

The Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network Program Rapid Response Grants

Call for Applications

The Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network Program (MTT) opens its call for applications for its **Rapid Response Grants**. MTT Program will award up to seven grants during the program's implementation. Funding support will not exceed **AUD 50,000 (~USD 33,000)** per rapid response project that should be completed **within one year** (12 months) from contract signing or agreed upon start date.

Launch of the Call: 9 August 2023

Application deadline: 17 September 2023, 23:59 (Bangkok/Indochina time)

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

<https://sei.submittable.com/submit/848bcab0-52e2-45d7-914c-5f80a111f34d/mekong-thought-leadership-and-think-tanks-network-rapid-response-project-call-fo>

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 subregion 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.¹ In particular, the program will work with KBPIOs to support strengthening policy and practice in relation to equitable 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 the marginalized, vulnerable, and at-risk communities and social and gender groups. To do so, the program aims to contribute to more robust and more 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.

¹ 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>.

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

Rapid Response Grants are one of the key knowledge-generating activities of the MTT Program. These flexible grants support focused interdisciplinary research projects that seek practical solutions to urgent or emerging challenges in the water-energy-climate nexus. The rapid response grants are targeted to improve understanding of how climate resilience of specific water and energy systems, equity, and their interlinkages may be enhanced. The Rapid Response Grants operationalize this through reinterpreting, integrating, sharing, and using existing policy-relevant research to engage governments, the public, and stakeholders, in practical solutions.

2. Water-Energy-Climate challenges in the Mekong

Recent studies indicate that Water-Energy-Climate (WEC) nexus governance in the Mekong countries has been fragmented or siloed, reactive, and/or exclusionary. 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 people from already marginalized gender and social groups, was limited, despite poverty alleviation and other social benefits were 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 socio-economic 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. 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 individualistic and off-grid renewable energy production systems such as solar support opportunities in providing affordable energy to the poorest, marginalized, and vulnerable 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 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. Areas of Rapid Response

To address the above interconnected, socio-technical-policy WEC challenges in the Mekong region, the applicant shall select one of the following rapid response areas:

1. Strengthening policy frameworks to address Water-Energy-Climate challenges more equitably and effectively at national or local scales.
2. Enhancing synergies between water and/or energy security in remote rural areas to cope with the impacts of climate change equitably and effectively.
3. Improving the equity and efficiency of integrated water and energy systems through technical and social innovations.
4. Decentralizing renewable electricity for equitably supply power and reduce climate change and water insecurity risks.
5. Building resilience and adaptive capacity of the poorest, marginalized, and climate-vulnerable groups to manage water and energy systems at national or local scales.
6. Equitably building ecosystem resilience and/or sustainable fisheries and livelihoods to deal with the impacts of climate change, water, and energy infrastructure development.

7. Enabling more inclusive and responsive disaster risk reduction i.e., flood, drought, landslide, and riverbank erosion through an equity-oriented, WEC nexus approach.
8. Shifting from token to impactful GEDSI in water and/or energy transitions.
9. Other areas that clearly contribute to address water, energy, climate and equity challenges may be proposed with strong justification.

The target users of the rapid response projects include but are not limited to.

- Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and related Departments.
- Ministry of Energy and related Departments.
- Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology and related Department.
- Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries and related Departments
- Ministry of Interior and related Department.
- Provincial local governments.
- Knowledge-based policy influence organizations.
- Climate-vulnerable communities, and marginalized social and gender groups, and organizations representing their interests – including civil society networks, women’s associations, and smallholder farmer and fisher networks.
- Other target users may be proposed with justifications.

4. Expected outputs:

- Report on Rapid Response grant project.
- Practical solutions to support the needs of target users.
- At least two communication products.

5. Detail of this call:

The format of applications emphasizes a clear and concise implementation framework that presents a logical summation of the project design, methodology, and outputs based on the project’s targeted objectives and context being proposed. The project must involve policymakers and planners, 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:

- Target to inform specific policy/planning processes directly at the national level in one of the Mekong countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand or Vietnam).
- Address the climate resilience of water or energy systems or other more specific interactions in the water-energy-climate nexus.
- Deliver policy recommendations for practical solutions.

- Rapid response will be GEDSI-responsive, where an intersectional gender equality, social, and disability inclusion lens is applied through whole-of-project - from the design.
- Work directly with KBPIOs using knowledge of co-production processes.
- Direct or indirect beneficiaries of the project include the socially marginalized and at-risk communities.
- Can be completed within 1 year (by December 2024).
- 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 Project Lead Applicant:

Lead Applicant is 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 capacity and experience necessary to direct the proposed rapid response project and to actively lead the consortium to ensure rapid response 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 Project 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 rapid response project and/or in engagement with relevant national/local policy processes identified by the project.

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 50,000 (~USD 33,000)** per project and can be completed within one year after the start of the project (or by December 2024, whichever is earlier)

9. Application submission:

Applications need to be submitted through the online application submission platform available at this link: <https://sei.submittable.com/submit/848bcab0-52e2-45d7-914c-5f80a111f34d/mekong-thought-leadership-and-think-tanks-network-rapid-response-project-call-fo>. 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](#)**
- **CV of Project Leader**
- **CV of Project team members (all key members)**
- **Letter of support from target users of rapid response project 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** : 17 September 2023
- **Screening and Review of Applications** : 18 September–1 October 2023
- **Endorsement by Program SC and Decision** : 2–6 October 2023
- **Announcement** : 10–11 October 2023
- **Administrative and contracting process** : 10 October–30 November 2023
- **Start of the project** : 1 December 2023

Note: Above dates may be adjusted as necessary by the Program.

11. Contact:

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