

Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Final Evaluation of Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network Program

OVERVIEW	
Start date	<i>May 2026 (tentative)</i>
Duration	<i>05/26 – 09/26</i>
How to apply:	Interested service providers or private companies are invited to submit expressions of interest providing the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A proposal outlining an indicative methodology and timeline to complete the consultancy (2 pages); 2. A high-level budget indicating fixed and variable costs, including local enumerators and interpretation costs during field data collection (1 page); 3. A brief response against the selection criteria as set out in the ‘Requirements’ (2 pages); 4. Brief CV of all team members relevant to the ToR to be involved in the consultancy; and 5. Examples of similar or relevant work undertaken to illustrate analytical and writing skills.
Application deadline	<i>15 April 2026, 23:59 (GMT+7)</i>
Assignment location:	Flexible location, and required field travel to Mekong countries (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand) where possible, for data collection.

1. Purpose of the contract

Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) is procuring independent external evaluator(s) to conduct an evaluation of the Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network (MTT) Program.

The evaluation will generate credible evidence, which will assess the program performance and impact, and highlight learning to guide ongoing efforts to support robust and inclusive water, energy, and climate (WEC) research–policy interfaces and development in the Mekong region. The contract aims on:

- Assessing the MTT program, implemented across Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, against the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, impact, sustainability, and coherence¹, and in alignment with the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Framework and DFAT evaluation standards. This includes:
 - Assessing the extent to which the MTT program contributes to the End-of-Program Outcome (EOPO) and Intermediate Outcomes (IOs),
 - Evaluating the integration and outcomes of Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) principles vis-à-vis the MTT GEDSI Strategy,
 - Identifying systemic and institutional outcomes linked to the robust and inclusive WEC policies in Mekong subregion (robustness refers to the strength, effectiveness, and resilience of the interactions and processes through which research evidence informs policymaking, and how policies, in turn, shape research agendas. Inclusiveness in the research-policy interface refers to the extent to

¹ More information about the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria: www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/development-co-operation-evaluation-and-effectiveness/evaluation-criteria.html

which diverse voices, perspectives, and stakeholders are actively involved in the process of connecting research to policy and vice versa).

- Identifying lessons learned, good practices, and provide actionable recommendations for replicable models or investment and program design.

Illustrative evaluation questions which correspond to these purposes are listed under 5. Evaluation Focus. The consultant(s) is expected to collaborate with the evaluation management team (see 4. Stakeholder Involvement and Management of Consultancy) on further refinements deemed fit with the purposes, resources, and timeframe of this Final Evaluation.

The evaluation will provide a comprehensive assessment of achievements under the MTT program, offering clear insights into what worked well, where challenges emerged, and how outcomes varied across contexts. The evaluation report will be published on the DFAT website, in line with the Development Evaluation Policy.

Background and context

The Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network (MTT) Program is an AUD 6.35 million initiative funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) Mekong-Australia Partnership – Water, Energy, and Climate (MAPWEC) Program, and implemented by Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI).

The Mekong-Australia Partnership (MAP) was announced on 14 November 2020 as part of a broader package of economic, development and security measures to support Southeast Asia's recovery from COVID-19. MAP is supporting economic integration and development in the Mekong subregion. The long-term objective of MAP is to foster a stronger Mekong subregion that would shore up ASEAN unity and support an open, prosperous Indo-Pacific region. In line with *Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response (2020)*, MAP augments existing and provides new bilateral and regional aid programming. As one of six pillars underpinning MAP, the Environmental Resilience pillar (known as MAP Water, Energy, Climate (MAP-WEC)) recognises that environmental resilience¹ is complex. MAP-WEC is focused on water, energy and climate priorities of Mekong countries – recognising the strong linkages between these themes – in ways where Australia can provide recognised expertise in policy and practice. The overarching goal of MAP-WEC is: Environmental resilience built in the Mekong subregion by improving water security, enhancing access to affordable and clean energy, and taking action to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

In alignment with the MAP-WEC, MTT aims to strengthen water, energy, and climate research–policy interfaces across the Mekong region to ensure they are more robust, inclusive, and able to inform cross sectoral and equitable policies that respond to the needs of socially marginalised groups. To achieve this, the program enhances the role and effectiveness of Knowledge Based Policy Influence Organisations (KBPIOs), addressing persistent constraints on policy uptake such as limitations in research design, communication approaches, and policymakers' willingness to use evidence. By strengthening regional networking and thought leadership, MTT supports KBPIOs to engage more effectively in policy processes and contribute to more evidence informed decision-making. Central to its approach is the establishment of a regional network comprising 41 KBPIOs from four Mekong countries and the commissioning 11 flagship and rapid response projects targeting WEC nexus challenges, with an emphasis on Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI). The program also supports early- to mid-career researchers (fellows) through awarded fellowship grants, providing opportunities to engage in technical research and accessing to capacity building activities.

The evolution of MTT is as follows:

- **Original contract:** June 2022 – October 2025 (AUD 5 million)
- **Amendment 1 (Dec 2022):** Budget increased to AUD 5.35 million, supported 12 additional female researchers and funded a Mekong regional climate dialogue in 2023.

- **Amendment 2 (Jun 2024):** Budget increased to AUD 6.35 million, supported the ongoing research and fellowship components and organised regional policy dialogues in 2024.
- **Amendment 3 (Aug 2025):** No-cost extension (NCE) to October 2026 (total AUD 6.35 million), to continue undertaking the Activity and implementing additional milestones for the extended term considering the initial delay in the first year of implementation. This NCE is part of the recommendations from the Mid-Term Evaluation in 2024.

The End-of-Program Outcome (EOPO) of the program is: ***water, energy and climate research and policy interfaces are robust and more inclusive, resulting in more effective and equitable policies, which are cross-sectoral, informed by evidence, and are responding to the needs of socially marginalised groups.***

To achieve its overarching aims, the program is addressing the following **Intermediate Outcomes (IOs)**:

- **IO1:** National and regional KBPIOs effectively engaging with sub-national, national and regional policy processes on water and energy security and climate change mitigation and adaptation strengthened.
- **IO2:** Role and capabilities of national and regional KBPIOs in inclusive knowledge co-production processes² strengthened.
- **IO3.1:** Enhanced capacity for networking of national and regional KBPIOs and build capacity of young professionals to deliver research, communicate, and engage with policy processes.
- **IO3.2:** Capacity of entry- and mid-career professionals in delivering inclusive research and communicating and engaging with policy processes enhanced.

And is implemented through key five approaches that include:

- **Component 1:** Development of home-grown regional network/alliance of KBPIOs.
- **Component 2:** Enhancing climate resilience of water and energy systems through policy research and collaboration among policy influencing organisations (PIOs).
- **Component 3:** Inclusive engagement with policy, practice and the public beyond dialogues for effective change.
- **Component 4:** Professional development of agents of change.
- **Component 5:** Effective project management Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) for long-term sustainability.

The Mid-Term Evaluation for MTT was conducted in 2024. One of the recommendations was the revision of the MEL Framework to restructure indicators that represent the commitment to the policy interfaces being robust and inclusive, including responsive to GEDSI principles. Revision of the MEL Framework was approved by DFAT in August 2025 and replaces the original version approved in 2023. It is used in 2025 Annual Reporting onwards.

Intended Users

The results of the evaluation will be used by intended users below:

3.1 Primary Users

- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Australian Embassy in Thailand (Program Donor). Primary users from DFAT include, but are not limited to, Senior Executives, Desk Officers, Senior Managers, and Program Managers
- MTT Program Steering Committee (PSC) & Secretariat Members

² According to the MTT Guideline on Knowledge Co-production, inclusive knowledge co-production is defined as “a collaborative process through which knowledge is generated and applied by multiple actors, including researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and communities, who share power, responsibility, and decision-making throughout. It is not simply a process of consultation or education, but a deliberate effort to shape purpose, process, and outcomes together. This approach offers a complementary approach to traditional research and development models, in an effort to address the risk of isolation from the lived realities, priorities, and expertise of those most affected”

- SEI (Asia Centre and Global Management Team)

3.2 Secondary Users

- The Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET)³ and other relevant programs and network partners.
- Other development partners engaged in research-for-development and regional cooperation
- Current and potential funders of a science to policy and practice network
- Research/academic institutions and civil society organisations (CSOs) in the region (including past grantees)
- Government authorities in Mekong region, in particularly decision-makers on WEC issues in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

2. Stakeholder involvement & Management of Consultancy

- The MTT Program Secretariat at SEI Asia will administer the evaluation with the guidance of DFAT, and in collaboration with other stakeholders including the Program Steering Committee (PSC), MTT subgrantees, and partners.
- Throughout the processes of the evaluation, the Program Secretariat will work closely with the selected evaluator(s), providing day-to-day assistance with providing introductory letters and contacts of partners, co-planning the field visits, and advising on logistical arrangements, as needed.
- **ToR development:** Drafted by the MTT Program Secretariat, with DFAT and PSC providing input and approval.
- **Procurement:** MTT Program Secretariat will recruit and contract an independent evaluation firm or team in line with SEI procurement rules.
- **Quality assurance:** DFAT, PSC, and SEI will provide comments on the draft ToR and draft reports.
- **Role of MTT Program Secretariat:** Manage overall evaluation processes from the start until completion. It will also facilitate access to documentation and stakeholders; provide factual clarification; prepare a management response to findings and recommendations.

3. Evaluation Focus

The main reference for the FE is the revised MTT Program MEL Plan which was approved on 9 August 2025. This revision of the MEL Framework was part of the recommendations of the Mid-term Evaluation exercise for MTT to restructure the indicators to represent the commitment to the policy interfaces being robust and inclusive, including responsive to GEDSI principles. This revised MEL Framework has been used in the 2025 Annual Reporting onwards. The original MEL Plan and Framework approved in 2023 is no longer valid but could be reviewed as an additional background on the adaptation of the MEL Framework over the course of the program.

The following is the list of evaluation questions at the program-level and subgrant levels arranged by the criteria stated under the *1. Purpose of the contract*. Nevertheless, these questions should be regarded as indicative and initial questions, and follow-up questions could be further developed by the evaluator in collaboration with the evaluation management during the inception phase to draw more comprehensive conclusions based on the needs of the FE.

³ The Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET), established in 2005, is supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and is complemented by MTT program through the support of DFAT since 2022. MTT and SUMERNET are distinct but deeply interlinked programs operating in the same regional ecosystem. Both share a thematic area in the Mekong region, making their collaboration a natural and strategic fit. The launch of SUMERNET PLUS (5th phase) in July 2025 has given this complementarity a concrete programmatic future. MTT's results have directly contributed to SUMERNET PLUS's activities and granting, and SUMERNET PLUS has formally adopted MTT's programmatic strategy into its own program policy, representing knowledge transfer and institutional continuity that extends well beyond the end of MTT's funding cycle.

Criteria	Evaluation Questions
<p>Effectiveness:</p>	<p><i>To what extent has the MTT program met its end-of-program outcome and objectives?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent has the MTT program contributed to robust and inclusive water, energy, and climate (WEC) research-policy interfaces through its knowledge products and engagement activities, including shaping and influencing cross-sectoral, evidence-informed policies and influencing specific policy dialogues or decisions, while ensuring responsiveness to the needs of marginalised communities? • To what extent has the MTT program strengthened the capacities of national and regional KBPIOs, including through (a) inclusive knowledge co-production via cross-sectoral and multi-location stakeholder engagement, (b) increased engagement in policy processes, and (c) the integration of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI)? • To what extent has the MTT program enhanced networking capacities among national and regional Knowledge Based Policy Intermediary Organisations (KBPIOs) and strengthened the capacities of early- and mid-career professionals to conduct research, communicate evidence, and engage effectively with policy processes? • To what extent were the program supported localisation and local ownership?
<p>Efficiency:</p>	<p><i>To what extent has the program operated efficiently, considering principles of value for money (VfM)?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was the resource effectively and adequately allocated to contribute achievement of program target indicators and the expected outcomes, including the GEDSI outcome? • What were challenges of resource allocation that impacted the efficiency of project implementation? How has the current modality been efficient for the program and adoption of adaptive management? • To what extent has the program modality demonstrated efficiency in the design and implementation of key activities, including flagship studies, rapid response study grants, fellowships, and media–research collaboration fellowship programs? • To what extent did the program respond to Mid Term Evaluation (MTE) findings, including the implementation of recommendations, and how did this response inform adaptive management, program improvements, and the delivery of results? • To what extent has the MTT program effectively managed operational challenges, including risk management and safeguarding measures, where relevant?

Criteria	Evaluation Questions
Relevance:	<p><i>To what extent were MTT activities aligned with DFAT, national governments, and partners' WEC priorities?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent has the MTT activities identified and addressed the region's emerging WEC issues? • How appropriate and suitable were the selected interventions (i.e., research studies grants, knowledge co-production, capacity building, and policy engagement activities) in addressing WEC issues in the region, given the context? • To what extent has MTT met the needs of KBPIOs, partners and stakeholders, and how appropriate were the relationships among them? • To what extent has MTT complemented with SUMERNET?
Impact:	<p><i>To what extent has the Program contributed 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 the socially marginalised and at-risk communities?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent have the program and its grants led or contributed to more effective and equitable policies that are cross-sectoral, evidence-informed, and responsive to the needs of socially marginalised and at-risk communities? • To what extent has the program strengthened the capacities of national and regional KBPIOs to engage in knowledge co-production and policy processes across sectors and locations? • To what extent has the program enhanced the capacities of entry- and mid-career professionals and networking among KBPIOs, and what outcomes have resulted from their enhanced capacities?
Sustainability:	<p><i>To what extent has the program planned for and built the potential or capacity to sustain results beyond the program cycle?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent has the program supported the design, development, and sustainability of the regional KBPIOs network/alliance, and strengthened the institutional capacities of KBPIOs? • To what extent are the results of the activities and networks likely to be sustained or scaled beyond the program period? • How effectively have knowledge and insights generated by the program been documented, shared, and made accessible for future use by KBPIOs, partners, and donors? • To what extent were the program supported localisation and strengthened ownership and home-grown? • What lessons and recommendations from the program can inform the design and delivery of future investments addressing water, energy, and climate policy in the Mekong region?

Criteria	Evaluation Questions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent did the program identify and pursue additional funding opportunities and foster partnerships or cooperation with other relevant initiatives to support sustainability?
Coherence:	<p><i>How did the program align and interact with other interventions at country and regional levels, as well as with the policies, priorities, and governance structures of relevant actors, stakeholders, and donors?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How were the MTT alliance and SEI positioned within the regional landscape, including their complementarity with other transboundary initiatives and the management of potential trade-offs across WEC spaces? How did MTT subgrants complement national and sub-national initiatives, policies, and actors, and what synergies or trade-offs have emerged in relation to WEC priorities at the country level?
Cross-Cutting/Mainstreaming Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI):	<p><i>To what extent has the program integrated and advanced gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) across its knowledge co-production, capacity building, and policy engagement activities — and what have been the outcomes of that integration for marginalised and at-risk communities?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent has the program integrated GEDSI principles within KBPIOs' research and knowledge co-production processes? How efficient and appropriate was the program's GEDSI responsiveness in policy engagement, and to what extent have program outputs contributed to more equitable policy outcomes? To what extent has the program strengthened the capacity of KBPIOs and professionals to apply GEDSI principles beyond the program cycle?

4. Methodology

At the inception phase, the evaluator(s) shall develop and propose a more detailed evaluation matrix and methodologies that correspond to the indicators and evaluation questions. MTT requires a participatory approach and utilises a mix of primary and secondary data. The following are indicative sources and methodologies that can be considered for the review.

- **Review of documentation** (see below list of documents, non-exhaustive)
 - 1) MTT grant agreement signed between DFAT and SEI
 - 2) MTT Program Proposal
 - 3) MTT Program Design Document
 - 4) MTT Program MEL Plan (revision approved on 9 August 2025)
 - 5) MTT Progress Report between 2022-2026
 - 6) Mid Term Evaluation (MTE) Report
 - 7) Most Significant Stories
 - 8) Proposals and reports of MTT Flagship Studies, Rapid Response projects, and fellowships grants
 - 9) Agreements with key partners and advisors, including supporting documents/annexes

- 10) List of Program Secretariat members and list of MTT Alliance members
- 11) Minutes and proceedings of meetings
- 12) Internal reports, strategies, and syntheses produced by the different components.
- 13) GEDSI documents: MTT GEDSI Strategy, GEDSI Work Plan, Thematic GEDSI Analyses, etc

- **Fieldwork for data collection and verification.** This may include key informant interviews, focus group discussion, site visits, and online surveys.
- Key informant interviews are expected to include, but not be limited to donors, (DFAT, Australian Embassy in Thailand), MTT Program Secretariat (hosted at SEI Asia), Program Steering Committee Members, key consortium partners, some subgrantees (i.e. flagship study grants, rapid response grants and fellowship grants), alliance members, advisors, fellows. As applicable and feasible, consultations with end-beneficiaries and community-based stakeholders especially marginalised groups are expected.
 - Translation needs should be planned for field visit and consultations with local stakeholders.
- **Case-based analyses against Progress Markers:** review of collected case-based Most Significant Change Stories (MSC) and harvesting and mapping additional country-specific and regional MSC Stories against the EOPOs in the MTT Progress Markers.

5. Profile and Qualifications of Evaluator(s)

Expected qualifications:

- 1) Consultant(s) with professional competencies in fields related to environmental sustainability, gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI), preferably within the sectors of water, energy, and climate change;
- 2) At least 15 years of relevant experience of evaluating research to influence policy projects in Southeast Asia, especially in the Mekong region;
- 3) Substantive experience in result-based project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, including project's risk management and safeguards, "Value for Money" (VfM) analysis in the development context;
- 4) Excellent English writing communication and analytical skills, including GEDSI analysis skills. The consultant(s) must be equipped with own computing equipment;
- 5) Demonstrate ability to succinctly distil critical issues and draw forward-looking conclusions and recommendations; and
- 6) Willingness to travel within the region (especially in the Mekong Region).

Preferrable:

- 1) Substantive experience in reviewing and evaluating similar projects, preferably those involving DFAT, international development agencies, other major donors;
- 2) Highly knowledgeable of participatory monitoring and evaluation processes; and
- 3) Familiarity with the issues, challenges and priorities of the developing countries and/or countries of Mekong region in the area of sustainable development and policy engagement, related to the sectors of Water, Energy and Climate Change adaptation and mitigation.

6. Activities, schedule, and outputs

The final evaluation of MTT Program should be commenced in May 2026 and be completed by August 2026. The exact timeline for different activities could be discussed and agreed upon during contract negotiation.

Activities	Deliverables	Indicative timeline	Estimated working days for consultant	People involved
1. A verbal briefing: A verbal briefing on key issues and priority information is organised to ensure mutual understanding and expectations.	Summary of agreed key priorities	1 May 26	1	DFAT, SEI
2. Review of key documents	N/A	1 st week of May	2	Evaluation consultant(s)
3. Scope confirmation or negotiation	Concept note of evaluation plan	2 nd Week of May	N/A	DFAT, SEI
4. Develop an Evaluation plan: The inception report will include the details of the evaluation process, tools to be used for data collection, proposed sampling frame for data collection (FGD and KII), methodologies including the evaluation matrix, analysis and reporting process and field data collection plan.	An evaluation plan	Mid-May	2	Evaluation consultant(s)
5. Review an evaluation plan	Feedback provided	3 rd and 4 th week of May	N/A	DFAT (5 days), SEI (1 day for consolidation)
6. Data collection and field visits (including 1 day of in-person participation and data collection at the MTT Final Impact Workshop)	N/A	June 2026	10	Evaluation consultant(s)
7. Develop first draft report	1 st Draft of Evaluation Report	4 th week of June	3	Evaluation consultant(s)
8. Presentation of preliminary findings + verbal feedback	Presentation slide deck	1 st week of July	1	DFAT, SEI, PSC
9. Review first draft report	N/A	2 nd week of July	N/A	DFAT (5 days), SEI (5 days)
10. Develop second draft based on the verbal and written comments	2 nd Draft of Evaluation Report	4 th week of July	2	Evaluation consultant(s)
11. Review second draft report	N/A	1 st week of August	N/A	DFAT (5 days), SEI (5 days)
12. Develop (3 rd) final draft report based on comments	Final draft of evaluation report	Mid-August 2026	2	Evaluation consultant(s)
13. Presentation of evaluation findings & recommendations (in-person)	Presentation slide deck	3 rd week of August	1	DFAT, SEI, PSC, valuation consultant(s)
14. Review (3 rd) final draft report	N/A	3 rd and 4 th week of August	N/A	DFAT (5 days), SEI (5 days)
15. Finalisation of the FE report based on final comments from DFAT and MTT Program Secretariat	Final FE Report	Early September	1	Remark: DFAT will take time to review the final report 1-2 months before it can be published.

Total working days for consultant(s): 25 days

7. Ethical Considerations

The evaluation will comply with DFAT and SEI's ethical standards, data protection requirements, and principles of confidentiality and informed consent.

8. Budget and payment schedule

The total budget of the FE will not exceed **AUD 30,000**, including personnel costs, travel/site visit cost (if any), translation and related accessibility costs, and any applicable taxes.

9. Reporting format

The contents of the report shall:

- Reflect the purpose, intended users, focus of evaluation, and interest to the MTT Program stakeholders (Section 1, 3, 4 and 5).
- Number of pages not exceeding 30 pages, including an Executive Summary not exceeding 2 pages.

** Report template will be provided as reference for final product.*