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VISION GUIDE 2014

# Sustainable Mekong Research Network SUMERNET

## ■ About this guide

This “vision guide” presents information about SUMERNET – its origins, aims, key research areas, engagement with policy, and products.

This is a working document revised regularly to reflect the evolving needs and perspectives of SUMERNET partners.

Questions, comments and suggestions are welcome and can be addressed to the SUMERNET Secretariat at the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) – Asia Centre, Bangkok.

## ■ SUMERNET

The Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET) is an initiative for research and policy engagement bringing together research partners working on sustainable development in six countries of the Mekong Region: Cambodia, China (specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. **SUMERNET partners are committed to the sustainable development of the Mekong Region.**

Launched in 2005, SUMERNET supports policy-relevant research and outreach activities to inform and engage policy-makers, planners and stakeholders. Within this context, it pursues an evolving agenda in response to questions and policy issues that arise in the region. Current research themes are climate-compatible development, regional economic integration, and ecosystem services and local development.

SUMERNET Phase 1 covered 2005–2009; Phase 2, 2010–2013 and **the present Phase 3, from late 2014 to June 2017.**

## ■ Objectives

SUMERNET aims to inform and influence sustainable development in the Mekong Region by:

- supporting credible, collaborative research;
- stimulating independent discussions on key regional issues;
- engaging with decision-makers and stakeholders to foster more effective and sustainable policies and programmes.

## A key aspect of SUMERNET’s work is to bridge science and policy.

We do so by choosing research questions that are directly relevant to current policy debates, engaging decision-makers in all aspects of our activities, and building capacity for sustainable development through workshops and other activities.

We also emphasize collaboration, networking and knowledge-sharing, connecting partners in different countries through our projects and events, and we work to strengthen research capacity across the region.

## ■ Origins and composition

SUMERNET was launched in 2005, supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). Our work in Phase 2 has also been supported by the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) and other partner institutes across the region. Membership has grown from the initial 14 organizations to 50. SUMERNET partners comprise University researchers and academics, government agencies, independent research institutions and international organizations (see Figure 1).

SUMERNET began at a time of accelerated economic development in the Mekong Region. Major infrastructure projects such as roads, hydropower dams and irrigation projects were being planned and built. Many bilateral and multilateral trade agreements were being signed. There was a vigorous debate going on about the future of the Mekong Region. A number of development agencies expressed concerns and called for an integrated approach that would incorporate a greater diversity of views and perspectives into regional planning and policy.

SUMERNET was established to help meet the need for integrated research by supporting and promoting the use of scientific evidence in policy-making, with the overarching goal of contributing to sustainable development in the Mekong Region.

Since its inception, SUMERNET has sponsored a wealth of policy-relevant research and worked to create an ‘enabling environment’ for researchers and decision-makers to engage with one another.

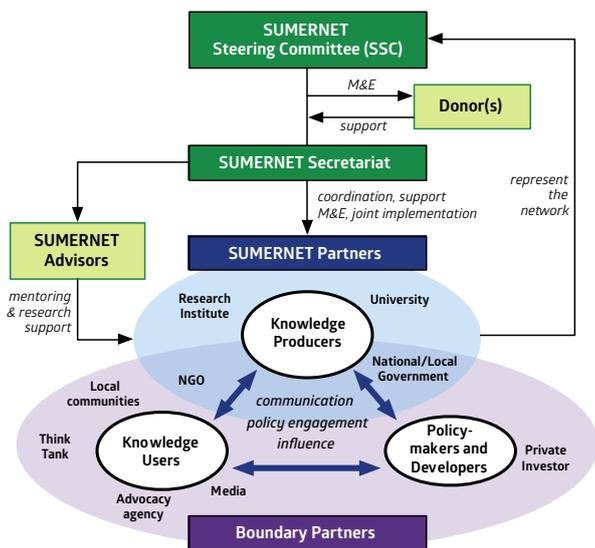


FIGURE 1 SUMERNET Governance Structure

- **SUMERNET Steering Committee (SSC):** The body with the ultimate authority for leadership of SUMERNET, in which the overall direction and strategic decision-making are vested. SSC members are drawn from active individuals and representatives from the network partner institutes;
- **SUMERNET Advisors:** High-profile academics, policy makers, and NGO and donor representatives who provide strategic advice on the development of research and policy engagement;
- **The SUMERNET Secretariat:** Hosted by SEI in Asia, it provides coordination support to SUMERNET through its four components: 1. deliver credible research; 2. convene and contribute to regional assessments; 3. communicate and engage with the policy process for impact and visibility; and 4. Ensure effective management, network sustainability, and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E).

The SUMERNET Secretariat, at the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) Asia Centre in Bangkok, actively supports the network's activities, drawing on both regional and global intellectual resources.

## Priority Themes

SUMERNET's research themes in the past have included ecosystem management, transboundary issues, climate change and energy, livelihoods and poverty, and sustainable urbanization.

SUMERNET's research findings have helped in raising awareness of key issues and creating space for policy debates as well as further research. SUMERNET's series of collaborative studies on rubber plantations contributed to the Government of Lao PDR reconsidering the concessions provided for rubber plantations and revising the related forestry policies. SUMERNET's work on labour migration from Myanmar to Thailand was aired on Thailand's public television channel, contributing to greater awareness of a key transboundary issue in the region. SUMERNET's work on sustainable low carbon tourism contributed to a formulation of Non-Motorised Transport policy in Chiang Mai and promotion of garden houses in Hue City. The SUMERNET project on communicating water-related climate change risks in the deltas of the Mekong Region also led to a

follow up pilot project in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam with other funding sources.

In response to the changing knowledge demands and policy debates in the Mekong Region, Phase 3 of SUMERNET has a focus on these research themes:

### Climate-Compatible Development

Climate-compatible development means promoting human development while addressing both mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change.<sup>1</sup> It can take many forms, but always aims to reduce poverty and inequality in a way that is ecologically sustainable under current and plausible future climates. The rising energy demand and rapid urbanization that have typically accompanied economic growth in Southeast Asia represent significant challenges and opportunities for climate-compatible development.

For example, livelihoods and income-earning opportunities can be expanded through better-planned renewable energy development, or through adaptation measures that leverage on the inherent resilience of households and communities from their local traditions and knowledge.

### Regional Economic Integration with Environmental Sustainability and Social Equity

Greater regional economic integration has been promoted widely in the region, most notably as part of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) activities. Bilateral trade and investment agreements and the 2015 ASEAN Economic Community suggest further acceleration of these economic development processes.<sup>2</sup>

Though the region is experiencing significant economic growth, poverty and inequality remain significant and local and transboundary environmental degradation is also a major challenge. Mechanisms for ensuring both environmental sustainability and social equity are essential in a region developing together so rapidly.

### Ecosystem Services and Local Development

Local development in rural and peri-urban settings can be greatly affected by the condition of ecosystems and the services they provide. For example, the degradation of wetlands and floodplains can have significant repercussions for flooding in peri-urban areas and make protection of major cities much more expensive. In agricultural areas, land and water management practices can enhance or degrade key soil-related services as well as contributions from trees and remnant patches of native vegetation.

The well-being of societies and households who derive their livelihoods from natural resources often depends directly on ecosystem services. Research and policy-oriented assessments are needed to help maintain and improve ecosystem services throughout the Mekong region, to ensure that as development proceeds, ecosystem services are appropriately valued and protected.

1 Climate and Development Knowledge Network. "Climate Compatible Development Strategies and Plans." Accessed on June 27, 2012. [http://cdkn.org/themes/climate-compatible-development-strategies-and-plans/?loclang=en\\_gb](http://cdkn.org/themes/climate-compatible-development-strategies-and-plans/?loclang=en_gb).

2 Sustainable Mekong Research Network. "The Mekong and ASEAN's Fast Lane: Who's Left Behind?" Accessed on June 27, 2012. [http://cdkn.org/themes/climate-compatible-development-strategies-and-plans/?loclang=en\\_gb](http://cdkn.org/themes/climate-compatible-development-strategies-and-plans/?loclang=en_gb).

## ■ Core Strategies

Four core strategies guide SUMERNET activities:

### Support Applied and Collaborative Policy Research

SUMERNET supports applied and collaborative policy research by designing and funding projects that engage partners across the region. Funded projects typically involve partners in at least two countries working both individually and together, creating opportunities to study regional and transboundary issues from multiple perspectives and conduct comparative analyses of impacts and policies.

### Build and Expand Capacity through Regional Knowledge Network Development

SUMERNET supports a regional network of research partners through intellectual, programme, and technical support that includes meetings, workshops, trainings on data analysis and writing, and joint proposal development. Online support for collaboration and coordination is provided through the website, an email discussion group, and dissemination of reports through SUMERNET partners and SEI's own distribution networks.

SUMERNET also facilitates networking by our partners, with one another and with outside groups, to help them identify opportunities for future collaboration beyond SUMERNET. And SUMERNET builds research capacity by connecting research partners with mentors who provide advice on research design and implementation and support them prepare high-quality publications, including peer-reviewed research articles.

### Actively Engage Boundary Partners and Other Stakeholders in Research

SUMERNET promotes the use of scientific knowledge in policy-making not just by producing policy-relevant research, but also by engaging development actors, decision-makers and other stakeholders directly in the research process. Engagement with these actors, whom we call 'boundary partners', is built into SUMERNET's research activities and programmes, which helps ensure that the work is aligned with our boundary partners' priorities and can be effectively integrated into their plans and programmes.

SUMERNET's boundary partner model has led to the strategic engagement of decision-makers and influencers at all stages of research and dissemination, making SUMERNET research more credible and policy-relevant. Boundary partners and other stakeholders are also engaged through media, communication and dialogue activities such as policy forums. The role of boundary partners in SUMERNET has become essential in ensuring policy relevant research and the impact of results, such as the role of Municipal Governments in Chiang Mai and Hue in the Sustainable Urban Tourism Project, or Vietnam Fund for Forest Development, in Payment for Forestry Environmental Services, both implemented during SUMERNET Phase 2.

### Monitor Emerging Regional Issues

SUMERNET monitors emerging regional policy issues so that it can anticipate and be responsive to knowledge demands. The rapid development of the Mekong Region makes it essential that SUMERNET maintain some flexibility to re-organize around new issues as they emerge. The SUMERNET structure is highly reflexive. The partners can propose new strategic directions for the network to consider through the Secretariat. This ensures that SUMERNET's work remains directly relevant to newly emerging policy and knowledge needs.

## ■ Activities

- Initiate and implement cross-border collaborative research projects
- Build capacity through ongoing skills trainings, mentorship between senior and early-career research partners and provide opportunities for graduate or post-doc students to work on research projects
- Convene and support assessments of the state of the knowledge on policy issues in the region
- Convene and join panels at policy and research events across the region
- Publish comparative policy analyses on timely Mekong Region issues
- Support dissemination of research findings through books, peer-reviewed journals, policy briefs, and the media
- Facilitate coordination and networking for knowledge exchange and sharing, both within and outside of the SUMERNET network
- Monitor and evaluate SUMERNET programme implementation and achievements, to ensure increased network capacity and contributions to independent discourse on regional sustainable development issues (in current and past phases)

## ■ Financing and Governance

SUMERNET has received most of its funding from Sida, with additional funding from CDKN and modest contributions from partner countries. In order to continue expanding SUMERNET's reach in the Mekong Region, we are moving toward a network-centric model, with more diverse funding from multiple donors and partner contributions, to make SUMERNET more sustainable and diverse. The SUMERNET organizational structure is shown in below figure.



FIGURE 2 Types of Partner Institutions

## ■ Forums for Sharing Research and Influencing Policy

- SUMERNET's Annual Policy Forums both build the capacity of SUMERNET partners to engage with policymakers and communicate key research findings, and create space for constructive engagement with policymakers and the media.
- In early 2013, SUMERNET partners contributed significantly to the Mekong Environmental Symposium (MES 2013) in Vietnam, in which numerous sessions were led and participated by SUMERNET to share and discuss the research findings and implications for regional policy.

- In mid-2013, SUMERNET convened two technical workshops in the Second Asia Pacific Water Summit (APWS) on “Water Security and Water-related Disaster Challenges: Leadership and Commitment”, Chiang Mai, Thailand. The recommendations from SUMERNET workshops were submitted to the APWS organiser for the country leaders to consider for regional cooperation.
- In mid-2013, SUMERNET led a panel and co-hosted a roundtable on “Forest Commons in a Rapidly Changing Mekong” at the 3rd International Conference on International Relations and Development (ICIRD 2013) “Beyond Borders: Building a Regional Commons in Southeast Asia”, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.
- SUMERNET led a panel and co-hosted a roundtable in conjunction with Chulalongkorn University at the ICIRD 2012 International Conference, “Towards an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC): Prospects, Challenges and Paradoxes in Development, Governance and Human Security”, in Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- SUMERNET partners participated in the 2012 Mekong2Rio Conference, contributing to a dialogue with stakeholders and garnering insights for its research agenda.

## ■ Producing Credible Knowledge

### Journal Articles

Lebel, L. (2012). “Governance and Coastal Boundaries in the Tropics”. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 4(2). 243–51.

Thongyou, M., and R. Savangnokg (2011). “Negotiating Livelihoods in an Urban Hinterland: A Study of Fishing Households at Thung Sang Lake, Khon Kaen Province”. *2011 International Conference on Humanities, Society and Culture*, IPEDR Vol. 20 (2011), IACSIT Press, Singapore.

Tran, H.T., et al. (2012). “Effects of The Pilot Program on The Payment For Forest Environmental Services In Lam Dong Province”. *Journal of Science and Technology University of Da Nang*, No. 8 (57) Volume 1, University of Da Nang, Vietnam.

### Book and Book Chapter

Lebel, L., C.T. Hoanh, C. Krittasudthacheewa, R. Daniel (Eds.) (2014). “Climate risks, regional integration and sustainability in the Mekong region.” SIRD: Kuala Lumpur. The chapters explore contemporary issues of ecosystems management and transboundary integration in the Mekong Region.

Lebel, L., B.T. Sinh, N. Chinh, S. Boontaveeyuwat, and H. Kimkong (2013). Risk communication and adaptation planning in deltas and coastal settlements of the Mekong Region. In *Successful adaptation to climate change: linking science and policy in a rapidly changing world*, S. Moser and M. Boykoff, Editors. Routledge: New York. Pages 253–269.

### Policy Briefings

A number of policy briefings – both at national and regional levels – are produced by the various research partners to synthesize key insights and offer recommendations for policy makers and others in the region. The briefings are produced in booklet form and are available on request and also downloadable as pdf’s in the website.

## ■ Empowering Partners

SUMERNET research partners presented mid-way findings at the 6th International Conference on Community Based Adaptation, held in Hanoi on 16–22 April 2012. Work from two research projects was shared: “Participatory Social Return on Investment (PSROI): Greater Mekong Sub-region Climate Change Adaptation Planning and Costing Project”, and “Communicating water-related Climate Change Risks to Improve Local Adaptation in the Deltas of the Mekong Region”.

SUMERNET also sponsored a Community and Media Workshop on Climate Change Adaptation on 13–15 July 2011 in Quy Nhon, Vietnam, in conjunction with Hue University and Hue Municipality, Southeast Asia System for Analysis, Research and Training (SEA START), and the TBWA/Thailand. The workshop was built around scenario-based planning to support adaptation. Participants included representatives of local government, technical departments, university, local civil society organizations, some vulnerable communities as well as journalists (16 of the total 32 participants). The workshop led to a change in technique and approach among local policy-makers and participants.

All ten SUMERNET research teams funded by SUMERNET Phase 2 have included other institutes and individual experts as research mentors, boundary partners and other interested parties. More importantly, the teams have been engaging policy-makers and policy influencers at multiple levels: district, sub-national, and regional. This has led to broadened perspectives in the policy sector and a greater capacity of SUMERNET partners to design policy-relevant research.

## ■ Collaborating with Us

SUMERNET is open to organizations and individuals with an interest in contributing to sustainable development in the Mekong Region through knowledge-based policy engagement. We welcome partners to serve in different capacities and participate in various activities, e.g. research project implementation, knowledge exchange and sharing, capacity building and mentorship, joint publications, and contributing to policy debates and public forums.

To become a member of SUMERNET, interested parties can write us a letter of intent explaining their aims and describing their organization and ongoing or future work that is relevant to SUMERNET. We also welcome research ideas for financial support. Send letter of intent to [secretariat@sumernet.org](mailto:secretariat@sumernet.org) or below contact for processing the membership endorsement from SUMERNET Steering Committee (SSC).

### CONTACT DETAILS

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