi Tha Thawng, Mekong Region Land Governance, Myanmar

• Presentation 2

Crafting Shared Governance Using a Commons-based Approach in the Wetland of Luang Prabang, Lao PDR:

Mr. Phong An Huynh, NRM International Expert, GRET, Laos

• Presentation 3

Building a Low-carbon, Climate-resilient Agriculture through Circular Approach: A Case Study in An Giang Province:

Mr. Nguyen Minh Quang, Mekong Environmental Forum, Vietnam

Q&A and Discussion

Short Break

Session 2 (Continued)

• Presentation 4

Food and Social Innovation: Exploring Participatory Policy Development, the Cases of Thailand:

Ms. Wallapa van Willenswaard, Innovation Network International, Thailand

• Presentation 5

Community-based Solution to Addressing the Integrated Issues of Biodiversity Conservation, Climate Change and Sustainability: From China to the Mekong Region:

Dr. Kui Peng, Program Manager, Ecosystem Conservation & Community Development Program, Global Environmental Institute, China

Q&A and Discussion

Discussant: *Dr. Sawang Meesaeng*, Lecturer, International Development Program, School of Social Innovation, MFU; *Mr. Keola Souknilanh*, Deputy Director, Economic Geography Studies Group, IDE-JETRO; and *Ms. Naomi Hatsukano*, Associate Senior Research Fellow, Southeast Asian Studies Group II, IDE-JETRO

Moderator: *Mr. Shozo Sakata*, Senior Researcher, IDE-JETRO and *Dr. Khen Suan Khai*, Mekong Program, MFU

DAY.2: February 28, 2023: 9:00-12:00

■ **Session 3: Transboundary cooperation in the Mekong Region and beyond**

• **Presentation 1**

Water Resources Distribution and Utilization among the countries of the Lancang-Mekong:

Prof. Yan Feng and Dr. Wenling Wang

Institute of International Rivers and Eco-security, Yunnan University

• **Presentation 2**

Water Diplomacy in the Mekong Region

Dr. Chheang Vannarith, President, Asian Vision Institute, Cambodia

• **Presentation 3**

Address the Water Resources Issues toward the Better Future of Mekong:

Dr. Kenji Nagata, JICA

Q & A

Moderator: Ms. Maki Aoki-Okabe, IDE-JETRO

Short Break

■ **Roundtable Discussion**

All panelists and discussants

Moderator: Dr. Khen Suan Khai, MFU and Dr. Kenji Otsuka, IDE-JETRO

■ **Closing Remarks**

Prof. Lee Lai To

Director, Asian Research Center for International Development,

School of Social Innovation, Mae Fah Luang University

Opening Remarks

Dr. Nantana Gajasen

Associate Professor and Vice President of Mae Fah Luang University

Dr. Gajasen

Dr. Gajasen thanked the participating organizations for their support and involvement in the Dialogue. She noted Mae Fah Luang University's (MFU) willingness to collaborate on future endeavors. She highlighted MFU as an institution particularly suited for studying Mekong issues from its campus in northern Thailand, near the border with Burma and Laos.

"Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to the fourth Mekong Dialogue organized by the Mekong Program of the Asian Research Center for International Development, School of Social Innovation, Mae Fah Luang University. I am Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nantana Gajasen, the Vice-President of Mae Fah Luang University, from Chiang Rai, Thailand.

The Mekong Program of the Asian Center for International Development (ARCID), School of Social Innovation, Mae Fah Luang University, aims to promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation partnerships for sustainability and development in the Mekong region. The Mekong Program has been initiating a dialogue series on Mekong issues; it is the fourth time today. The Mekong dialogue is a form of a 2.5 track consisting of participants from academic, think tanks, I.O.s, and (I)NGOs from Mekong countries as well as extra-regional countries which play an essential role in the development of the region, such as China, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S., to discuss on the issue of transboundary water resources management in the region.

Based on the mentioned background, The Mekong Program of ARCID and the Institute of Developing Economies of the Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO) have initiated to host the 4th Mekong Dialogue. This 4th Mekong Dialogue aims to promote knowledge and experience sharing among local NGOs and individuals in Mekong countries regarding water, Food, energy, and climate nexus in the Mekong region, prioritizing local voices based on the principle of Leave No One Behind promoted under SDGs and committed by states since 2015. It is to provide a forum for partners involved in the development of the Mekong region, including Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam plus Japan, China, and ASEAN, as well as South Korea and the USA, to exchange the ideas of the roles of all stakeholders regardless of their power, and to explore the possible mechanism for further collaboration among those stakeholders.

The Mekong basin is vital for more than 70 million people of Mainland Southeast Asia who depend on the Mekong River to hold the potential for electrical energy production. On the other hand, people in the Mekong region have threatened the river's long-term sustainability with extreme environmental disasters, such as severe flooding or long drought. To overcome those problems and develop the region, cooperation among actors and stakeholders in Mekong countries is a critical matter, aiming to have open communication and discussion through various regional platforms or similar instruments, for instance, the Mekong Committee, which was established as early as 1954 with Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Southern Viet Nam and later became a form of Mekong River Commission in 1995. Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) was formulated by Asian Development Bank (ADB) 1992.

At the state level, the governments of Mekong countries have conducted several policy dialogues related to water quality monitoring improvement, information and data sharing, technical cooperation and exchanges, joint research as well as capacity building on governance mechanisms of hydropower, energy development, and environmental issue, and cross-border issues such as trades and trafficking. In addition, the Mekong region has cooperated with some significant and middle powers, such as Japan, China, and South Korea. USA, Australia, and New Zealand. In defense of its centrality, ASEAN also is sentient to the grave interest of the major and middle powers in the Mekong region. Besides states, non-state actors, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are essential in voicing the local people's ideas because NGOs are close to local people and can see things clearly in the field. Therefore, engagement with non-state actors is an opportunity to make better decisions regarding policymaking and implementation. Turning the voice of the commoners into an academic agent would draw the attention of duty-bearers and the major and middle powers involved in the region.

The Mekong River is vital for both riparian countries and extra-regional powers. This is due to the precious value of the resource itself and the potential competition or cooperation among actors and stakeholders involved in regional development regarding infrastructure, Food and energy security, climate change, and disaster resilience. Beyond the regional connectivity and collaboration with the Powers, cross-sectoral implications of the water, Food, and energy sectors require vigilant consideration. Development projects and investments for water access, energy supplies, food security, and other development activities are interrelated with unintended impacts, especially to the grassroots communities relying on the Mekong. The Bonn 2011 conference on the Water, Energy, and Food Security Nexus stressed that "understanding the nexus is needed to develop policies, strategies, and investments to exploit synergies and mitigate trade-offs among these three development goals with the active participation of and among government agencies, the private sector, and civil society. In this way, unintended consequences can be avoided."

The 4th Mekong Dialogue today is materialized with the support of many organizations and parties. My special appreciation goes to IDE-JETRO and Heinrich Böll Stiftung- Southeast Asia Regional Office for thoughtfully and openhandedly co-hosting this vital Dialogue with the Mekong Program of Mae Fah Luang University. The physical presence of Mae Fah Luang University next to the Golden Triangle is the advantage that our university has much potential to carry out more practical research and cooperation with national and international organizations working on Mekong issues. So, everyone is welcome to cooperate with us. I sincerely thank the JICA, the keynote speaker, presenters, discussants, and participants from Mekong countries, Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S., for your kind support, particularly your ideas, and presence today. At last, this event happens to owe to the dedication of my colleague at the School of Social Innovation, notably the Mekong Program, for which I feel grateful.

Thank you very much."

Opening Remarks 2

Ms. Mayumi Murayama, Executive Vice President, Japan External Trade Organization, IDE-JETRO

Speaking from Japan, Miss Murayama highlighted the importance of the Mekong River to the region and the increasing threats it faces from climate change. The Mekong Dialogue was established under these circumstances to promote the Mekong's sustainability and the region's health. JETRO has conducted research on the Mekong since its inception in 1960. This research has grown over time.

Kenji Otsuka discussed his involvement in Mekong research since 2019. He noted that the issues surrounding the river are various and intertwined. They include the sustainable use of water to meet the needs of all relevant countries and local communities, the preservation of local wildlife, and the promotion of local agriculture. Multilateral coalitions must be leveraged to meet these challenges adequately. Expectations for research institutes are getting stronger. Joining the 4th Mekong Dialogue is part of IDE-JETRO's critical mission as a research institute. JETRO's relationship with the region is especially noteworthy this year, the 50th year of ASEAN friendship and cooperation between ASEAN and Japan. IDE-JETRO welcomes further collaboration in the future.

"Distinguished Professor, Dr. Nantana Gajaseeni, respected fellow speakers and the participants in Bangkok and online, dear colleagues, perfect morning from Japan.

On behalf of the Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization. (IDE-JETRO), first of all, I would like to congratulate the ARCID, Asian Center for International Development, School of Social Innovation, and Mae Fah Luang University for organizing the 4th Mekong Dialogue on the theme of "the Water-Food-Energy-Climate Nexus: Revisiting Development in Mekong Region."

As we all know, the Mekong River has brought numerous blessings to the countries in its basin in ecological, economic, and social aspects. However, In recent years, its sustainable use has been threatened by extreme weather caused by climate change and others.

Under such circumstances, the Mekong Dialogue, initiated by ARCID, was established to provide a platform for practitioners, including NGOs, international organizations, and researchers working on the sustainability issues surrounding the Mekong River. I want to thank all of you for your extensive efforts to build and maintain this valuable network.

IDE-JETRO has been researching the Mekong region since its inception in 1960, mainly from economics and political science. The area of research has expanded over the years. For instance, Maki Okabe-Aoki, one of the speakers at this Dialogue today, has been studying the region from the perspective of international relations. Another colleague, Kenji Otsuka, has been working on water governance in Asia and has been involved in the Mekong Dialogue since 2019.

While research is a prerequisite, building an interactive and cooperative governance structure is essential to realize a sustainable future for the Mekong River and its basin region. The problems surrounding the river are intertwined and broadly impact the public, private, and civil sectors. As titled in the Dialogue today, the issues such as how to protect and manage water use, how to enhance sustainable production and supply of Food and energy, and how to confront the climate crisis faced by the basin countries are all interrelated. An interactive approach is therefore required to build multilateral cooperation at the international, national, regional, and local levels, involving all public and private sectors as well as NGOs and citizens to face the challenges.

In that sense, the Mekong Dialogue is a unique platform to connect a wide range of stakeholders. As the importance of the science-policy interface has been increasingly acknowledged, expectations towards research institutes like us are strengthening to become a bridge linking the actors and utilizing the research outcomes for better policy discussions. I appreciate that the Mekong Dialogue has given us, IDE-JETRO, a precious opportunity to strengthen the interface.

Before closing my speech, I also would like to mention that this event is a part of the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation. This year, 2023, marks the 50th year of the extended cooperation between ASEAN and Japan. As many of the ASEAN countries are situated in the basin of the Mekong River, I hope that our Dialogue will also become a part of the fruitful bridge of the cooperation between ASEAN countries and Japan.

Lastly, I would like to thank our co-organizers and partners, including the ARCID, School of Social Innovation, Mae Fah Luang University, Heinrich Böll Foundation Southeast Asia Regional Office, and Japan International Cooperation Agency.

I hope this year's Mekong Dialogue will be an excellent start to building partnerships among us all and lead us to future collaborations.

Thank you very much."

Framing of the Mekong Dialogue

Dr. Khen Suan Khai

Lecturer, School of Social Innovation, Mae Fah Luang University

Dr. Khen Suan Khai welcomed this year's participants in the Mekong Dialogue and highlighted the expanded list of representatives compared to previous years. He acknowledged the critical roles played by organizations from Japan, China, Australia, ASEAN, and elsewhere in contributing to the future sustainability of the Mekong. MFU seeks to bring key players together to Dialogue on these issues while providing a platform for local communities to be heard by policymakers. We view the Mekong as a river and a region integral to food production, biodiversity, and millions of people's economic and social well-being. This year's Dialogue will expand the focus beyond the river to include many issues related to the Mekong Delta.

Unpacking the Mekong Dialogue and the way forward

Kenji Otsuka

Senior Research Fellow, the Institute of Developing Economies - Japan External Trade Organization

Dr. Kenji Otsuka reflected the past rounds of Mekong Dialogue and addressed its characteristics as 2.5 track multistakeholder dialogue in the region. He raised some issues to be discussed for the way forward of the multistakeholder dialogue such as: sharing the 'stake' among multi-stake-holders in the region; raising awareness of the unique role of nonstate actors in the Mekong region; exploring transdisciplinary research in the region; connecting the existing and more influential platform with this platform; and building a new science-practice-policy platform based on the Mekong Dialogue.

Keynote Speech: Critical Issues for the Water Food Energy Climate Nexus in Mekong Region

Dr. Carl Middleton, Director of the Center for Social Development Studies

Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University

- Dr. Middleton noted **the negative impact of COVID-19 on academic research and advocacy**. He stressed the importance of communication and trust-building among the Mekong research community. The Post-COVID world is an opportunity to pursue new approaches.
- **Mekong issues transcend national boundaries**, leading to conflict and cooperation over various topics. These relationships should not be oversimplified as entirely antagonistic or cooperative.
- In addition to the importance of these issues at the regional level and across national boundaries, **Mekong issues are local**, with a profound impact on local communities comprising millions of people
- **A variety of institutions work on Mekong issues**. In addition to the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC), there are numerous regional frameworks, think tanks, NGOs, academic institutions, and governments
- **Cooperation amongst these players is a constant evolution**. While some issues are resolved or fade in importance, such as navigation, new problems are constantly emerging, such as the expansion of urban areas and the need to meet their water demands
- There have been **flashpoints in recent years**, including COVID, the coup in Burma, and climate change, which have changed the landscape of Dialogue on the Mekong
- The **impact of climate change** is becoming increasingly apparent. For thousands of years, people lived along the Mekong along with floods, which have now been shrinking
- The **flood pulse** is at the center of the sustainability of the Mekong basin. The flood pulse has been changing. Annual rain levels historically were 80% in flood season and 20% the rest of the year. This ratio has been changing in recent years, impacting agriculture and local communities
- Since the 1990s, the Mekong basin has been radically transformed due to these climate changes
- **hydropower dams** enclose areas previously governed as commons. Ecosystems become degraded, and negative externalities are passed onto local communities
- Advocacy and research have shifted to a **whole-of-basin approach** to tackle interrelated challenges
- **Privatization of Hydropower Projects**: While many of these hydropower projects were historically managed by states, they are now primarily private sector projects or public-private partnerships, leading to a blurring of public and private interests
- **International Water Law and Equitable and Reasonable Utilization** govern the rights of states to utilize shared water resources
- 2019 to 2021 included periods of **severe drought**, including in the Mekong Delta and Tonle Sap Lake.
- **Insufficient data** during this severe drought contributed to tension and limited the potential to make scientific, reason-based water usage and resource management decisions. A period of poor relations between the United States and China compounded the difficulty in addressing the drought.
- These **flashpoints led to significant data sharing and publication developments**, increasing trust and transparency.
- **Efforts to acquire and share data** include the LMC Water Center website, the MRC data portal, and the Stimson Center's Dam Monitor.

- **Water data can prevent** water shocks, make more comprehensive choices, and build trust.
- **Nevertheless, data remains insufficient.** There must be a process to produce and share data, turn that data into digestible information, and then actionable knowledge. Early warning data is of particular need.
- In addition to the production of knowledge, **accountability is essential.** Even with ability, one must demonstrate that they know something. Accountability can be produced through Dialogue. Once knowledge has been attained, there must be accountability for action, i.e., closing the gap between expertise and impact.
- **Water diplomacy:** a paradigm shift in which resource management is no longer viewed as an issue to be managed by technical experts but by a wide range of actors and institutions, including politicians and diplomats.
- **Hydropower Lobby:** the hydropower lobby promotes hydropower as the solution to electricity needs while drawing attention away from the broader value of rivers or alternative electricity generation mechanisms
- **Civil society space is shrinking** in some countries. Many civil society representatives feel that working on Mekong issues is no longer safe.
- **Conclusion:** We should think critically about the future. What are the goals? Where are we going?

Session 1: Revisiting the Development of the Mekong Region

Forming the "Mekong Region:": How Did the Conflicting Nations Create the Space for Cooperation?

Ms. Maki Aoki-Okabe

Deputy Director, Current Affairs Studies Group, Area Studies Center, IDE-JETRO

- The **Mekong region** is a multi-layered space that is simultaneously a river basin, an economic zone, and a group of sovereign states
 - the area boasts great diversity in language, culture, and economy
 - It is characterized by a superpower (China) and a group of Southeast Asian countries which are not like-minded
- **From Conflict to Cooperation:**
 - The Mekong has long served as an **essential border** in the region, including among Southeast Asian powers before European colonization, during the French colonial period, Cold War, and until today
 - the **first committee established to manage Mekong cooperation** was the Committee for the Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin in 1957
 - In the 1980s, **multilateral cooperation regarding hydropower production** emerged, followed by the establishment of the Greater Mekong Sub-region in 1992
- Today, a **variety of institutions** about Mekong development and conservation form a framework for cooperation
- Many of these institutions involve **amorphous membership**, with country members joining and leaving the organization as appropriate. This amorphism, though confusing, can help the groups to be more functional
- The **activities of these Mekong institutions are often duplicative**. But they can serve as a hedge against the influence of superpowers while still leveraging some benefits of outside influence
- **Prerequisites for a well-functioning Mekong framework** include:
 - Gains from projects are not zero-sum: some issues are often viewed as zero-sum, such as the battle over water resources.
 - there is no conflict between outside partners: strategic competition between the U.S. and China can sometimes hinder progress
 - there are no conflicts within basin countries
- **Conclusion**
 - "The Mekong Region" is a complex network of cooperative groups
 - Countries with diverse interests have cooperated by forming allies around areas where interests are in common
 - resource scarcity and great power politics continue to be challenged to progress

Mekong-Australia Partnership

*Dr. John Dore, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Australian Embassy, Thailand*

- Dr. Dore gave an overview of Australia's work on general Mekong issues and river conservation.
- There are **many Mekongs**, and respecting each other's values is essential.
- **Economists and environmentalists have an essential role**; both perspectives should be valued.
- **Dialogue and advocacy surrounding Mekong issues are far less safe** than 5-10 years ago. CSOs have expressed hesitance about working on the problems.
 - For example, Discussions from 2015 included hundreds of participants engaged in debate on sensitive issues—but that would not be possible today in many contexts.
- **The coup in Burma and the war in Ukraine** were two ruptures that altered the landscape for the Mekong engagement.
- **The formulation of a constructive dynamic is never-ending.** There will be constant challenges to cooperation and progress.
- **Australia's Engagement:** Australia is pleased to be a friend of Japan and has cooperated with Japan in many areas, including liquid hydrogen. Mr. Doyle also highlighted recent cooperation with Cambodia regarding constructing climate-resilient cities, cooperation with China on flood management, and with Thailand on water agriculture.
- **Conclusion:** "Partnership" has several meanings and forms. The various institutions and frameworks discussed today are not perfect solutions. It is essential to have a shared understanding and respect. Australia welcomes further cooperation in the future.

Session 1, Question & Answer:

Question 1: Regarding the history of conflict in the Mekong region---we must learn from this past conflict. How do you see future cooperation taking place in the future? How do we proceed for a better future?

Question 2: Australia has a wide variety of engagements in the region and serves as a counterbalance to China. How do you utilize lessons learned to proceed for better Mekong management? How does Australia's experience with water management at home contribute?

Response 1: (Ms. Aoki-Okabe) Dialogue is crucial for avoiding conflict and reaching shared goals. Dialogue should be based on data. Production of coordinated and reliable scientific data should be prioritized to facilitate productive Dialogue.

Response 2: (Dr. Dore) There is some coordination between organizations focused on river management. MRC cooperates with the Danube, Mississippi, and Yellow River commissions. MRC has also expressed interest in how Australia's work on river management domestically is relevant to the Mekong, particularly with flood and drought management. Covid has been a challenge to coordination.

Question 3: We are concerned about the role of NGOs and the community. MRC has not done much to incorporate views from the ground. MRC is trying. Nevertheless, I cannot help but notice more competition than cooperation between MRC and LMC. Possible tensions may arise between the two organizations. What sort of tensions would there be?

Response 3: (Dr. Dore) Everybody wants a say in Australia. Weather is significant. You go to the press or politicians if a committee is not working. Water is now an essential issue in our state and local elections. Everybody is lobbying. We have to find a way with peaceful, constructive Dialogue. Respectful and informed negotiations rather than Track 1 top-down. In our experience, top-down did not go over well without proper socialization. Australia is trying to earn and maintain trust within the Mekong. We are not trying to build trust between Mekong countries. Australia is respectful of where we sit.

Response 4: (Dr. Middleton) The critical question is, who is the leader? There exists much more commonality within the Mekong region than may first be supposed, but who is the practice leader? What can LMC or MRC do collectively to govern? These are essential questions. Talking about the commons. How can you get more comprehensive cooperation around shared values? Not just property defined in the law but also social values.

Session 2: Local and Transboundary Practices in the Mekong Region

Contribution of Research to Land Governance Reform Before the Political Change in Myanmar

Mr. Salai Bawi Tha Thawng

Mekong Region Land Governance Project (MLRG Project)

- **Myanmar Background:** land issues are salient for various reasons in Myanmar. The largely rural population is heavily dependent on agriculture. The rule of law is relatively weak, especially in some rural regions. Out-of-date land laws are essentially a legacy of the colonial era. Laws and customs vary significantly from locality to locality, particularly when viewed through the lens of upland vs. lowland areas.
- **THE MLRG Project:** seeks to promote customary tenure. MLRG Project provides capacity-building pieces of training for CSOs and local communities to advocate on behalf of their land rights
- Myanmar has over 40 land-related laws (Farmland Law, Land Acquisition Act, etc.)
- Developed countries sometimes exploit Myanmar's weak rule of law through the unlawful use of land.
- **Virgin, Fallow, and Vacant Land (VFV):** a law enacted in 2012. VFV land is primarily used by ethnic minorities whose legal rights are not protected. Crisis in 2018-2019 as the government solicits VFV land permits but is unable to handle the applications administratively
- **CSO Challenges Post-Coup:** CSO collaboration with the government has ceased since the political changes occurred. Before the coup, CSOs operated relatively freely and engaged in regular Dialogue with the government. That relationship has been cut off, and capacity-building exercises have shifted focus toward a more security-based skillset, including digital security. Donor interest after the coup is weak. Some members of the community or local CSOs are afraid to participate out of fear of the government.

Crafting Shared Governance Using A Commons-Based Approach in The Wetland of Luang Prabang

Mr. Phong An Huynh,

NRM International Expert, GRET, Laos

- **GRET:** Mr. Huynh gave an overview of GRET's activities promoting a commons-based land management approach in Laos over the last ten years
- **CSO operations in Laos:** CSOs can play a pivotal developmental role in Laos if they follow the national strategy and do not touch on sensitive topics. The government plays a facilitation role.
- **Wetlands Project in Luang Prabang:** GRET supports communities in forming their governance structure and activities to mediate their problems. Communities themselves perform the activities and engage with the government to address problems. The government was initially unsure, but when they started to see that the communities could perform actions that alleviate their burdens, they started to believe in the process. Communities evolve into lobbyists.

Building a Low-Carbon, Climate-Resilient Agriculture through Circular Approach: A Case Study in An Giang

Dr. Nguyen Minh Quang

Senior Lecturer at Can Tho University/Managing Director of Mekong Environment Forum

- Dr. Nguyen discussed **difficulties associated with agriculture** in Vietnam, a significant source of greenhouse gases and a victim of climate change. Farmers tend to adapt to climate change and other challenges through linear adaptation, prioritizing long-term interests in favor of short-term, path-of-least resistance solutions.
- **A Giang Project Activities:** CSO activities promoted economic diversity and resilience, grassroots self-reliance, energy and environmental security, conservation, and social justice; creating a production system that minimizes waste and greenhouse gas emissions
- **Results:** The project resulted in higher agricultural earnings, less extreme weather, and developments in infrastructure
- **Recommendations:** Circular agricultural projects should focus on self-sustainability and be market-oriented, all while taking into consideration feasibility and potential challenges

Session 2, Question & Answer:

Question 1: Were you able to work with the government for the Burma project? How was the relationship?

Response 1: (Mr. Bawi) We had a terrible time with COVID, which disrupted our activities. Then, we were preparing to resume activities, and the coup happened. We stopped engaging with the government. We realized we needed to change our strategy, including a greater focus on safety and security. We operate in a very discreet way to minimize risks. Some CSOs register with the government, and others try to operate under the radar. Before the coup, we got good data from the government in 2014, 2015, and 2016. We published that data, which created much attention to our issues. Unfortunately, there is no such relationship with the government now.

Question 2: For Mr. Phong on the Luang Prabang Project---I am Laotian and understand a robust framework exists between the chief, villagers, and party in Lao villages. I do not understand your statements about encouraging villagers to speak with the government.

Response 2: (Mr. Phong) The government is in the village, but historically, decisions were top-down rather than a collaborative process. Having people within the community work together to find solutions and then work with the government to implement those solutions is more of a novel process. The question is, how do you effectively engage in shared governance? We do not care who gets the credit. We are ok if the government gets the credit. Under these circumstances, the state becomes a more active part of the process.

Question 3: For the circular agriculture project in Vietnam, I am skeptical about this circular economy, even in developed countries. Even developed countries still emit substantial greenhouse gases. I wonder if local people can adopt new, green technologies this way.

Response 3: Yes, the circular economy is challenging to achieve. We start with something small and feasible. Sometimes a simple solution can go a long way in helping to reduce waste. One way to get farmers to adopt change in Vietnam is to coordinate with local government authorities. In Vietnamese culture, people listen to the government. The government liked our idea, and we were able to implement change. The methods to get farmers to cooperate may depend on your culture. Would our approach work in Thailand? I do not know.

Question 4: Is engaging with the government in certain countries difficult? How is the situation in Vietnam and Laos?

Response 4: (Mr. Phong) The National Assembly in Laos is revising the Land Law and has been relatively engaged on land issues. In Vietnam, CSOs have been very active on land issues.

Response 4: (Mr. Phong) CSOs must navigate the relationship between the state while maintaining their values. Ensure that you support your values, the expected values, while not angering the state. There is potential for synergy. That is how we do it in Laos.

Question 5: You mention the term "commons-based approach." There are people more interested in the term "community-based approach." Is it Mekong Commons or Mekong Community? Is there a distinction? You are using a circular approach. It is imperative to have a clear idea of the nature of your approach.

Response 5: (Dr. Nguyen) Commons and community: There is a difference in the terms. A circular approach means you recycle and you reuse. It mitigates the waste. "Communities-based" means that you emphasize the role of local communities in the governing system. Our circular approach identifies the farmers as the key player: circular communities.

Session 3: Transboundary Cooperation in the Mekong Region and Beyond

The Stories of the Mekong Network, Asia, Thailand & The Politics of the everyday and Food

Ms. Wallapa van Willenswaard

Advisor, Towards Organic Asia

- **Hidden costs of food production:** Ms. Van Willenswaard highlighted the hidden costs of food production---totaling trillions of dollars worldwide annually---as well as the increasing demand for Food in densely populated urban areas
- **Localization of food production:** To feed increasing global populations in an environmentally sustainable way, food production must become more local and diversified, as opposed to monopolized, single-crop systems. Food contributes to one-third of the climate change problem.
- **Institutions** such as the Mindful Markets Asia Forum, Food Policy Council, and the Earth Trusteeship Working Group are working to address these challenges in Southeast Asia.

Community-Based Solutions to Addressing Integrated Issues of Biodiversity Conservation, Climate Change, and Sustainability: From China to the Mekong Region

Dr. Kui Peng

Global Environmental Institute (GEI) / Civil Society Alliance for Biodiversity Conservation (CSABC)

- **The Role of Chinese CSOs:** Dr. Peng highlighted China's role as the largest investor in Southeast Asia and emphasized cooperation between the two
 - Since 2004, GEI has established itself as an essential partner for INGOs to operate in China while also operating programs in 15 countries.
- **Under GEI's Community Conservation Concession Agreement (CCCA)** model, GEI explores best practices for engaging in environmental advocacy with the government.
- **Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau Project:** GEI implemented a CCCA project in Qinghai to strengthen community engagement in environmental protection and economic development. The project included programs to develop ecotourism, handicraft production, and other environmentally sustainable business ventures. The project increased annual revenue from \$3,000 to \$10,000 while opening access to markets in Shanghai, Beijing, and elsewhere.
- **Alliance of Civil Protected Areas:** launched in 2017 by 23 NGOs and foundations, the Alliance seeks to engage civil society in protected area management. It aims to protect 1% of Chinese land area by 2030.
- **GEI's Myanmar Project:** GEI has invested 20 million Yuan in environmental protection assistance to Myanmar, including clean stoves and solar power generation. South-south climate cooperation in Myanmar began in 2016.
- **Wildlife Trafficking:** GEI has partnered with communities and civil society throughout SE Asia to prevent cross-border wildlife trafficking, including to African markets
- **East and Southeast Asia Community Conservation Network (EASACCN):** established by GEI to promote community involvement in biodiversity conservation, including through the implementation of grassroots training programs
- **Lessons learned:** Chinese CSOs should and will continue to play an essential role in environmental governance in the Mekong region. Strengthening partnerships, networks, and platforms in the Mekong region will be necessary for transboundary cooperation.

Session 3, Question & Answer:

Question 1: Regarding the Food Policy Council, I understand you have programs for youth. Do you work with middle-aged groups in addition to children? Can you explain more about your engagement in food production? Can organic farming feed the world?

Response 1: (Ms. Van Willenswaard) Farmers are scientists in my eyes. They know the most about food production. With traditional farming, before the implementation of chemical farming, there was a collective knowledge amongst the community in which best practices were shared. But, chemical farming has led to a certain passiveness among the community. When introducing organic farming and this community approach, we try to instill knowledge-based practices and a sense of community, which has declined. We also try to instill in young people an appreciation of farming and help them to see a future in agriculture. Human capital and talent must remain in farming.

Regarding whether organic farming can feed the world, I would say yes. Nevertheless, food production must be done locally. We must begin to get more of our Food from our local neighborhood. Extensive plantations result in significant distribution and various logistical and environmental problems.

Question 2: What is the situation with Chinese NGOs working in SE Asia? What are your challenges in working with the Chinese government?

Response 2: (Dr. Peng) One sector cannot solve the Mekong region's problems. CSO, government, multistakeholder. Solutions must be able to cross sectors. There are more than 8,000 NGOs in China, mainly at the grassroots level. The number is rising quickly. We work positively with local people and communities throughout SE Asia, learning their wants and needs. We also cooperate well with the Chinese government at the local and central levels. There are many challenges facing ethnic Chinese communities throughout SE Asia. The Chinese government can help address these challenges. We also have a good relationship with Chinese companies, which in turn have a close relationship with the government. Civil society, corporations, and government can communicate with one another. CSOs can identify problems and potential solutions for the government.

Water Resources Distribution and Utilization among the Countries of the Lancang-Mekong

Prof. Feng Yan, and Dr. Wang Wenling

Institute of International Rivers and Eco-Security

- **Water Distribution:** The presenters gave a breakdown of water and hydroelectric distribution along the Mekong, noting the difficulty of sharing the water equally among countries in the region. Fairly allocating benefits and costs is difficult.
 - **Surplus water** exceeds 400 cubic km, which is more than enough for the ecosystem. The four lower states use more water than the three upper states. The four middle and lower countries also derive more benefits regarding fisheries and navigation.
- **Conclusion:** equitable distribution of water resources will continue to be a challenge, but water levels are sufficient for all, notwithstanding the seasonal changes of wet and dry seasons

Water Diplomacy in the Mekong

Dr. Chheang Vannarith

President, Asian Vision Institute

- **Great Power Politics:** Dr. Vannarith noted a recent return to great power politics in the Mekong region. He lamented the return of a zero-sum game mentality. It is difficult, with geopolitical fault lines forming that threaten to disrupt regional cooperation.
- **State and non-state actors** have a vital role in the Mekong, and fruitful cooperation between the two is essential.
- **A multilayer, multistakeholder, multidimensional approach is needed, including state and non-state actors.** At times, non-state actors are not included enough in Mekong-related Dialogue.
- **The Mekong is a shared public good.** How can we reconcile sovereign rights with rival countries; we established MRC for this purpose.
- **Need to surrender state sovereignty** to an extent for regional cooperation and shared interests.
- **Lack of communication between policymakers and technical experts** is a problem. Diplomats, in particular, are sometimes unfamiliar with technical issues, making reaching solutions for complex problems more difficult. We must find a way to close this knowledge gap.
- **Water diplomacy aims** to reach consensus, peace, and security. Beware of increasing amounts of fake news and misleading data. Scientific monitoring and production of reliable data are critical.
- **We must understand each other's** interests, open our minds, reconcile, and forge shared interests.
- **Lack of institutional cooperation continues to be a problem.** For example, Japan used to play a decisive coordinator role in the region, but that role has diminished due to international political considerations.
- **MRC** can build synergies between the various mechanisms

Address the Water Resources Issues toward the Better Future of Mekong

Dr. Kenji Nagata

Senior Advisor on Water Resources, JICA

- Dr. Nagata highlighted **the importance of evidenced-based cooperation**, particularly when formulating compensation systems to address negative externalities to local communities stemming from development projects along the Mekong. A project implemented by one country may create significant cross-border impacts.
- **Fisheries**: More than 1,200 fish species exist in the Mekong, with great importance for the fisheries industry and biodiversity.
- **Climate change** is not just a grave future threat; it has already affected the livelihoods of the 65 million people in the Mekong Basin.
- **There is no scientific framework** to address these challenges. We propose a Mekong scientific platform to set priority agendas and contribute to consensus-building and decision-making. Outcomes must be tangible, actionable solutions.

Session 3, Question & Answer:

Question 1: Can you tell us more about how you envision implementing a Mekong scientific framework?

Response 1: (Dr. Nagata) In our survey, we got a lot of information, but we feel there is no decisive information. As Dr. Middleton mentioned, there is almost no operational knowledge to change the behavior of developers. We want to propose a platform to share scientific evidence with developers. Developers should have to compensate victims when negative externalities occur. We should create a platform like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for the Mekong. In the IPCC example, 20 or 30 years of work by scientists have led to changes in public perception and policymaking. I want to propose something like IPCC for the Mekong.

Question 2: Have you looked into the issue of droughts and floods that we are facing in the Mekong region? How do we deal with this based on your data?

Response 2: (Prof. Feng) We have already seen more drought occurring in the dry season and more flooding in the wet season. Proper regulation of water storage is one solution. Another solution is to enhance the capacity of local people to deal with these changes. It should be a two-tiered approach.

Roundtable Discussion

Dr. Khen noted the **unique nature of this year's Mekong Dialogue**, which included participants from an expanded range of countries and focused on an expanded range of issues across the Mekong region. He highlighted the use of scientific data in decision-making and the role of China in the area as potential topics for further discussion.

China's Role in The Mekong Region: Dr. Peng highlighted the networks created between China and ASEAN countries, including more than 160 Chinese CSOs operating in ASEAN. These platforms, serving as a bridge between NGOs, private and public sectors, address various issues. Dr. Peng highlighted cooperation between Chinese and ASEAN NGOs, Alibaba, and the Chinese Ministry of Environment as a positive development.

Water Levels: Climate Change or Dams?: Discussion touched upon changes in water levels in recent years, as well as potential causes and solutions. One commenter noted that China attributes recent changes in water levels entirely to climate change, while others claim that dams are the primary cause. Another commenter expressed confidence that climate change is the primary cause, impacting rainfall patterns in the region.

Dr. Middleton asserted that the **reasons for water level changes are complex and multi-faceted**. In Chiang Kaen, there have been studies from various sources confirming that dams change water levels. Nevertheless, how climate change intersects with dam construction becomes very politicized. Climate change is sometimes used as a mechanism to make the impact of dams on water levels invisible. In reality, water level changes are due to both factors. At Tonle Sap, development in the Tonle Sap basin has contributed to water level changes in the lake.

Mr. Bawi shared best practices from his experience working on environmental issues in Myanmar. He noted that when a Norwegian dam was being considered for construction, they performed **an impact study and engaged with the local community**. This is very important. Creating a safe space for CSOs to express controversial views safely is also essential. In Burma, for example, CSOs may face intimidation from the Burmese government and Chinese or Japanese companies.

Land Laws: In response to a question about CSO activity and land rights in Myanmar, Mr. Bawi elaborated on his experience promoting customary land tenure practices. They **identify gaps in the legal framework** and inform parliament of what is happening locally. Capacity-building projects on how to conduct research and rights-awareness training have been important knowledge generation and advocacy tools. Unfortunately, while these activities produced results before the coup, such work has been dramatically diminished. Engagement with the government has stopped. Now we work on customary tenure. **Customary tenure practices** vary across Burma. We have developed legal options on how to recognize typical terms. However, CSO mobility is challenging, and movement throughout the country can be dangerous. Digital security training had grown in importance, as well as training on how to engage with local armed groups and police when stopped at checkpoints, etc. Despite these challenges, civil society in Myanmar is acting as a watchdog on land grabbing and other essential issues.

Another commenter highlighted the importance of **instilling critical analysis skills in local communities** to advocate for their rights more effectively. Local people need to understand complicated land and forestry laws and how those laws are relevant to them. There are always gaps in the wording of rules which, if well understood, can be exploited by locals. Once the people gain this knowledge, it can also be used for national advocacy. If critical analysis skills are not fostered within the local community, whatever project your NGO builds will not perpetuate.

Developing a Scientific Mekong Platform: Dr. Middleton emphasized that scientists should be accountable to the region's people. Community peer review could be a strategy to achieve accountability to the people. In the academic community, peer review is standard practice. Perhaps it would be beneficial to **establish a community peer review process** in which literary works are reviewed by the local community to which they pertain. Under the current system, some might feel science misrepresents the local experience. The politicization of science is also a problem.

Another commenter expressed further support for a Mekong scientific platform to influence policy. In addition to the IPCC, the biodiversity sphere has an example of an institution that could serve as a template. However, creating action is difficult because many countries are not interested in action due to the money at stake.

Dr. Vannarith expressed that such platforms are very well-received in Laos when the platforms are linked to actual impact. However, trust-building is essential with such media. Trust will be lost if the platform does not result in a substantial impact.

Dr. Nagata emphasized the importance of setting an appropriate agenda for the platform and trust-building. The Mekong countries themselves should be the impetus for critical objectives. Showing evidence is complex, and establishing clear causal links between development and damage will always be difficult. However, a Mekong scientific platform could result in progress toward these ends. Then, when focusing on compensation mechanisms for losses due to development, ASEAN wisdom can solve some of these problems.

Challenges in Engaging with Local Communities: Dr. Wang shared her experience regarding difficulties working at the village level. She noted the complex network of policies, not only at the federal level but from village to village. In Laos, for example, her organization tried to understand the role of environmental issues in the community. It was very challenging. They spent 15 years working in a village of 3,000 people. It was difficult to grasp how the local people value different things. It is essential to understand local people deeply, which is not easy work to do.

Dr. Peng commented on working in the remote border regions of Cambodia and Vietnam, where cell phone communication and other challenges make work difficult. It is difficult to inform the local people about important issues affecting them. However, he saw evidence that some community organizations had overcome these barriers for decades.

Making MRC More Effective: Dr. Khen asked for ideas on how to make MRC more effective in helping people at the ground level. He also asked about the potential for eco-friendly energy solutions outside of hydropower, noting the challenge that ASEAN's non-interference policy poses to effective advocacy.

Dr. Chang expressed that funding is a continuing problem and funding sources should be diversified. The private sector is potentially an untapped source of funding for MRC and similar mechanisms as corporate social responsibility grows in prevalence. Regarding hydropower, there are alternative solutions to hydroelectric, such as solar. Solar is a growing technology. We must also embrace digital transformation, which can be leveraged to connect communities and institutions. Funding, people, and technology can improve the effectiveness of the MRC.

Concluding Remarks

*Professor Dr. Lee Lai To,
Director of Asian Research Center for International Development, School of Social Innovation,
Mae Fah Luang University*

First, let me thank all of you for participating in our Fourth Dialogue. From the presentations, we can see that we have more participants from the Mekong region. In addition, we have participants from China, Japan, and Australia. Given more time, we hope that we shall be able to get more experts to join our discussions.

As we all know, promoting the Water-Food-Energy-Climate Nexus requires a wide range of expertise. This multi-centric approach needs to have specialists from different disciplines. In this regard, the challenge is to assemble a quality multi-disciplinary team to examine the issues.

As noted in my remarks in the last Mekong Dialogue, there is a tendency for some academics to stay in their silos because of the emphasis on specialization. Having been in the academic world for more than forty-five years, I would also add that there are always academic in-fightings, competitions, and rivalries. As such, the task for us is to invite the relevant academics and researchers to come together to adopt the multi-centric approach. Probably strong academic leadership will be needed to press on for such teamwork.

In light of the need to integrate research with policy and governance across sectors, it is also pertinent to remind ourselves that in the formulation and practice of the Nexus approach, we need a wide range of institutions, notably in the government sector. Thus it has been suggested that one primary mechanism for a policy structure in practicing the Nexus approach is to strengthen the role of a national planning commission or its equivalent. However, this is easier said than done, as departments, agencies, and ministries on water, Food, energy, and climate change frequently work in silos too. Policies of the various government sectors could be compartmentalized in policy making. Again, if the Nexus approach is adopted, it will take strong political leadership to enforce inter-ministerial or inter-departmental cooperation for teamwork to practice it.

While the Nexus approach needs expertise from a wide range of disciplines, as noted earlier, the problem we have is that the Mekong states may not have the talent and resources to adopt this approach. It is heartening to see that many extra-regional powers are now interested in helping us. Such help is welcome, although we all know they may have an agenda in working with us. In addition, we would like to emphasize that since the Mekong region is part of Southeast Asia, or for that matter, ASEAN, the issue that we may have in mind is what we can do to manage a region that belongs to us.

Suppose you look at the survey results of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore on The State of Southeast Asia published in the 2020s. In that case, you will notice that more than 70% of policymakers, think tankers, academics, businessmen, NGOs, and others in Southeast Asia suggested that ASEAN should discuss the Mekong River issues in its agenda. Unfortunately, less than 7% thought ASEAN's actions were sufficient. That means more than 90% of them thought ASEAN's actions were insufficient. If you look at the recent Foreign Ministers' retreat in Indonesia earlier this month, the chairman's statement had nothing on Mekong issues. That was why about one-quarter of these interviewees thought there was a need to strengthen ASEAN initiatives. While the Mekong issues may not be as severe and urgent as the

Myanmar issue or the South China Sea conflicts, there are challenges and problems in the Mekong region, particularly in non-traditional security. Hopefully, ASEAN could one day regain its centrality in managing the Mekong River, or for that matter, the Mekong region.

In the final analysis, we suggest that the Mekong states try to help themselves. It would be productive if the Mekong states could get their act together. It is important to emphasize that trade-offs and externalities in the transboundary Mekong settings may result in friction between states and reduced trust, hampering regional cooperation and possibly generating misunderstandings and conflicts. In this regard, a cross-sectoral approach like the Nexus approach in managing the issues could help enhance resource governance and efficiency and peace and stability in the Mekong region.

Last but not least, it should be noted that in the case of Thailand, it can play a leading role in managing the Mekong River issues. It emphasizes the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). It also put forward the BCG Model, namely, Bangkok Goals on the Bio-Circular-Green Economy, at the APEC meeting at the end of last year. Hopefully, the Nexus approach will be helpful to the Strategy and the Model.

Thank you !