

## The Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network Program Flagship Research Studies

### Call for Applications

The Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network Program (MTT) opens its call for application for its **flagship research studies**. MTT Program will award up to 4 grants during the program's implementation. Funding support will not exceed **AUD 250,000 (~USD 163,000)** per research project that should be completed **within 1.5 years (18 months)** from contract signing or agreed upon start date.

**Launch of the Call: 9 August 2023**

**Application deadline: 1 October 2023, 23:59 (Bangkok/Indochina time)**

Submissions of applications will only be accepted through online submission platform:

<https://sei.submittable.com/submit/6b8333e4-ccc3-42f0-b774-9c61f7d2b209/mekong-thought-leadership-and-think-tanks-network-flagship-study-call-for-applic>

### 1. Background

The Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network Program, supported by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), aims to work with national and regional knowledge-based policy influence organizations (KBPIOs) in the Mekong Region to enhance their capacities to effectively engage stakeholders involved in policy processes. KBPIOs are "organizations that produce and disseminate policy-relevant knowledge, such as think tanks, research institutes, advocacy groups, and academic centers". They differ from other types of policy actors in their degree of independence, specialization, and legitimacy. KBPIOs can impact policymaking, such as conceptual, instrumental, or symbolic.<sup>1</sup> The program will work with KBPIOs to support strengthening towards more equitable policy and practice in relation to the nexus of water security, energy security, as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation. This will be combined with communications based on high-quality research, practical advice generated by the program, and cross-learning among relevant organizations in the region.

The long-term goal of the program is to contribute to improved and more equitable water and energy security, adaptation, and mitigation of climate change in the Mekong Region for the benefit of all, especially marginalized, climate-vulnerable, and at-risk communities and social and gender groups. To do so, the program aims to contribute to more robust and inclusive water, energy, and climate research and policy interfaces, resulting in more effective and equitable policies, which are cross-sectoral, informed by evidence, and are responding to the needs of climate vulnerable communities and socially marginalized or at risk groups, including

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<sup>1</sup> Wellstead, A.M. and M. Howlett, *(Re)Thinking think tanks in the age of policy labs: The rise of knowledge-based policy influence organisations*. Australian Journal of Public Administration, 2022. **81**(1): p. 224-232. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-8500.12528>.

women and people from gender minorities, people living in multidimensional poverty, and people living with disabilities.

**Flagship Research Studies** are one of the key activities of the MTT Program. These studies aim to enhance evidence-based understanding of the Water-Energy-Climate (WEC) nexus, including through the lens of gender and social equity, and motivate the application of this knowledge to practical, robust, and equitable policy solutions to persistent and emerging issues and challenges. Special attention is given to the potential to enhance the practices and strategies of KBPIOs in generating and sharing knowledge as well as supporting collaboration with other stakeholders (see 3. Research Topics). As flagship research in the program, these studies are intended to demonstrate the value of a holistic perspective on water, energy, and climate issues and their interconnections and the likely benefits from new or enhanced knowledge-to-policy processes in the Mekong Countries. As such, the studies are expected to take at least an interdisciplinary approach (drawing on and linking relevant social and technical sciences) and ideally a transdisciplinary approach (interdisciplinary, plus engaging both scientific as well as nonscience forms of knowledge and actors).

## **2. Water-Energy-Climate challenges in the Mekong**

Recent studies indicate that WEC nexus governance in the Mekong countries has been fragmented and/or siloed, reactive, and non-inclusive. These studies found that coordination among ministries related to WEC was limited to inter-ministerial bodies, and integrated development plans were ineffective at guiding project design or operation decisions in the presence of bureaucratic competition. Anticipation of cross-sectoral concerns was rare, despite the scope to identify them early in feasibility studies and assessment activities; instead, they were only acknowledged after public pressure. The inclusion of the needs of climate-vulnerable communities, especially of already marginalized gender and social groups, was limited, despite poverty alleviation and other social benefits being a significant element in project justification narratives. Attribution of responsibility was difficult as many key decisions took place behind closed doors while project information was withheld, raising further governance issues of transparency and accountability. Structural complexity in the nexus links made addressing governance problems even more challenging.

The demands of water and energy for socioeconomic development are increasing and competition among the sectors nationally and between Mekong countries is rising. There are numerous development challenges facing the Mekong Region influenced by climate change and the pandemic, including national and global food security associated with sea level rise in mega-deltas of Asia, triggering new poverty traps and emerging hotspots of hunger to potential conflicts over transboundary water resources. These changes have been at the expense of natural resources and local communities with growing levels of inequality.

Presently, water resources in the Mekong are used to produce energy, supply water for food production, and support livelihoods. However, water insecurity in the Mekong has significant implications for national and regional development. This is evident through changed river flows and fluctuations associated with the construction and operation of large water storage and diversion infrastructure for hydropower and irrigation; increased frequencies of droughts and changing flood patterns due in part to climate change; and the over-exploitation of

natural resources and habitat destruction. These have contributed to a decline in the functionality of aquatic ecosystems including natural wetlands and a decline in the productivity of capture fisheries which are important for the nutrition and the livelihoods of people throughout the region.

Rapid changes in the growth and affordability of the off-grid renewable energy production systems, such as solar, represent opportunities for more accessible, affordable energy for the poorest, marginalized, and climate-vulnerable people that have yet to benefit from access to energy. Although hydropower, fossil energy, and gas are stranded assets on centralized energy production systems in the Mekong countries. These systems are also facing challenges from climate change impacts and the availability of water resources. Managing these competing elements and resources within the energy sector in an equitable way will require innovative policies and governance systems.

There is strong evidence that water and energy development and climate change (as well as adaptation and mitigation policies and programs) have differentiated impacts on people of different genders and social groups. These are mediated by pre-existing unequal gender and social power relations as well as by the degree to which policies and program (and project) design and implementation take these differences into account these relations, pre-existing gender and social barriers, and differentiated needs. The outcomes—and justice relating to energy, water and climate—are also directly affected by inclusion and equity (or the lack of) in decision-making processes. Policymakers tend to be largely men in these sectors in the Mekong region. Women tend to be, directly or indirectly, excluded from decision-making due to gender-related norms and barriers, especially women from already marginalized social groups such as ethnic minorities, Indigenous groups, or women living with disabilities. As such, mainstreaming Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) into the Water-Energy-Climate policies and planning processes in the Mekong Countries at national and regional levels is also a key challenge to lead to more equitable and sustainable GEDSI outcomes in the region.

### **3. Research Topics:**

To address the above interconnected, socio-technical-policy WEC challenges in the Mekong region, the applicant shall design a research study and engagement activities that address one of the following research topics:

- Governing **long-term climate change adaptation measures** (e.g., managed coastal retreat in response to sea level rise) and their implications for efforts to equitably enhance climate resilience of water and energy systems for all, especially climate-vulnerable communities and socially marginalized or at-risk groups.
- Advancing **technologies**, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), remote sensing, and Internet of Things (IoT) to equitably improve warning and notification systems for unusual water flows, floods, shortages, and drought for climate-vulnerable communities and socially marginalized or at-risk groups.
- Comparison of infrastructure and nature-based **water storage management options** for multiple purposes (water supply, energy production, fisheries, ecotourism, etc.) in terms of potential to enhance equitable benefit sharing and reduce climate risks.

- **Challenges and successes to date in GEDSI mainstreaming** into WEC nexus policies and related coordination mechanisms, leading to identify actionable lessons for more inclusive and equitable for planning and management.
- Enhancing **renewable energy transitions** for the poorest, marginalized, and climate-vulnerable social and gender groups, including women and people living with disabilities, while reducing water insecurity in a changing climate.
- Enhancing the **effectiveness of civil society KBPIOs** in generating evidence, engaging with and influencing policy, and addressing challenges arising from WEC and their interlinkages, including equity.
- Other topics that clearly contribute to addressing key knowledge and policy gaps related to water, energy, climate and equity challenges may be proposed with strong justification.

The target users of the Flagship Research Studies include but are not limited to:

- Inter-government/regional organizations i.e., Mekong River Commission (MRC), Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC), Asian Development Bank (ADB), etc.
- Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and related Departments.
- Ministry of Energy and related Departments.
- Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology and related Departments.
- Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries and related Departments.
- Ministry of Interior and related Departments.
- Provincial local governments.
- Knowledge-based policy influence organizations.
- Affected vulnerable communities and organizations representing their interests.
- Other target users may be proposed with justifications.

#### **4. Expected outputs:**

- Report on Flagship Research Study.
- At least one peer review paper from Flagship Research Study.
- Analytical/decision support tools.
- Practical solutions/frameworks uptake for policy or guidelines on policy influences.
- At least three communication products.

#### **5. Detail of this call:**

The format of applications emphasizes a clear and concise research framework that presents a logical summation of the rigorous research design, methodology, and outputs based on the research question and context being proposed. The approach to – and the budget and capacities – ensuring that a GEDSI lens is applied from design to final outputs must be clearly articulated.

The project must involve policymakers, KBPIOs, practitioners, and socially marginalized people in the Mekong Region for inclusive knowledge co-production processes.

#### **6. Successful applications will have to fulfill the following aspects:**

- Inform specific policy/planning processes in two or more Mekong countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand or Vietnam) and/or at the regional (inter-governmental) level.
- Address issues of significant interest to all countries in the Mekong Region.
- Flagship Research Study will be GEDSI-responsive, where an intersectional gender equality, social, and disability inclusion lens is applied through whole-of-project - from the design stage to completion.
- Address the climate resilience of water or energy systems or other more specific interactions in the water-energy-climate nexus.
- Deliver high-quality research outputs.
- Deliver policy recommendations for practical solutions.
- Led by or work directly with KBPIOs using knowledge of co-production processes.
- Direct or indirect beneficiaries of the study include the socially marginalized and at-risk communities.
- Can be completed within 1.5 years after the start of the project (or by July 2025, whichever is earlier).

Gender-balanced project team composition, including in the leadership aspects (project lead and co-lead) and project members will be advantaged.

The project team may wish to host early to mid-level career professionals as the MTT fellow(s) as part of the flagship study team. More details regarding the fellow grants will be announced through a separate call.

## 7. Who can apply?

Consortium of KBPIOs and experts whose works focus on the Mekong Region can apply to this call for applications.

The project team should be gender-balanced in its composition, including in the leadership aspects. Social diversity is strongly encouraged, including the inclusion of people who identify as being from social or gender minorities and those living with disabilities. In line with the nexus nature of the WEC challenges and thus the interdisciplinary requirements of the design, disciplinary diversity in the team is required.

### 7.1 Lead Applicant:

Lead Applicant must be a regional or national KBPIO based in one of four Mekong countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand or Vietnam)

The Lead Applicant needs to demonstrate institutional and/or regional capacity and experience necessary to direct the proposed research study and to actively lead the consortium to ensure effective project implementation through to completion.

The Lead Applicant that provides opportunities for young professionals, people with disabilities, and gender-diverse persons within its organization to contribute to the research and policy engagement work and/or develop their capacities is encouraged to apply.

## 7.2 Consortium Member:

Consortium Member is an individual expert or KBPIO based within or outside Mekong Region.

Consortium Member individual or organization needs to demonstrate capacity in the topics/theme of the proposed research study and/or in engagement with relevant policy processes identified by the research study.

Consortium Members that work with young professionals, people with disabilities, and gender-diverse persons are encouraged to apply.

## 8. Funding and duration:

Funding support will not exceed **AUD 250,000 (~USD 163,000)** per research project and be completed within 1.5 years.

## 9. Application submission:

Applications need to be submitted through online application submission platform available at this link: <https://sei.submittable.com/submit/6b8333e4-ccc3-42f0-b774-9c61f7d2b209/mekong-thought-leadership-and-think-tanks-network-flagship-study-call-for-apply>. Only applications that are submitted through this online platform will be considered.

The following documents will be required to be uploaded to the submission platform:

- **Completed Application Form – please download the template [at this link](#).**
- **CVs of Lead Applicant representative (Project Leader)**
- **CVs of individual key experts/persons from Consortium Members**
- **Letter of support from target users of this research or boundary partners, while not compulsory, will certainly be an advantage.**

## 10. Important Dates:

- **Launch of the Call for Applications** : 9 August 2023
- **Deadline for Submission of Applications** : 1 October 2023
- **Screening and Review of Applications** : 2 October–21 October 2023
- **Endorsement by Program SC and Decision** : 25–27 October 2023
- **Notification for short-listing** : 31 October–30 November 2023
- **Grant awarding confirmation** : by 30 November 2023
- **Administrative and contracting process** : 31 October–31 December 2023
- **Start of the project** : 1 January 2024

**Note:** Above dates may be adjusted as necessary. The MTT program team may readvertise the call if not all grants can be awarded in the first round.

## 11. Contact:

For inquiries, please contact: **Mr. Boripat Lebel**, Unit for Social and Environmental Research (USER), Thailand. Email: [boripat@sea-user.org](mailto:boripat@sea-user.org).