

## **The 5<sup>th</sup> Mekong Dialogue: Stakeholder Engagement and Governance: Lessons from the 2024 Flood and Beyond**

Venue: Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai – Thailand and via online platform

### **1. Rationale**

The Mekong Basin is vital to the livelihoods of more than 70 million people in Mainland Southeast Asia who depend on the Mekong River for water, food, and economic activities. However, this lifeline is under significant threat from mounting environmental challenges, including severe flooding, prolonged droughts, and other climate-induced disasters. Recent events, such as the devastating flooding in Chiang Rai in October 2024, underscore the urgency of addressing these issues. Chiang Rai and surrounding provinces near the river and its tributaries experienced three catastrophic floods within a single month, resulting in extensive damage to infrastructure, agriculture, and communities. Such recurring disasters highlight the critical need for coordinated action to mitigate risks and enhance resilience.

In response to these challenges, cooperation among various actors and stakeholders in the Mekong countries is essential. Collaborative efforts foster open communication and dialogue, creating opportunities to tackle environmental, social, and economic vulnerabilities through regional platforms.

At the state level, governments across the Mekong region have engaged in multiple policy dialogues aimed at improving water quality monitoring, enhancing information and data sharing, promoting technical cooperation, conducting joint research, and building capacity on governance mechanisms for hydropower, energy development, and environmental issues. These efforts are complemented by engagement with major development partners, including Japan, China, and South Korea, whose support has been instrumental in addressing shared concerns.

For instance, Japan has partnered with Mekong countries since the 1990s through several development programs and the collaboration has reached new dimension in the 2000s when the Japanese government initiated official platforms and programs such as the first Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministries' Meeting in 2008, the Mekong-Japan Exchange Year 2009 and the annual Mekong-Japan Summit meetings to strengthen Mekong-Japan cooperation with

a main focus on connectivity, climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and water resource management. China's "Lancang-Mekong Cooperation" initiative prioritizes production capacity, cross-border economic cooperation, hydropower development, and poverty reduction. Meanwhile, South Korea supports the region through "Mekong-ROK Cooperation," targeting transportation, energy, water resources, logistics, and agricultural value chains.

Non-state actors, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs), also play a critical role in fostering inclusive dialogue. These organizations, often closely connected to local communities, provide unique insights into grassroots challenges. Collaborating with NGOs and local authorities ensures that policy decisions align with the needs and aspirations of affected populations. For example, the Rak Chiang Khong group, a local conservation organization in Chiang Rai province, has actively worked with communities to protect the Mekong River and its resources. Recently, the group participated in consultations regarding the proposed hydropower projects along the Mekong River, where they raised concerns about environmental impacts, riverine livelihoods, and cross-border collaboration. By engaging in such dialogues, they provided critical perspectives to government agencies and regional forums, ensuring that local voices are represented in policy discussions.

Recognizing the importance of inclusive cooperation, the School of Social Innovation at Mae Fah Luang University launched the first Mekong Dialogue on "Transboundary Water Resources Management in the Mekong Region." This platform brings together stakeholders from Mekong countries and beyond—including representatives from Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, China, and South Korea—to exchange ideas and explore collaborative mechanisms for managing shared water resources.

Following a **2.5-track** approach, the Mekong Dialogue engages academia, think tanks, international organizations, and NGOs, along with extra-regional powers such as Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States. The annual forums address the critical issues of transboundary water resource governance, emphasizing sustainable development for the Mekong Basin.

The **Mekong Dialogue** has been held annually since 2019, with forums in 2021, 2022, and 2023. The **5th Mekong Dialogue**, scheduled for **February 2025** in close collaboration with the **Institute of Developing Economies - Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO)**, will focus on "**Stakeholder Engagement and Governance: Lessons from the 2024**

**Flood and Beyond."** The 5th Dialogue will specifically address and highlight the growing unpredictability and severity of climate-related disasters in the Mekong region that impacted massively, especially to Chiang Rai and its neighboring areas. Heavy rainfall caused rivers and tributaries, including the Mekong itself, to overflow their banks, flooding agricultural fields, damaging homes, and disrupting transportation and communication networks. Landslides triggered by heavy rainfall compounded the disaster in mountainous regions, isolating entire villages and making relief efforts more challenging. These events underscored the interconnected vulnerabilities of the Mekong Basin and the urgent need for coordinated action to address such crises.

This year's Mekong Dialogue will bring together networks of universities, think tanks, NGOs, and experts from Mekong countries, including Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand with significant expertise in water governance from Japan, Australian, United States, and South Korea. The event is expected to foster a common understanding of transboundary water resources management, the governance structures for managing the tributaries of the Mekong River, a global challenge impacting both urban and semi-urban development. These challenges extend beyond ecological and food security concerns to include unpredictable disasters, resource governance challenges, the impacts of climate change, and problematic development which can severely affect local economies, safety, and property. Generating actionable recommendations for governments and communities in the Mekong region and building expertise in these areas is, then, crucial for paving the way for collaborative solutions to these pressing issues.

## **2. Objectives:**

1. Exchange the idea, knowledge and experience about **Stakeholder Engagement and Governance: Lessons from the 2024 Flood and Beyond** by emphasizing on tributaries from perspectives of states, non-state actors and local institutions
2. Discuss about future collaboration among multi actors from those institutions.
3. Initiate research proposal on Mekong's tributaries about tributaries governance.

## **3. Activities:**

1. A presentation of invited participants in plenary session to explore the situations in Mekong's tributaries areas.

2. The panel sessions from partners to exchange and discuss ideas and knowledge on water resource governance in the Mekong tributaries basin.
3. A discussion for future research collaboration on Mekong's tributaries basin governance.

#### **4. Organizers:**

The 5th Mekong Dialogue will be co-organized by **School of Social Innovation, Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand** and **Institute of Development Economies – Japan External Trade Organization, Japan**

#### **5. Expected Outputs:**

1. Accumulated knowledge on Mekong's tributaries development and governance.
2. Research proposal
3. Proceedings
4. Policy Recommendation