

**SUMERNET “RESEARCH 4 ALL” PODCAST SERIES**

EPISODE 13 - Messaging for gender equality and disability-inclusive climate policy

Full transcript

**00:00**

Welcome to the SUMERNET podcast series “RESEARCH 4 ALL”, where SUMERNET advisors and researchers talk about their support for research on water insecurity in the Mekong region.

**00:22**

**My:** Hello and welcome to the SUMERNET “RESEARCH 4 ALL” podcast. I'm your host today, **My Le**. And I'm thrilled to speak with **Dr. Kien Nguyen-Trung**, Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion and Research Lead at the Water Sensitive Cities Australia, part of the Monash Sustainable Development Institute

**00:44**

**My:** His work sits at the intersection of research, lived experience, and policymaking. In this episode, we'll unpack Dr. Kien's strategies for advancing gender equality and disability inclusion in climate policy. Dr. Kien, welcome to the podcast!

**01:03**

**Kien:** Thank you, My. It's a real pleasure to be here. I'm grateful for this opportunity to share not just our research findings, but also the journeys we have taken across the Southeast Asia region in disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and gender, disability and social inclusion.

**01:25**

**Kien:** Our focus has been on how to bring lived experience into meaningful policy conversations. I truly believe your platform is essential for amplifying voices that too often go unheard in mainstream policy spaces.

**01:45**

**My:** Thank you, Dr. Kien, for your kind words.

So let's start with the first question. In many parts of the Mekong Region, like Vietnam's Mekong Delta, women often carry a big responsibility for caring for their families. Because of this role, they are more dependent on natural resources and daily utilities like clean water and food. This means they can be more affected by climate issues like floods or droughts. But sometimes, climate policies don't fully reflect this reality. Do you agree?

And from your experience, how can we frame our messages about these gendered impacts so policymakers can truly listen?

**02:29**

**Kien:** Let me start by clarifying something important. We need to recognize that climate change is only one of the factors that lead to natural hazards; and a natural hazard like flooding or drought is not a disaster in itself.

When the flood occurs, it doesn't automatically become a disaster. A disaster only happens when the affected community lacks the capacity to cope, when existing resources, systems and supports aren't enough.

**03:09**

**Kien:** That breakdown is often due to underlying vulnerabilities, unequal access to resources, weak infrastructures, or the absence of disaster preparedness systems.

So from that perspective, we must look beyond a hazard itself and focus on the structural and systemic barriers that prevent communities from responding effectively. Now with that understanding, let's connect that to gender.

**03:44**

**Kien:** A woman may be more affected by a disaster than a man, not because of biology, but because of social norms. That plays a heavier caregiving burden on her, while she is expected to work just as hard to earn income. This reflects a gender system that increases her exposure and limits her ability to cope.

**04:11**

**Kien:** In our [research](#) with [the Hanoi Association of People with Disabilities](#), or we call DP Hanoi, we saw it vividly. Women with disabilities, in particular, face some of the harshest impacts, yet their experiences are rarely acknowledged in the policy.

**04:32**

**Kien:** For example, someone we call Ms. D in Thanh Chuong district, Nghe An province. She's a farmer caring for a husband with the paralysis and three daughters with intellectual disabilities. During floods, when fresh water sources became contaminated, she had to paddle a boat to another village just to collect clean water to cook. That is an immense physical and emotional burden.

**05:04**

**Kien:** But what's even more telling is that situation was seen as normal in local community. The expectation that she as women must take on that role was never questioned. And because of that, there were no policies in place to support women like her. That is what I mean by "a policy blind spot". And that's where vulnerability come from.

**05:35**

**Kien:** So how do we frame those realities for policymakers? I think, firstly, we need to challenge the assumption that hazards cause disaster impacts.

The underlying vulnerabilities, especially gender inequality, disability exclusion, those issues cause their lack of access to rights, resources and decision-making power. That puts women at greater risks.

**06:09**

**Kien:** Secondly, statistics alone won't move people. I think we have found that emotional resonance is key. Policymakers respond when you make the issues human and relatable. So we focus on real-life stories, specific incidents and voices from the ground, not just data points. That's what helps technical issues feel tangible and ultimately more urgent.

**06:39**

**Kien:** So yes, I agree with you. Framing matters deeply. And when we do it right, we center lived experiences, highlight systems and tell stories that connect. We move from just pointing out problems to building solutions that policymakers can act on.

**07:02**

**My:** I'm glad that you mentioned DP Hanoi. That brings me to another important point. I read about your recent work with the Hanoi Association of People with Disabilities; you and they developed and communicated key messages to policymakers.

Could you walk us through your journey with DP Hanoi? I'd like to hear how you brought together research, climate, gender equality and disability issues in a way that resonated with policymakers.

**07:35**

**Kien:** I must declare that this has been one of the most meaningful collaborations of my career. The partnership with DP Hanoi started with the fund by the Australian Water Partnership, and it was built on the principle of co-design, "Nothing about us without us".

**07:54**

**Kien:** From the very beginning, persons with disabilities were not just participants, they were active co-researchers. So our role was to support them in building their research capacity. We organized training, we trained 14 members, including ten people with disabilities, in research methodologies, policy analysis and communication.

**08:21**

**Kien:** Through this, DP Hanoi formed their first ever internal research group. Together, we conducted interviews with 52 persons with disabilities. We gathered sex, age, and disability disaggregated data ([SADDD](#)) alongside deeply personal stories that highlighted how gender, disability, climate and water insecurity intersect in everyday life.

**08:47**

**Kien:** One of our most important findings was that women with disabilities in rural districts, like My Duc in Hanoi and Thanh Chuong in Nghe An, are disproportionately impacted during floods. They lack access to clean water, safe evacuation options and basic services like disability-friendly early warning systems.

But instead of framing these as isolated gender or disability issues, we worked with DP Hanoi to link them to broader policy and institutional challenges like disaster resilience, equitable development and climate resilient infrastructure.

**09:28**

**Kien:** For example, when we share the story of people with hearing disabilities in Nghe An province who couldn't access weather warnings due to limited sign language education, it sparks important conversations about the lack of inclusive education for deaf communities in rural provinces. Not everyone has the privilege of accessing sign language training like those in big cities like Hanoi. This again highlights unequal access to resources in right - a reflection of system inequality embedded in our society.

**10:04**

**Kien:** So, by framing our message around vulnerability - the root causes of disasters, rather than just intensity of natural hazards, we aimed to get the framing right. First, policymakers began to see this wasn't about advocacy. It was grounded, actionable input that could help strengthen the systems they were already trying to improve. So, I think that's more important.

**10:32**

**My:** Thank you so much, Dr. Kien. The case study with DP Hanoi was really insightful. And you were right. Doing research is one thing, but framing the findings is a whole different skill. And even more important, I think, is knowing how to communicate effectively for policy actions.

One person can do brilliant research, but still misses the mark if it's not communicated in a way that policymakers can understand and can take actions, right?

So drawing from your experience, Dr. Kien, how did you navigate both, ensuring the message is both well-positioned and clearly delivered to policymakers?

**11:15**

**Kien:** You're right. Impactful research doesn't end with the report. If it doesn't reach decision-makers in a way they can act on, then we miss the mark.

The principle that we found especially helpful was [the EAST framework](#) developed by the Behavioral Insights Team in 2012. It helped us shape our communications in four ways.

**11:41**

**Kien:** *E for easy.* Make it easy! We simplify the messages, avoid jargons. Instead of a long report, we create short briefs with visual, quotes, clear recommendations. Policymakers are very busy people; a 2-page summary is much more effective than a 60-page technical report. That increases our response rate significantly.

**12:06**

**Kien:** *A for attractive.* We use images, short videos, real-life stories. When your message is visually engaging and emotionally grounded, it captures more attention.

*S for social.* We ensure our communications reflect the voices of the people with disabilities, not just about them, but by them.

**12:30**

**Kien:** *T for timely.* We align our communications with real policy windows, for instance the national law revision process, and partner with respective institutions that give our message more legitimacy and help us push for change at the right moment.

**12:50**

**Kien:** In our work with DP Hanoi, we were very deliberate about how we communicate our findings.

First, we translated our research insights into practical, policy-relevant messages. For instance, we didn't just say people with disabilities are vulnerable to floods. We show how failing to include them in early warning systems leads to delays in evacuation, higher health costs, and weaker recovery.

**13:20**

**Kien:** Second, we co-presented our findings at the final dissemination workshop in Hanoi. The DP Hanoi researchers, many of them are people with disabilities, deliver the findings themselves. That's incredibly powerful. Policymakers were hearing directly from those affected, not filtered to an external voice. That built authenticity and urgency.

**13:50**

**My:** So during that process, how did you tailor your messages depending on who you were talking to, for instance, national versus local decision-makers?

**14:03**

**Kien:** We adapted our communication to the audience. Research shows that familiarity helps the message resonate more.

With local authorities, we used concrete examples from their own districts, like how residents in My Duc district lacked access to safe water and had to rely on untreated well water during floods.

For national agency, we linked our findings to existing legal frameworks like the revised law on water resources and show how disability inclusive approaches could help meet broader national growth around resilience and equity.

**14:43**

**My:** Thank you, Dr. Kien. You've mentioned many communication tools you have been using like presentations, policy briefs, and visual aids like videos and photos. As a communicator myself, I'm very curious: from your experience working with policymakers in Vietnam, what are the communication media that have worked best to convince them and to talk to them?

**15:13**

**Kien:** That's a great question. I think we must not rely on any single means. We must mix a lot of channels and methods to reach the audience. Like I said above, they are very busy people, and we cannot throw at them a 60-page long report. We need to translate it into a policy brief, 10 bullet points of recommendations, or some visual images that carry the message. I think that is the key thing.

**15:48**

**Kien:** Another important point is that we need to involve them from the beginning, make them become our partner from day one, rather than when we finish our research, we invite them to the consultation workshop and tell them about the findings.

**16:03**

**My:** Before we get deeper into policy engagement as you just shared, I have one last question regarding communication. So we've been talking about the tools. How about the communication forces that help you? In your research team, do you have people who are in charge of communication, or you partner with other organizations?

**16:28**

**Kien:** One of the advantages that we have at the Water Sensitive Cities Australia, Monash Sustainable Development Institute is that we have a communication specialist, who with the magic wand can turn technical reports into something plain, simple, and attractive.

**16:50**

**Kien:** But more importantly, when we work with diverse audiences, for example, with Vietnamese audience, we need to collaborate with someone like DP Hanoi. We first have to turn that into plain English, and then work with them to make sure that the translations are right. When translating the messages, we need to make sure that they reflect the local language, the terms that Vietnamese often use and that they should care about the cultural sensitivities.

**17:26**

**My:** I have the understanding that framing the messages and communicating the key messages is not just a one-off event, but is the process that involves many stakeholders. So during that process, have you dealt with any challenges or moments of resistance from your partners, like DP Hanoi, or from the policymakers that joined the knowledge co-production process?

**17:58**

**Kien:** That's also a great question. I think challenges always exist in development efforts. One of the early challenges we faced was a tendency to normalize the vulnerability of people with disabilities. Some local authorities still feel that there is no need to make major changes. Because in their view, the system already responds to emergencies.

**18:27**

**Kien:** Let's take one example. When a storm hits, the local disaster response in Vietnam often mobilizes a range... a wide range of forces. They have distributed life jackets, provided food and shelter, prioritized support for vulnerable people like the poor, the elderly, and people with disabilities. That emergency-based model works well in the short term, I must acknowledge that.

The problem is the system is too focused on immediate responses and lacks the longer term policies needed to build resilience.

**19:10**

**My:** How did you reach consensus?

**19:13**

**Kien:** To reach consensus, the collaboration is everything, but it has to be genuine.

In our project, we didn't just consult DP Hanoi. We shared power. Some [research] participants later told us this was the first time they were being interviewed by someone who also had a disability. It made a huge difference. They felt more comfortable, more open and later shared stories they had never told before. And that depth of the connection brought a new level of insights into our research.

**19:56**

**Kien:** For policymakers, like I mentioned before, we need to involve them from the very beginning of the project. We need to discuss with them, involve them so they develop some sense of ownership into the project. The conflicts can be solved by our genuine efforts to connect and co-work with each other.

**20:21**

**My:** Thank you so much, Dr. Kien. I myself find your work experience very inspiring. Before we close, is there a message you'd like to leave with our audience?

**20:33**

**Kien:** Thanks, My, for a very interesting podcast. If there's one message I would like to leave with listeners, it's inclusion must start at the beginning. Don't wait until after you have written the report and finished the research to think about how to include people with disabilities, or how to integrate gender equality. Make them part of the process from day one.

What our work with DP Hanoi has shown is that when people are in power to tell their own stories, shape their own evidence, and define their own priorities, that's when the research truly becomes a force for change.

**21:16**

**Kien:** We often hear that policymaking is technical, but it's also emotional. Policymakers are people, and they're moved by real stories, real struggles and real solutions. So if we want to influence policy, we must not only speak to the head, but I must say, we must speak to the heart as well.

**21:39**

**Kien:** Finally, collaboration is not about ticking boxes. It's about building tasks, building capacity, building a future where nobody is left behind.

And the last: inclusion is not just the right thing to do. It makes our climate, water systems more resilient, more just, more effective for everyone. That's the key message I would like to leave with listeners. Thank you.

**22:08**

**My:** Thanks again for joining us and for the important work that you are doing.

For our listeners, we will link some of Dr. Kien's work and partner organizations in this episode accompanying blog.

Until next time. Thanks for listening.

**22:26**

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