

RESEARCH FOR ALL PODCAST SERIES 1
EPISODE 5 – A CONVERSATION WITH DR. CHAYANIS, SUMERNET DIRECTOR
Full transcript

Clemens: Welcome! My name is Clemens Grünbühel, I'm a senior research fellow at SEI Asia, and I welcome, today, Chayanis Krittasudthacheewa who is the deputy director of SEI Asia. But more importantly, she is the SUMERNET director and previously manager, now director of SUMERNET. And she's been that for the last 10 years. So we're really excited to have you here today. Welcome, Chayanis.

And I wanted to talk to you about a couple of things in SUMERNET that maybe add a more general level. We've had some podcasts before that we're looking into specific issues in SUMERNET and a deep dive into human rights, into gender. But I wanted to talk to you about more generally about some of it and especially your connection to SUMERNET. So, to start things off, I'd like to ask you what's your passion for the Mekong region and how did how did your career and SUMERNET start to come together?

Chayanis: Thank you, Clemens. It's my great pressure to be in this podcast. Just to respond to your question. I would say my passion is to start from myself as my own personal background. The Mekong Region is my home. I was born, live and work here for 20 years. And in fact, my hometown is in Nong Khai, a small province along the Mekong River in Thailand. And it's just opposite to Vientiane of Laos. And I, in fact, have many relatives living from both sides, I mean, in Nong Khai and also in Vientiane. And I also have many, many relatives living in Vietnam. So Mekong is important for myself, my relatives and also many friends living in all six countries of the Mekong, and I remember quite well, we use water from the Mekong River for domestic use, navigation, farming and also livelihoods. I enjoy very much since I was very young with boat racings and also Loy Krathong. This is cultural activities that we really love doing this together. And the Mekong, because it's the was changing so fast and also rapidly in the past decade and affecting our life. My passion is how we as a Mekong citizen, no matter what form which country we are from, can work together in good partnership and also a good spirit to save the Mekong for all of us here and including our future generations can continue living and also enjoy our life with a beautiful nature of the Mekong. So this is really my passion.

Clemens: That's wonderful. And if I can just ask you, like a little follow up, do you think that growing up on the Bank of the Mekong River and having family in all of these countries had something to do with your career ending up in looking at water and water use and water insecurity, these kind of things?

Chayanis: Yeah, in fact, it's really true. My career has been inspired by my direct experience. Seeing many school friends in Nong Khai often had to move their houses because their houses were constructed along the Mekong River Bank. And every year there would be someone, some of my friends that house had to be removed because they have completely collapsed into the river and because of the bank erosion. And I was at a time eager to know why it happened like that, and why people were still constructing and having the house like by the river in enjoy so much the wind and the nice view. Although this problem was happening, but they still like to live there. And that's why I chose to study in the field of water resources engineer and also hydrology since Bachelor, Master, and also the PhD that I got on this subject. And I was one of the only few female engineering students at that time studying in this topic. And but what engineering study and work cannot tell is what are the reasons making people, and especially the decision makers, decide on different development decision that might sometimes affect people. And this was only answered after I joined Mekong River Commission Secretariat. So I had a wonderful opportunity working there, both in Phnom Penh and also Vientiane for three years to manage hydrological data, and also engage in many countries for data collection and also the publication of hydrological yearbook, and also conduct various analysis to support the government of four countries in dialogues and negotiations on several subjects. By the time, I worked with many experts, not only for fishery and agriculture. So, I learned a lot from there, not only on what are a different situation from different countries, but also why different situation and biophysical situation and socio-economic situation became key factors, driving the decision of different countries to negotiate within MRC. I mean a dialogue.

Clemens: So it's not just engineering, right? Now, you have the social component as well.

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Chayanis: Yeah. So, I learned a lot from there. And in fact, I think, just really engineering aspect cannot solve everything. We really need to understand people and also society.

Clemens: Which goes back to your question. Why do the people live on the on the riverbank even though the erosion forces them to move all the time, right?

Chayanis: Yeah, you're right. So that's the really good learning for me. And after working with the Mekong River Commission. My ambition is to join SEI which is the international research organization in 2016 is to support SEI's mission to bridge science and policy, and induce change toward more sustainable development world, which I feel this is really important for the Mekong Region. And we need to really have the credible knowledge and reliable knowledge that people can trust that. And I believe that a kind of knowledge could actually help them make just decisions. And I have been very lucky so far that I always have some projects or activities to support the mechanism that I have a great passion about. This also includes SUMERNET. So, SUMERNET is a long-term research network and also a long-term program, research program, that I am feels so honor to be part of the network.

Clemens: Yeah, the current phase of SUMERNET, SUMERNET for All, looks at water insecurity. Can you talk a little bit about why, why is the theme of this phrase water insecurity? And could you give some examples of what are water insecurity issues in the Mekong right now that you can observe?

Chayanis: So, in fact, we have identified three water insecurity issues under SUMERNET for All as priority issues that need to be addressed, because, in fact, we have there are conducted online surveys that network members actually engaged in choosing the topic and themes. And we have identified the governance of flood disasters, access to water during a time, water scarcity, and also transboundary water interaction as priority areas. And they identified that these are the issues that affect the most vulnerable groups of people. And I still feel from the recent change in the region that these three topics still highly relevant. And we, it's very critical for us to address this, but not in isolation, kind of one by one, a problem, a topic.

And because we already witnessed the problem there. We found the water scarcity or drought in one year and then suddenly after a month, there's a big flood, just in the same area. And the water fluctuation and rapid fluctuation in the Mekong River, it's happening in the same year. And it really and not only one location, but many locations. And this affects a lot to local livelihoods of people who actually have little access to information and also to, I mean, alternative livelihoods. So that's really something I feel that SUMERNET should look more in details and see how we could actually responds to this issue of problems.

Clemens: And you've been managing SUMERNET. I was wondering, so over those those ten years almost, how has the program itself changed? So obviously the issues that we're dealing with change according to what is most urgent. But the program itself, the composition of partners, how has how is that change?

Chayanis: Ok, so let me let me talk about the same first and then say what what are the changes we have? What is the same is SUMERNET remains to be a regionally-own network. And we do focus on focusing on strengthening knowledge-based policy processes for sustainable development. So, this never changes. We always keep our long-term goal and our original intention to have this as a regional network. We still rely a lot and strongly on multi-country collaborative and bottom-up approach to identify the needs for research and also policy engagement with our boundary partners. And since phase two, we've used boundary partner engagement as an avenue for us to make sure that our research is relevant to those who have the need on evidence to support their policy or their decision-making process. Yes, this is basically the principle we use since then.

And for what have we change ourselves in the past ten year? I would say the big change for us here is that because the region is changing so much, we need to adapt and make ourselves to be highly relevant. So, to respond to different challenges, SUMERNET now includes many activities in this phrase. So, in the past, we only have the multi-country research grants and also small grants. But this phase, we include the several types of grant and increase the number of grants. So, the network members can benefit and also through applications, of course, to this granting opportunity. I can name few, a new type

of the grants that we actually introduced in this phase like joint action grants that the researchers and also boundary partners. Many of them are policy makers, can only jointly apply and also upscale any existing innovation that they feel want to try in that area. And so, this is really also helping build a good partnership between researchers and also boundary partners as well. And we also have fellowship grants where young professionals from the Mekong Region could benefit from. And last one is the biggest grant that we offers in this phase, to indicated ground water assessment. So, this plan is to help and inform the key decision at the regional level on how groundwater could be managed in a way to reduce water insecurity so that more in terms of the content of the grants and also activities. The other change that we do, it's really we feel we have to learn more is the network. SUMERNET is the network of learning and we are learning new topic every day. And in this phase, we are learning on new subjects, especially we have ambitious to indicate gender equality and social equity, conflict sensitivity, human rights-based approach and such ethic approach into SUMERNET such as policy engagement.

Clemens: So, this is new for this phase, is it?

Chayanis: Yeah, so that's why you could observe that we have many podcasts and also training materials available on the website because we are learning and also we like to provide this opportunity, not only the grantees but also network members to access to this information and also the materials. And also we are welcoming any insight and feedback from our network. Then we can be a bridge to help these further to the network as well.

Yeah, and last point and I'd say it's very important point here, is that we want to make sure that as the network expanding that network members still can actively engage and be part of the decision making process and for any key direction of the network and the program. And we do this by putting a lot of effort in enhancing regional ownership of the network. And in this phrase, we have for at least nine members now and recruited through open election process. So, this is the first time, and I know I actually checked with many regional network and it seems only network like SUMERNET has done this. So, we want to make sure that the steering committees who are the leaders of the network are

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really represented. As the network members, they can vote, they can nominate themselves for the position.

Yeah, and we also have the other things we done for SUMERNET fellowships, and we open the opportunity for any expert in a network to fill in the position of advisors, training and capacity building. These are all efforts to ensure that while delivering the content and also making the impact all through several subjects and issues, we keep the original intention and remind ourselves that this is really the network where everyone own.

Clemens: So, I'd say active, dynamic governance of the network. So, it's amazing actually how this network has grown and changed over the years. I wanted to ask, you know, obviously now for phrase four, SUMERNET for all, water insecurities. This is the big issue. If you look into the future, hopefully SUMERNET will exist still for many more years, what do you think or what do you see as an expert and also as the person most involved in. What are the issues that will take us into the future looking at this region, Mekong region?

Chayanis: So, I think looking at the future ahead of us, I still sense that the challenge that we will face in the future likely to be even more complex because of the uncertainty linking with climate change and also development decisions. And of course, when we say development is not only the government who will decide the development, but it's like even individuals of us and how we decide our own decision on doing our livelihoods and also investment on our farming or our fishery, fishing lodge, for example. So, what if the situation where we have drought, flood, and rapid water, I mean, water level fluctuation as a recurrent event, and is happening every year. So, it almost every year.

So how can local communities and marginalized groups survive in such rapid changing Mekong Region and how can really we find a solution that be acceptable to all countries and also make people happy, especially the local communities who affect most from any kinds of change linking with the development decision or even not linking with development but more natural-driven, I mean, factors. So, these are all big questions that SUMERNET and also many other actors need to do and consider.

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In fact, there are so many regional governmental mechanisms that trying to address these challenges, but it's very obvious that they have done some great jobs on this. There's still a lot of rooms for us to further improvement and contribution, especially on how this mechanism could take more local concerns in their consideration for any kind of decision, either linking with development or cooperation among different countries. So, and I really feel that these are area, the area where SUMERNET could contribute.

SUMERNET as a network with a diverse membership, I mean, we have now 300 members and from almost 200 organizations.

Clemens: That's amazing.

Chayanis: Yeah, some of them are from the government and some of them are non-government representing local communities or media or academics. So, by having this kind of major network, why don't we think about how any individual or organization or the network as a whole could find a way where we are good at? And SUMERNET as the network could be a bridge or ambassador who could link from the local perspective. We have a good connection with the communities, and they tell us what they need and what are their concern. At the same time, we could use the research and of course, it should be reliable research that co-produced and co-designed by many parties concerned and to feedback to those who really need information for making a decision. So, I think we have done very well in the past at the sub-national level, and I could see that many research or project we have contributed, and we could see the real change. But what I still think there are still some areas where SUMERNET could do more. It's how we could link and make this kind of a great potential that we have in the network to benefit more at the national level and also regional level. But we won't forget that we still need to keep doing the things that we are good at at the sub-national level, because that also inspire many people who do the small research or project...

Clemens: Upscale

Chayanis: Yeah, upscale. That why this phrase, we we we actually offer a different kind of grants and also opportunities for upscaling. Yeah. So that's something that I think we need to work more.

Clemens: I'd like to go back to your 10 years' experience of involvement in SUMERNET and ask you a personal question, which is probably hard to answer. But what do you feel is your proudest achievement as a SUMERNET program director or what do you think you have? Where do you think you have really made a mark in this program?

Chayanis: So it's indeed very hard question. And I have so many things that I want to say about the SUMERNET and what I feel most about. But let me name two of them. One is I really feel that by witnessing I mean, there are many young Mekong researchers gain more knowledge and capacity, not only how to do good research, but also how to engage the policy actors and how they can work with the researchers from other countries broadening their perspectives and the way they set the research questions, not only within their territory or thinking about their sector, but also other sectors and also other countries. It really provides a kind of a kind of a basic or a thinking and their attitude, so they gain more confidence and opportunities to be shined. I would say because in the past they just work as a research assistant or project team members. And now I even see many of them could lead the research projects. And it was a great-designed research project. And there can even be a competitor of their professors.

And I want to stay in our culture, we always have a full respect to our senior and professor. But I think this way it will make everyone better and better because the professor...

Clemens: Friendly competition.

Chayanis: Yes, but Professors have to be improving himself or herself to be even, how to say, to challenge themselves, to be better. And that's why we could improve our ourselves and afterward, we can contribute to our society better.

And the other thing I feel proud about with that kind of contribution in making people feel that they empower them, the experience gained SUMERNET not only apply for SUMERNET work. But I see many occasions that they told us the stories how they use

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their concept like boundary partner engagement and others for other project or research activities.

Clemens: That are not SUMERNET.

Chayanis: That's not SUMERNET. So, this is really what we want to see more and more.

Yeah, yeah. And the second one that I pround about is to the work and the research that SUMERNET had contributed. We could see real examples for SUMERNET research that actually have changed the policy and practice on ground. Despite most of them at the sub-national level as I mentioned earlier, but this kind of small examples actually inspire more kind of effects to others, not only among research communities, but also communities who feel that they can actually rely on research, and to convey their message. And some of them from the communities become the research team members. They want to speak in their language and really express their need. So, this is a really powerful example by having this concrete example of the change.

And I can name a few examples like we work in the northern part of Thailand by introducing an application on a boundary support. It has actually influenced the decision of local government investing and on water development and to help poor farmers and to get better access from groundwater.

Clemens: So, actual policy happens.

Chayanis: Yes, and now we could see their products in many department stores and they can earn more kind of income and improve their, I mean, living standards. And we also have the project in, at early stage, I feel nervous because they touch upon the hand of power in resettlement areas in Laos. Actually, the project covers Laos, and also Thailand and also Vietnam. The example in Laos actually the research project is contributed to improving the relationship between the government, local government, local communities and also developers. So, the project could actually convey the need of the local communities to local government and also developers on what they really needed. Because in the past, there was some issues with the trust and don't want to speak much.

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And now they could actually have better livelihood because they get access to the training on organic farming and they can use this for earning, own, I mean, their own consumption and also for for the like income. So that are two examples, and in fact, we have several examples that I think we can learn from.

Clemens: I'm sure you have countless of examples, but I think the very good to try to understand what what SUMERNET can actually achieve and also what you can achieve as a program director of SUMERNET.

Chayanis: I feel so honored to have these opportunities to be a part of the network and also work closely with many team members and the Secretariats, including you, Clemens and also Leonie, Agus, Unchulee, Rajesh and many others, and our steering committee. They are fascinating. Even they are busy, they always make time to have discussion with us and also provide strategic direction to the secretariat team. And we also have good interaction with the network members who actually have really strong inspiration and to do research to inform policy and practices. And I feel that we have contributed a lot in the past 10 or 15 years. But because the region is changing so much and it's so big. So, we still have really kind of long-term commitment to continue working within SUMERNET, and also collaborating with other initiatives to make our effort become the meaningful effort. And for this five coming years, we want to reduce water insecurity for all. And this wouldn't be possible without everyone. Thank you very much.

Clemens: I think this has been very fascinating. Thank you very much, Chayanis, for your contribution to SUMERNET. We are really so happy to have you lead us through this and continue to grow and expand SUMERNET over the years, and hopefully in into the future, many, many years ahead.