

SUMERNET “RESEARCH 4 ALL” PODCAST SERIES
SUMERNET Young Professionals miniseries
EPISODE 12 - Communicating your research to influence policymaking in the Mekong Region

Full transcript

[00:23 – 00:32]

Khaing Su: Welcome to the second episode of the SUMERNET Young Professionals podcast miniseries, “Policy engagement for a just Mekong.”

[00:33 – 00:53]

Khaing Su: The demand for researchers to produce tangible on-the-ground impact has been increasing. There are many literature and scholarly articles that work on science-policy-impact interface. But here we won't be discussing what's written in the literature, but rather first-hand experiences of our Mekong researchers.

[00:54 – 01:03]

Khaing Su: Today, we want to discuss policy engagement through scientific, evidence-based research in the context of a just and sustainable Mekong.

[01:04 – 01:35]

Khaing Su: In this episode, we will highlight perspectives and insights from a young professional in policy engagement in the region. I'm delighted to introduce our guest, Bin Liang. She is currently a senior Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) consultant at the China General Certification Center and has over five years of experience in development studies. Her current research interests include the environment, energy, and corporate sustainability. Welcome, Bin!

[01:36 – 01:38]

Bin: Thanks so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

[01:39 – 01:50]

Khaing Su: Let's dive right in. From your perspective as a young professional, what does it mean to “engage in policy” to achieve social and environmental justice in the Mekong?

[01:51– 02:11]

Bin: For me, engaging in policy to achieve social environmental justice in the Mekong Region means actively communicating with our policymakers and lobbying them to introduce or amend current policies in order to address the specific problem or issues.

[02:09 – 02:15]

Khaing Su: So to be effective in this endeavor, what kind of steps young professionals can take Bin?

[02:16 – 02:40]

Bin: I think the first step is kind of the rough understanding of the social and environmental landscape in our region. It's quite essential, or even if the first step for being a good researcher, if you equip us with the credibility and insights needed to make constructive policy recommendation. It's difficult to engage in meaningful policy dialogue without the solid grasp of the issue at hand.

[02:41 – 03:17]

Bin: The second point would be young professionals can try to participate in different kinds of forums and activity that bring together diverse stakeholders. For example, the Learning Forum organized by SUMERNET last week was a good demonstration because it takes government officials, young professionals, NGO representatives and many stakeholders on board. Such gatherings are invaluable

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because they allow us to hear different voices and understand the interest and needs over there. These kinds of engagement help us to form well-rounded policy suggestions that consider multiple viewpoints.

[03:18 – 03:23]

Khaing Su: It's great to hear about such collaborative efforts? Is there anything else young professionals can do?

[03:24 – 03:52]

Bin: For sure, in addition to invite government officials into the dialogue, actually young professionals can directly contribute to the policy making process by participating in research projects. Every year, governments will seek support from think tanks in order to understand wide range of social and environmental issues and sometimes they ask commissions, universities or research institutions to conduct such studies.

[03:53 – 04:03]

Bin: So I think our young professionals can join the think tanks and then they would have a chance to conduct evidence-based research and then have a direct conversation with policymakers.

[04:04 – 04:08]

Khaing Su: Can you share some examples of your own experience in policy engagement in the Mekong Region?

[04:09 – 04:33]

Bin: Over the past few years, I've had the honor of engaging with various aspects of policy dialogues, from government to international organizations, and even embassies. One of the notable experience has been my work on a project hosted by United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), focused on promoting the concepts and practices of cradle to cradle (C2C) in China.

[04:34 – 05:02]

Bin: My role in the UNIDO project involves conducting comprehensive research contributing to policy recommendations, and integrating the C2C concept into the existing policy framework. This includes working on strategies to encourage companies to adopt C2C practices. To be honest, it's been a unique opportunity to see how environmental principles can be woven into policy at a national level.

[05:03 – 05:30]

Bin: The most rewarding part has been the chance to directly participate in policy making process by working on policy recommendations and engaging with stakeholders. I've been able to see firsthand how research and dialogue can lead to tangible changes in policy. It's been incredibly fulfilling to contribute to initiatives that promote sustainability and environmental stewardship in such a meaningful way.

[05:31 – 05:35]

Khaing Su: Can you share any specific outcomes or impacts of your work on this project?

[05:36 – 05:53]

Bin: One significant outcome has been the incorporation of C2C principle into discussions with government officials and industrial leaders. We've seen increased awareness and interest in sustainable practice and some policies are beginning to reflect this idea as well.

[05:54 – 06:04]

Bin: Additionally, several companies, especially the leading company in China, have started to explore how they can integrate the C2C principle into their operations.

[06:05 – 06:11]

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Khaing Su: That's quite an achievement, Bin. I'm also curious what are the opportunities and challenges in your policy engagement work?

[06:12 – 06:33]

Bin: The opportunity here is quite straightforward. I finally have a seat at the table as a young professional and I can engage these conversations with senior researchers and policymakers. This access allows me to directly contribute to important conversations and influence decisions.

[06:34 – 06:51]

Bin: Then, in terms of challenges here, I think the biggest one is becoming thoroughly familiar with the given topic, shaping my insights, and confidently voicing my opinion. It's quite difficult, actually, because there are sometimes when it feels like no one is taking my words seriously.

[06:52 – 07:12]

Bin: It takes time to build credibility and trust, especially for a young researcher. I tried to see it as a part of the learning process by consistently presenting well-researched contributions. I gradually earned the respect and attention of more experienced colleagues. I would say persistence and patience are key.

[07:13 – 07:46]

Bin: Another significant challenge is the complexity of the policymaking process itself. Understanding the intricacies of policy development, the priorities of policymakers, and the political dynamics at play can be daunting. To effectively navigate this landscape, it's essential to invest time in learning about the policy environment. This includes identifying key stakeholders, understanding the legislative process, and staying informed about current policy debates relevant to one's research area.

[07:47 – 07:55]

Khaing Su: I see. Then in your view, what are the personal and professional skills necessary for making your research matter to policy and practice?

[07:56 – 08:07]

Bin: The top one would be research skills, no doubt. I would like to highlight the other two top essential skills here: networking skills and storytelling skills.

[08:08 – 08:14]

Khaing Su: Research skills are certainly fundamental, but can you elaborate on the importance of networking and storytelling?

[08:15 – 08:58]

Bin: There are some stereotypes about researchers; people will think, oh, you are really nerdy and introverted, but actually, research itself is a social activity. For instance, you need to interact with your peers, review their research papers, attend academic conferences, and present your latest findings to large audience. Also, you need to directly communicate with the government officials and influence them, so all of them are about interpersonal communication. Strong social skills will help you expand your network, view influence and attract policymakers' attention.

[08:59 – 09:02]

Khaing Su: That's an interesting perspective. How about storytelling?

[09:03 – 09:42]

Bin: My master's degree supervisor impressed this upon me. She always emphasized the need to communicate complex scientific knowledge in the most accessible language, as if explaining it to my grandparents. This advice has been invaluable. If you want others to understand and value your research, you must make the information appealing and comprehensible. Human beings naturally enjoy stories, for

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sure, including policymakers. A strong storytelling ability can effectively impress them, provoke their thoughts, and draw attention to important social phenomena.

[09:43 – 10:01]

Bin: Networking skills plus story skills can make researchers to communicate their findings, build meaningful connections and influence policies more effectively. These skills, combined with the solid research capability, are essential for making a significant impact on policy and practice.

[10:02 – 10:19]

Khaing Su: Thank you, Bin. Our podcast is approaching the end and I'd like to ask you one final question. What would be your recommendations for other early career researchers out there contributing to and sustainable Mekong Region regarding effective policy engagement and making an impact?

[10:20 – 10:39]

Bin: I shared a lot today, but it all down to one essential piece of advice. That is put your heart into your work. So in Chinese we say 俾心机 bei sam gei. It means to invest a lot of effort and passion into what you are doing. That's what good researchers need.

[10:40 – 11:11]

Bin: For early career researchers, this means roughly understanding the issue, continuing to build your knowledge and research skills, and actively engaging with policymakers and stakeholders. Be persistent, stay curious, and don't be afraid to voice your insights, even if it feels like no one is listening at first. I believe that our dedication and passion will eventually make a difference and contribute to a more just and sustainable Mekong.

[11:12 – 11:13]

Khaing Su: Thank you very much, Bin, for sharing your insights.

[11:14 – 11:17]

Bin: Thank you so much, Khaing Su, for inviting me to join the podcast.