



SUMERNET 4 All

Communications

Strategy





SUMERNET 4 All

Communications Strategy

Author:
Rajesh Daniel

Financial Supporter:



The Government of Sweden through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)

Cover photo: SEI/Roengchai

SUMERNET 4 All (S4A): Communications Strategy

The Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET) is a long-term programme and regional research network to inform and influence policy development over the long-term on sustainable development in the Mekong Region. The goal of SUMERNET is to achieve sustainable development in the Mekong Region by strengthening knowledge-based policy processes.

The SUMERNET network is guided by SUMERNET Network Members (SNMs), who collectively deliberate on strategic issues that have implications for the whole network. The SNMs delegate their authority in taking strategic decisions to SUMERNET Steering Committee (SSC). The SUMERNET Secretariat hosted at Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) provides the day-to-day management, coordination and technical support to the network under the direction of the SSC.

Towards the end of its third phase, the SSC decided to embark on a new fourth phase (2018-2023) of the SUMERNET Programme, with a strategic focus on *“reducing water insecurity for all in particular for the poor, marginalized and socially vulnerable groups of women and men in the Mekong Region”*, referred to as **“SUMERNET 4 All”** (S4A).

Through its unique participatory approach, SUMERNET addresses the need for integrative, regional-level, and transboundary analyses that compare or aggregate evidence and experiences, and feeds these directly into the policy development process. High-quality regional studies require extensive collaboration across countries. SUMERNET addresses this need by bringing together researchers with links to policy, planning and practice across the Mekong Region.

Multi-stakeholder engagement is central to all of SUMERNET’s activities. Each research project includes strategic partners and audiences (referred to as boundary partners) comprising knowledge producers, policy influencers (e.g. think tanks, non-governmental groups, media, and advocacy groups), and policy developers and practitioners, all of whom help shape policies and development choices.

This document serves as the strategy, informing how SUMERNET will carry out its research for policy and practice and engage with the policy and wide group of stakeholders to fulfil the mission set under SUMERNET 4 All.

1

S4A Expected Outcomes and Boundary Partners

S4A has an ambitious overall outcome that is *“by 2023, the policies, strategies, plans, programmes and practices at national and sub-national levels is taking on findings of SUMERNET’s joint action and research which consider human rights, conflict sensitivity, gender inclusivity and poverty reduction”*.

S4A’s overall outcome will be made possible by producing two interlinked bridging outcomes which are:

- *improved capacities of researchers’ and boundary partners’ to influence policies and practices; and,*
- *Policy recommendations based on evidence-based science in consideration of human rights, conflict sensitivity, gender inclusivity and poverty reduction promoted through appropriate policy engagement strategies influencing policymakers and decision makers*

These outcomes are the interaction of results of the specific outputs produced in response to the main outcome challenges¹, that S4A will influence three key groups of boundary partners². To achieve these outcome challenges, S4A will:

- *enhance the knowledge, attitude, and skills of **KNOWLEDGE PRODUCERS** so that they can deliver credible, gender inclusive, human rights-based, conflict sensitive, and poverty focused research, on key sustainability challenges throughout the Mekong Region. Knowledge producers’ capacity and confidence will be built so that they improve their research practice and contribute to the discourse on water insecurities in the region (**Outcome challenge 1**);-*
- *support **POLICYMAKERS** and **PRACTITIONERS** at subnational, national and regional levels in order to develop policies, strategies, plans and programs to address water insecurities and poverty in the Mekong Region, based on sound evidence and science, and informed by the principles of human rights, conflict sensitivity and gender inclusivity (**Outcome challenge 2**); and,*
- *improve the understanding of **POLICY INFLUENCERS** (e.g., media, CSOs, think tanks etc.) on water insecurities in the region, by providing them with credible and independent knowledge so that they become better advocates for SUMERNET research findings in influencing critical policy and practice domains on water management in consideration of human rights, conflict sensitivity, gender inclusivity and poverty reduction (**Outcome challenge 3**).*

¹ Outcome challenge is a statement that describes the desired changes in the behaviour, relationships, activities, actions (professional practices) of the boundary partner.

² Boundary partners are the individuals, groups, or organizations with whom SUMERNET interacts directly, and with whom SUMERNET, can anticipate opportunities for influence and measurable changes. The boundary partners of S4A include the knowledge producers, policy makers and practitioners and policy-influencers

2 Communications Component in S4A

To achieve all expected outcomes, S4A work is being undertaken through four interlinking components: multi-stakeholder engagement (component 1), research for policy and practice (component 2), **communications (component 3)** and programme management and coordination (component 4).

As part of the ambition towards wider integration, scaling up solutions, and applicability of research results, it is crucial to reach various target audiences with appropriate messaging. If research wants to achieve wide adoption, communications needs to be appropriate to the recipients of the communications messages and applicable to the realities of the audiences.

The communications component also relates to the other three components: multi-stakeholder engagement (component 1), research for policy and practice (component 2) and component 4 in developing and sustaining the network. Moreover, it covers incoming communication, i.e. feedback resulting from research and outreach activities: Are they effective? Can they have an impact on people's lives? Are they achieving what they intend to achieve? These perspectives will be important for quality control and adapting research outcomes to various socio-ecological situations throughout the region. The outreach efforts and products will be guided by gender-sensitive language and addressing gender issues.

3

Aspects of external and internal communications in S4A

Over the last three phases, SUMERNET has established regular platforms for dialogue and communication in which a variety of stakeholders can actively participate and these will be continued and strengthened under S4A.

This includes **SUMERNET Steering Committee (SSC) members, network members, and other invited people including non-members**, to ensure that relevant persons from the region attend meetings, conferences and workshops that concern vital water-related issues. These dialogue platforms are inclusive, gender-equal, and conflict sensitive.

SUMERNET will also actively engage **policy-influencers, such as NGOs, CSOs and think tanks, as well as media**. This will help increase public discourses on water insecurity issues and potential policy and practice changes.

Media engagement is a vital part of S4A since growing public attention on water insecurity leads to an enabling environment for improvements in policy and practice. SUMERNET will therefore actively engage with media both through connections of the individual project teams and partnering with regional media networks for example, participating in trainings and workshops, while facilitating linkages between media and researchers for more long-term partnerships.

SUMERNET website has long served as a key platform for sharing news, perspectives and research updates about environmental and natural resource issues in the Mekong Region. The website was recently refurbished in 2019 to provide not only a fresh and attractive design but also to make the website easy to use and facilitate multiple languages. The redesigned website also emphasizes the work and activities around “water insecurity” of S4A and other broader issues related to sustainable development in the region.

SUMERNET has for a long time posted a regular **newsletter** that goes out to members as well as ad-hoc communication around new initiatives, project calls and proposals, linkages to other networks and regional organisations. The newsletter helps facilitate comprehensive internal communication within the network membership.

In addition, to the website and newsletter, S4A is becoming more active on social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to increase and maintain dialogue among members and interested parties and provide an active presence for S4A on water issues in the region.

4

Communications Strategy

Goal: The goal of the communications strategy is to build on the previous phases of work of SUMERNET and in the present phase of S4A to maximise the network's value as a resource for science, policy and media actors in the Mekong Region.

Objectives: The communications strategy has the following objectives to ensure that S4A communications will:

- **Be interactive**, since our goal is to invite dialogue, not just to unilaterally convey information. This means events must facilitate interaction with our boundary partners using digital communications tools such as the SUMERNET website and social media to encourage interaction.
- **Engage all our partners**, not just the SUMERNET Secretariat, to make the most of their available networks and leverage their local, national and regional knowledge and connections.
- **Be gender-sensitive and inclusive in the tone**, languages, images, formats and intended audiences of all communications products
- **Present materials in different formats, long- and short-form**, with different levels of depth and complexity – from articles for peer-reviewed journals, to technical reports, to policy briefs, brochures, blog posts, and multimedia presentations including short films.
- **Provide multiple entry points**, recognising that no single event, newsletter, website or publication will reach everyone, but all should make it easy to engage more deeply with SUMERNET.
- **Be multi-lingual**, English is our programme's core language, but we also need to produce publications and conduct outreach in the languages of the different Mekong Region countries.
- **Build capacity**, both among SUMERNET partners, to help them to effectively communicate with policymakers and general audiences, and among our boundary partners, for whom engagement with SUMERNET could be a way to strengthen their own knowledge and skills.

4.1 The strategy has three key areas of focus:

- 4.1.1. **SUMERNET website** used as a strong platform for enhanced network visibility, and digital presence with strong links to social media channels;
- 4.1.2. **Support both scientific and policy engagement products like policy briefings and popular writing outputs** to strengthen the SUMERNET brand as a credible, scientific research network that engages in dialogue with different stakeholders in the region including media and policymakers;
- 4.1.3. **Capacity building** to through training workshops and field visits to build capacity of researchers;
- 4.1.4. **Monitoring and evaluation** of the communications efforts and SUMERNET digital presence in the Mekong Region.

Table 1. Strategy focus and key activities

Strategy focus	Key activities
1. Website as a strong platform for enhanced network visibility and digital presence with links to social media channels	- The redesigned website will strengthen the focus on “reducing water insecurity” with its user-friendly design, better functionalities for multimedia, and the use of multiple Mekong languages. - Strong platform for sharing and exchange of information among the network partners, policymakers, media and the general public. - Ease of use in writing and sharing of blogs and the monthly newsletter. - Website will feature multimedia such as short films, photo stories and the integration of social media platforms.
2. High quality scientific and other publications to strengthen the brand of SUMERNET as a credible, scientific research network engaging in dialogue with regional stakeholders.	- Comms will support S4A grantees in this phase to produce high quality publications both scientific and policy engagement and popular outputs to strengthen the brand of SUMERNET. - The outputs to be supported include journal articles, policy briefs, press releases, news article, and films, blogs and webpages, as well as linking across other knowledge platforms and networks. - A database will be compiled as part of the SUMERNET website functionality to highlight specific knowledge and expertise of our membership.
3. Capacity building through training workshops and field visits to build capacity of researchers	- Comms will support trainings to build capacity of researchers on writing high quality peer-reviewed journal articles - Media training workshops in collaboration with media groups on topics related to improved communication with non-academic audiences. Workshops involve both researchers and the media to enable better media interactions and enable researchers to communicate their science to non-academic audiences. Topics may include: making effective presentations; writing policy briefs and press releases; how to use social media. - Trainings on communications topics related to water insecurity and gender, human rights and conflict sensitivity will be integrated. - Meetings or visits to research sites, joint outreach efforts for enhancing understanding on communications and outreach, and for building better linkages with the media.
4. Monitoring and evaluation of the communications efforts and SUMERNET digital presence in the Mekong Region	- Ensure that S4A communications is a process for continuous learning and improving.

4.2 Audiences

The communications strategy has three key audiences:

- **Knowledge producers:** individuals or organisations participating in the research projects – e.g. researchers, academic and research institutes, NGOs and grass-roots groups
- **Policy influencers:** civil society, think tank, NGOs, advocacy groups and media
- **Policymakers and practitioners:** e.g. government officials at different levels and other practitioners including private sector actors

SUMERNET communications team will work closely with the multi-stakeholder engagement (component 1), research for policy and practice (component 2) towards achieving the different objectives for the network audiences to produce outcomes as shown in table 2 below.

Table 2. Communications strategy organised by objectives, audiences (boundary partners), approaches, and outcomes and outputs.

Objective	Approaches	Outputs
<i>Knowledge producers: individuals or organisations participating in the research projects: e.g. researchers, academic and research institutes, NGOs and grassroots groups</i>		
• Ensure credible collaborative research and outputs • Increase engagement with other boundary partners (policymakers and influencers)	• Encourage partners to contribute to peer-reviewed publications, and provide subject-expert and editorial support where needed • Disseminate information about opportunities to publish research, attend regional conferences and other events, or participate in external training programmes • Keep partners informed about SUMERNET activities, including other partners' work and facilitate communication among network members • Facilitate learning and sharing of knowledge and experience among members • Reach out to the broader community of knowledge producers to ensure they are aware of SUMERNET activities and outputs • Build capacity for academic research, policy analysis, communication through training sessions (writeshops, seminars, webinars), and direct mentoring)	• Peer-reviewed publications • SUMERNET email updates • SUMERNET website • Regular meetings among members • Capacity-building workshops and other guidance

Objective	Approaches	Outputs
<i>Policy influencers: civil society, think tank, NGOs, advocacy groups and media</i>		
• Ensure that these audiences know SUMERNET's work and cite or use it in their own activities • Increased and sustained engagement with knowledge users ----- • Increased engagement of gender /feminist organizations	• Identify knowledge users as partners and plan activities to ensure their engagement in SUMERNET projects –including research design, data collection, workshops and discussions of findings • Present research findings in accessible language and in useful and usable formats, with content targeted to specific audiences' interests and needs • Actively reach out to the media, building long-term relationships when possible • Build an engaging website that invites interaction, and support it with output materials including multimedia, integration with social media, and cross-linked with other partner websites and portals • Provide updates to boundary partners on research activities and findings; where possible, organise or invite the boundary partners to field trips to the programme field sites • Present research findings in accessible language and in useful and usable formats, with content targeted to specific audiences' interests and needs • Enable active participation of women's organizations in future multi-stakeholder dialogues	• Full suite of targeted publications, including factsheets, policy briefs, and brochures • Press releases and submissions to blogs • Multi-faceted online presence, including revamped website, (multiple languages targeted in 2021), monthly newsletter, social media integration, multimedia content • Workshops and other outreach events (e.g. public consultation workshops) • Institutional agreements with policy influencers • Media briefings and online coverage of SUMERNET activities • Actionable work plans to address research findings and link with gender concerns in reducing water insecurity • Joint workshops with other stakeholders
<i>Policymakers and practitioners: e.g. government officials at different levels and other practitioners including private sector actors</i>		
• Ensure these audiences know SUMERNET's work and cite and use it in their own activities • Increased and sustained engagement with policymakers and practitioners • Ensure that gender focal points in government water agencies are engaged, including key representatives from ministries of women's affairs	• Involve policymakers and practitioners in research activities, e.g. research design, research project workshops and consultations • Active participation of these boundary partners in relevant national and regional policy dialogue events • Provide updates for the boundary partners on research activities and findings; where possible, organise or invite the boundary partners to field trips to the programme field sites • Present research findings in accessible language and in useful and usable formats, with content targeted to specific audiences' interests and needs, and short- and long-form materials	• Meetings • Research project workshops • Policy dialogue events • Policy briefs • Project reports • Online resources and outreach (see above)

4.3 Monitoring and evaluation with performance indicators

Below are provided some indicators to monitor and measure the effectiveness of the communications approach such as media editorials, public and stakeholder engagement, website analytics and social media traffic.

Table 3. Outcomes, outputs and performance indicators

AUDIENCE	Knowledge producers: individuals or organisations participating in the research projects – e.g. researchers, academic and research institutes, NGOs and grassroots groups		
OUTCOME	OUTPUTS	Monitoring indicators (preliminary list to be later updated with project partners)	
• Credible collaborative research and outputs ensured • Engagement increased with other boundary partners (policy-makers and influencers) • Increased engagement of gender /feminist organizations	• Partners supported with peer-reviewed publications, and subject-expert and editorial support provided where needed • Information disseminated in monthly newsletter about opportunities to publish research, attend regional conferences and other events, or participate in external training programmes • Partners kept informed about SUMERNET activities, including other partners' work and facilitate communication among network members • Learning and sharing improved of knowledge and experience among members • Broader community of knowledge producers are more aware of SUMERNET activities and outputs • Build capacity for academic research, policy analysis, communication through training sessions (writeshops, seminars, webinars), and direct mentoring)	• Peer-reviewed publications • SUMERNET email updates per year • SUMERNET newsletters • Regular website blogs every year • Annual meetings and learning forum among members (online and offline) • workshops for capacity-building and other guidance	

AUDIENCE**Policy influencers: civil society, think tank, NGOs, advocacy groups and media****OUTCOME**

- These audiences made more aware of SUMERNET's work and they cite or use it in their own activities
- Increased and sustained engagement with policy influencers
- Increased engagement of gender /feminist organizations

OUTPUTS

- Knowledge users identified as partners and activities plan for their engagement in SUMERNET projects –including research design, data collection, workshops and discussions of findings
- Research findings presented in accessible language and in useful and usable formats, with content targeted to specific audiences' interests and needs
- Media is contacted on a regular basis, building long-term relationships when possible
- Website is engaging with interaction, and materials posted including blogs, multimedia, integrated with social media, and cross-linked with other partner websites and portals
- Updates provided to boundary partners on research activities and findings; where possible, emails sent to invite the boundary partners to field trips to the programme field sites
- Research findings provided in accessible language and in useful and usable formats, with content targeted to specific audiences' interests and needs
- Active participation enabled of women's organizations in future multi-stakeholder dialogues

Monitoring indicators

(preliminary list to be later updated with project partners)

- Full suite of targeted publications
- Press releases and submissions to the website as relevant
- Multi-faceted online presence using the revamped and rebranded website: regular social media posts every month, with multimedia content
- Partners organized workshops and other outreach events such as media trainings and comms workshops (e.g. public consultation workshops)
- Media briefings and online coverage of SUMERNET activities in media. Also includes public engagement activities of partners (interviews, media coverage, key events etc.) performed by researchers and boundary partners.
- Comms to support research component 1 with their work plans that address research findings and link with gender concerns in reducing water insecurity
- Joint workshops with other stakeholders

AUDIENCE**Policy influencers: civil society, think tank, NGOs, advocacy groups and media****OUTCOME**

- These audiences made more aware of SUMERNET's work and they cite and use it in their own activities
- Increased and sustained engagement with policymakers and practitioners
- Ensure that gender focal points in government water agencies are engaged, including key representatives from ministries of women's affairs

OUTPUTS

- Policymakers and practitioners involved in research activities, e.g. research design, research project workshops and consultations
- Participation ensured of boundary partners in relevant national and regional policy dialogue events
- Updates provided for the boundary partners on research activities and findings; where possible, they are invited to field trips to the programme field sites
- Research findings are presented in accessible language and in useful and usable formats, with content targeted to specific audiences' interests and needs, and short- and long-form materials

Monitoring indicators

(preliminary list to be later updated with project partners)

- Meetings (total meetings attended by the Secretariat)
- Research project workshops
- Policy dialogue events (Annual policy forum)
- Policy briefs
- Project reports

Contact

SUMERNET Secretariat

Email: secretariat@sumernet.org

Website: sumernet.org

Address: 10th Floor, Kasem Uttayanin Building
254 Chulalongkorn University
Henri Dunant Road, Pathumwan
Bangkok, 10330 Thailand