



SUMERNET

Vision Guide 2019-2028

Sustainable Mekong Research Network



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01 About the Guide

The Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET) is an initiative for research and policy engagement bringing together research partners engaged in sustainable development in the six countries of the Mekong Region: Cambodia, China (specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. SUMERNET is a regional network made up of partners from the Mekong Region that are committed to sustainable development, poverty alleviation, gender and social equality, and the incorporation of a rights-based approach in natural resource management.

This **"vision guide"** presents an overview of SUMERNET (www.sumernet.org)– its origins and governance structure, background to the network, aims, key research areas, engagement with policy, and outreach products from the last 14 years since the network was established, and the focus in the coming decade under SUMERNET 4 All or S4A (2019-2028).

This is an evolving document that will be revised regularly to reflect the needs and perspectives of the SUMERNET Steering Committee and the partners that form the network.

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

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SUMERNET 4 All 2019-2028

SUMERNET 4 All (S4A) has a mission “to improve the policies and practices in reducing water insecurity by conducting collaborative research, engaging in the policy process, and promoting scientifically sound research and innovation while considering gender and social equality, human rights, conflict sensitivity, environmental integrity and poverty reduction in the Mekong Region.”

S4A will continue working towards sustainable development of the Mekong Region by putting knowledge-based policy engagement at the heart of its activities.

S4A will support the formation of long-term innovative partnerships among research institutions, knowledge users and policymakers at different levels and in different sectors. With the focus on reducing water insecurity for all, the programme will continue its efforts, in conducting regionally-relevant research, capacity building in research and communications, engaging in the policy process, and promoting scientifically sound research and innovation while considering gender and social equality, human rights, conflict sensitivity, environmental integrity and poverty reduction in the Mekong Region, based on current strong partnerships, and fundraising, while seeking to expand its membership to include a diverse mix of institutions concerned with transboundary natural resources management.

The mission of addressing water insecurity is pertinent to the long-term success of SUMERNET 4 All. Water insecurity is defined as “not having the rights or access to sufficient water of adequate quality or being made increasingly vulnerable to unacceptable levels of water-related risks.” Water insecurity has important implications for health and wellbeing, gender equality, as well as livelihoods, income generation and productivity. Water insecurity is multi-scale: spatially, it may be applied to individuals, households, communities, nations and region; temporally, it may refer to just a particular time of year or season with high risks, or it may apply to entire years or decades, in particular under impacts of climate change which are highly uncertain.

A key component 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 gender-responsive sustainable development through workshops and other activities.

We also emphasize collaboration, networking, raising awareness on gender dimensions of sustainable development and knowledge-sharing, connecting partners in different countries through our projects and events, and we work to strengthen research capacity across the region.

Promoting Research
& Innovation

Fundraising

Improve Policies
and Practices

Partnerships

Research

Policy
Engagement

Communications and
Capacity Building

03 Key Themes in SUMERNET 4 All

In response to changing demands and policy debates in the Mekong Region, S4A will focus on three research themes:

1. Water access, rights & allocation in times of scarcity.

Improve understanding of how development policies, projects and practices influence water insecurities that affect urban and rural livelihoods; agricultural water productivities; viability of fisheries and aquaculture; and ecosystem integrity during seasons and years when water is scarcest, in particular under climate change. Based on this understanding and analysis of existing professional norms, discourses, projects and policies, the program will suggest reforms and political strategies likely to improve access, rights and allocation of water for poor, vulnerable or otherwise marginalized social groups of women and men while also helping maintain critical ecosystems in times of scarcity.

2. Governance and management of flood disaster risks.

Improve understanding of the impacts of water-related disasters in urban and rural settings and the effectiveness of risk reduction measures and decisions, on human insecurities and ecosystems under current and plausible future climate conditions. Based on this understanding and analysis of existing policies, disaster management norms and narratives, this program will identify practical ways to more fairly negotiate acceptable distribution of risks and integrate such measures into development strategies, policies and practices. In parallel, the program will offer gender- and socially-responsive practical measures to ensure that the resilience of social groups of women and men to flood disaster risks is strengthened and safeguarded.

3. Transboundary interactions with water systems.

Improve understanding of international transboundary interactions among the water, energy and food production systems including the impacts of hydropower dams and irrigation schemes. Based on this understanding, identify practical ways to negotiate acceptable trade-offs as well as take advantages of synergies which may exist across systems and national boundaries and associated policy domains, that are gender-inclusive and help reduce the water-related insecurities of the poor, vulnerable or other marginalized social groups. Transboundary engagements will include national and regional women/gender organizations in order to raise awareness and respond to gender and social inequality issues related to water, energy and food production systems in hydropower and irrigation development contexts.



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04 Contribution to 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

S4A will mainly contribute to Goal 6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all. Specifically, the S4A mission will contribute to Sustainable Development Indicators: proportion of wastewater safely treated (indicator 6.3.1), proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality (indicator 6.3.2), change in water-use efficiency over time (6.4.1), level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources (6.4.2), degree of integrated water resources management implementation (6.5.1) and proportion of transboundary basin area with an operational arrangement for water cooperation (6.5.2). Nevertheless, the contribution at this level would be mostly indirect and limited due to the research-focused nature of S4A's scope of work.

S4A targets policies and practices in reducing water insecurities at national and sub-national levels through implementation of policy-relevant collaborative research and joint action, along with policy engagement work of SUMERNET partners. Therefore, this intervention will also contribute to Goal 17: Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development, especially indicators: number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development (17.14.1) and number of science and/or technology cooperation agreements and programmes between countries, by type of cooperation (17.6.1).

SUMERNET has been integrating aspects of gender equality into its programme, ensuring equal benefits and opportunities between female and male research and policy partners working under the programme. In S4A, the programme enhances inclusiveness by targeting vulnerable groups such as persons with disability, elderly, ethnic groups, the poor, migrants and farmers or fishers. This will contribute to SDG 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies, specifically indicators on the proportion of population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group (16.7.2), aside from maintaining the support for SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, as earlier mentioned.



SUMERNET uses four core strategies to implement activities to achieve its long-term objectives:



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, including critical gender and social justice 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 mentoring support, meetings, workshops, trainings on data analysis and writing, gender analysis, 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 other 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 in the preparation of 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, which helps ensure that the work is aligned with our boundary partners' priorities and can be effectively integrated into their plans and programmes. Boundary partners also include actors active in promoting a gender policy lens to sustainable development, and thus would include gender/feminist organizations and individuals whose work is committed to building a democratic, inclusive and just Mekong future.

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 credible and policy-relevant. Boundary partners and other stakeholders are also engaged through media, communication and dialogue activities such as policy forums that will consciously integrate gender and social analyses and issues.



Monitoring Emerging Issues in the Mekong Region

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 a degree of flexibility to reorganize around emerging issues. The SUMERNET's structure is highly reflective. The partners can propose new strategic directions for the network to be considered by the SUMERNET Steering Committee. This ensures that SUMERNET's work remains directly relevant and driven by the issues in the region.

06 Activities

With 70 institute members and a variety of strategies for implementation, SUMERNET undertakes a huge range of activities. Some are listed below – but get in touch if you have good ideas or other actions we can collaborate on;

- ✓ **Initiate and implement** cross-border collaborative research projects
- ✓ **Apply** the scientifically proven results and innovations in pilot areas
- ✓ **Implement the activities** related to proposal development and dissemination of research findings to the policy and wider public through small grants
- ✓ **Build capacity** through ongoing skills trainings, and investing resources to develop capacity of researchers in the region by incorporating mentoring support of research project teams
- ✓ **Convene and support** assessments of the state of the knowledge on policy issues in the region
- ✓ **Raise awareness, build capacities and highlight** the need for gender analysis of emerging environment and development trends in the region and subsequently create gender-responsive measures to mitigate adverse effects on socially vulnerable groups of women and men
- ✓ **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 programmes implementation and achievements, to ensure increased network capacity and contributions to independent discourse on regional sustainable development issues.

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07 SUMERNET Governance

SUMERNET Network Member (SNM)

SUMERNET is a network consisting of members contributing to the progress of the network. In SUMERNET 4 All, the programme aims to enhance the participation and influence of network members in the decision-making process within SUMERNET. The 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).

SUMERNET Steering Committee (SSC)

SSC membership is drawn from network members and all Mekong riparian countries will be represented within the SSC. The SSC provides independent scientific advice and strategic oversight of SUMERNET. The SSC focusses on program planning and prioritization, science quality and strategic advice, partnership and impact issues.

SUMERNET Secretariat (SS)

It provides the day-to-day management, coordination and technical support to the network under the direction of the SSC. Hosted by SEI in Asia, it supports SUMERNET through its four components of SUMERNET 4 All :

- 1 Multi-stakeholder engagement
- 2 Research for policy and practices
- 3 Communications
- 4 Effective management, network sustainability, and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E).





08 Background to SUMERNET

SUMERNET is a regional network made up of partners from the Mekong that are committed to the sustainable development, poverty alleviation, gender and social equality and the incorporation of a rights-based approach in natural resource management. During this phase of SUMERNET, the network will engage with other Southeast Asian countries beyond the Mekong Region to promote greater regional collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Launched in 2005, SUMERNET supports policy-relevant research and outreach activities to inform and engage decision-makers, planners and stakeholders. Within this context, it pursues an evolving agenda in response to questions and policy issues that arise in the region. In this phase of SUMERNET we will focus on

Reducing water insecurities for all, in particular, the poor, marginalized and socially vulnerable groups of women and men in the Mekong Region.

SUMERNET Phase 1 covered 2005–2009; Phase 2, 2010–2013; Phase 3, 2014–April 2018; and the current phase, 2019–2028.

SUMERNET's research themes in the past have included ecosystem services for local development, transboundary issues, climate compatible development, sustainable regional economic integration livelihoods and poverty, and sustainable urbanization. Embedded within these thematic areas it concepts of gender equality and mainstreaming.

Origin and Composition

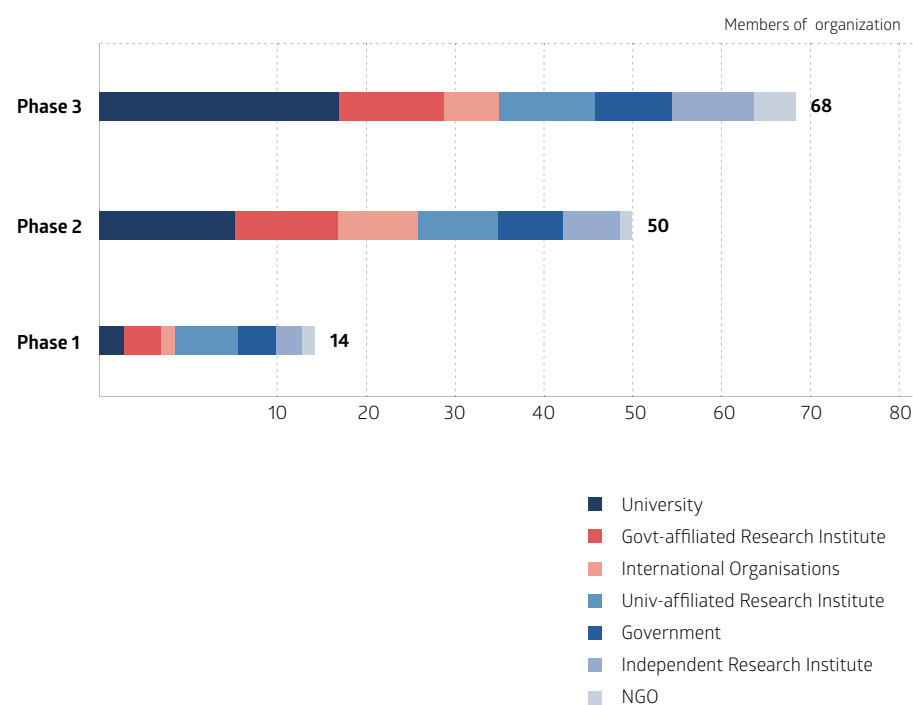
SUMERNET was launched in 2005, supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). Membership has grown from the initial 14 to 68 organizations. SUMERNET partners comprise academics, government line agencies, independent research institutions and international organizations (see Figure 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. 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 sponsored a wealth of policy-relevant research and worked to create an 'enabling environment' for researchers and decision-makers to engage with one another.

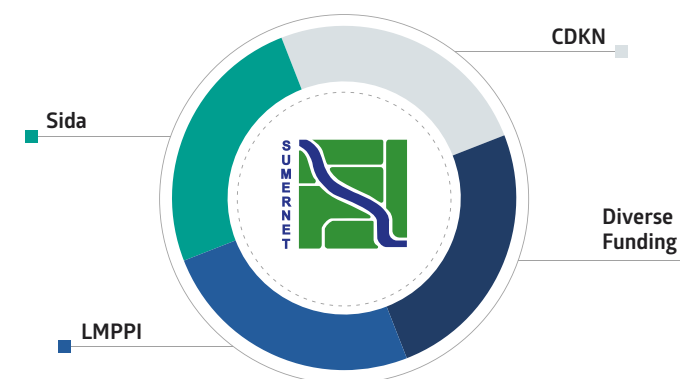
Figure 1. Growth and Diversity of SUMERNET Members



Financing

SUMERNET has received much of its funding from Sida, with additional funding from CDKN, LMPPI and modest contributions from partner countries. In order to continue expanding SUMERNET's reach in the Mekong Region, we are moving towards a

network-centric model that is supported by the region, with more diverse funding from multiple donors and partner contributions, to make SUMERNET a network for the region managed by constituents from the region.



Sharing Research and Influencing Policy

SUMERNET's research findings over the past 10 years have helped in raising awareness of key issues and creating space for policy dialogues and debate. SUMERNET's collaborative studies have influenced decisions makers in Chiang Mai, Thailand and Hue, Vietnam in promoting climate-friendly urban tourism; provided insights for better forest conservation in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand; establishing the river basin organization in the Chindwin Basin, Myanmar; and promoting gender-sensitive understanding of climate risk in the deltas of the Mekong region just to name a few. During Phase 3 of the programme, the research of our partners has influenced a policy on the expansion of floating rice field as a measure for climate change adaptation; wetlands protection through national policy; support to local government decision-making in investing in robust adaptation strategies for local farmers in Northeast Thailand; and an assessment case study in Myanmar. These studies have become a pedagogical reference and continue to be discussed by a wider audience.

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, civil society and the media.

SUMERNET has gained recognition as a credible research network that strengthens the policy process by using evidence and independent discourse. Responding to invitations by the Mekong River Commission Secretariat (MRCS) and ADB GMS Operation Centre, SUMERNET partners played an important role in facilitating the MRC regional consultation on the Pak Beng Hydropower Dam, independent reviews of MRC Council Study and regional knowledge and capacity building supporter for the 5th ADB GMS Environmental Ministerial Meeting in 2018.

SUMERNET Outputs

SUMERNET Phase 3 has produced more than 100 outputs including 31 manuscripts as journal articles and book chapters and five master theses as well as multimedia products. Some examples are listed below.



Journal articles

Nguon, Pheakkdey et al. (2018) Co-production of salient, credible and legitimate environmental knowledge: Cambodia National REDD+ Strategy. *Journal of Sustainability Science*. Springer.

Kusakabe, Kyoko and Myae, Aye Chan (2017) Precarity and Vulnerability Under Expansion of Rubber Plantation in Northern Laos and Northern Shan State. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. Routledge.

Dulce D. Elazegui, Maria Ana T. Quimbo, and Samantha Geraldine G. De los Santos (2016) Adaptation Pathways for Climate-Resilient Development: Lessons from Selected Local Government Units in Central Luzon, Philippines. *Journal of Development Policy Review*. Wiley-Blackwell on behalf of the Overseas Development Institute.

Rahaman, S.A., and Salam, A.P. (2016) Characterization of cold densified rice straw briquettes and the potential use of sawdust as binder. *Fuel Processing Technology*, 158, 9-19. Elsevier.

Maung, Tin Ming and Han, Phyu Phyu (in review). Ensuring National Safeguards Framework for REDD+ in Myanmar. *Journal of Forest Policy and Economics*. Elsevier.



Books and book chapters

Lebel, L., C.T. Hoanh, C. Krittasudthacheewa, R. Daniel (Eds.) (2014) "Climate risks, regional integration and sustainability in the Mekong region." SIRD: Kuala Lumpur.

Krittasudthacheewa, C., H. Navy, B.D. Tinh, S. Voladet (Eds.) (2019) "Development and Climate Change in the Mekong Region: Case studies". SIRD: Kuala Lumpur.

Middleton, C. et al. (2018) Recovering and valuing wetland agro-ecological systems and local knowledge for water security and community resilience in the Mekong region. In 'Addressing the Impacts and Uncertainties in Development and Climate Change in the Mekong Region' Krittasudthacheewa C., Hap, N., Bui, D.T., and Voladet, S. (eds.). SIRD / Gerakbudaya, Selangor.

Nguyen, H. B. et al. (2018) Understanding, Classifying and Mapping Human Use and Natural Resources in Pilot Wetlands of Cambodia and Vietnam to Promote Sustainable Development. In 'Addressing the Impacts and Uncertainties in Development and Climate Change in the Mekong Region' Krittasudthacheewa C., Hap, N., Bui, D.T., and Voladet, S. (eds.). SIRD / Gerakbudaya, Selangor.

Bui, D.T. et al. (2018) Impacts of the east-west economic corridor on local livelihoods and forest resources in the Mekong River region: Case studies of selected forest-dependent villages in Vietnam, Lao PDR and Myanmar. In 'Addressing the Impacts and Uncertainties in Development and Climate Change in the Mekong Region' Krittasudthacheewa C., Hap, N., Bui, D.T., and Voladet, S. (eds.). SIRD / Gerakbudaya, Selangor.

Nguon, P. et al. (2018) Comparative study on national REDD+ strategy in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. In 'Addressing the Impacts and Uncertainties in Development and Climate Change in the Mekong Region' Krittasudthacheewa C., Hap, N., Bui, D.T., and Voladet, S. (eds.). SIRD / Gerakbudaya, Selangor.



Films and multimedia

Six short films on water insecurity in the Mekong Region were produced based on the phase 3 research and policy engagement efforts.





Photo: Rajesh Daniel, SEI

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, financial support, joint publications, and contributing to policy debates and public forums.

Interested parties can get in touch by sending an email to secretariat@sumernet.org.



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