Australian Government
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SEI Stockholm Environment Institute

Chula Chulalongkorn University

Building Climate Resilience in the Mekong Region

Bridging Science, Policy, and Practice

Roundtable Report to Participants

Acknowledgments

SEI Asia warmly extends its gratitude to all those who contributed to the success of the "Building Climate Resilience in the Mekong Region" roundtable held on 14 September 2023 in Bangkok, Thailand.

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For additional details and access to the complete report, please visit the **event page.**

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Participants at the Roundtableon Building Climate Resilience in the Mekong Region

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1. Highlights

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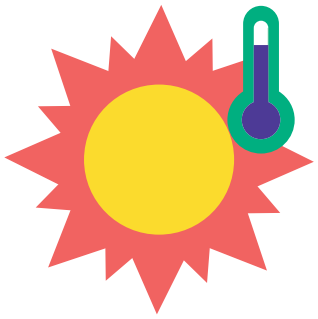
The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) showed the unequivocal conclusion that greenhouse gas emissions have set the world on a dangerous pathway of serious climate change, as average warming of 1.1˚C has already occurred, and current commitments and actions fall well short of emissions reductions needed to keep warming below and average of 1.5 or even 2˚C.



02

The Asia-Pacific region is home to a disproportionate share of the world's population that is highly vulnerable to climate change, and adaptation actions lose their effectiveness at higher levels of warming, even as the negative impacts on biodiversity and human health intensify and accelerate.

03

In Southeast Asia, there are a wide array of cost-effective mitigation and adaptation options across all sectors that can be deployed and scaled up if access to finance is significantly increased.

04

The Mekong region is home to nearly 350 million people (excluding China) and is increasingly urbanizing. Ensuring the region is resilient to the impacts of climate change and provides sustainable energy and food security is essential to its long-term development pathway.

05

In the Mekong region, particular attention is needed to adaptation for marginalised and vulnerable communities, community-based resource management and data-sharing systems, and mitigation actions in climate-sensitive land sectors where synergies and co-benefits are available.

06

To minimise the impacts of climate change in the Mekong River basin, cooperation between the countries in carrying out regional flood analyses and sharing reservoir operation data is essential, alongside strengthened community-based warning systems.

07

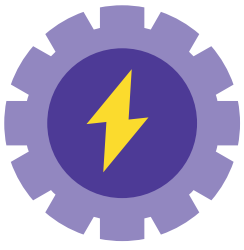
Food security metrics should consider not only food availability but also its nutritional value and environmental sustainability, and this requires a transition to more inclusive, equitable and sustainable food systems.

08

Urban resilience in the Mekong region can be fostered by investing in multi-functional public spaces, which can, for example, provide recreational space alongside nature-based solutions to flooding or heat islands, and local governments should work closely with local communities in implementing solutions.

09

Barriers to energy transition in the Mekong region include policy inconsistencies within and between national and international climate commitments, high risks of renewable energy and energy efficiency investments, grid infrastructure not ready to take up intermittent renewable energy supplies, and a lack of awareness and capacity to shift towards low carbon energy systems.



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Cross-cutting issues of gender, poverty, and social equity highlight the need for just transitions and inclusive processes of change that consider and account for the needs of different socioeconomic groups. Adaptation finance for poorer and more vulnerable communities is critically needed.

11

The Mekong is a significant subregion in Asia-Pacific and globally: in terms of the need for regional cooperation for climate resilient development, greater inclusiveness and visibility for Mekong actors and issues within Asia-Pacific and in multilateral processes, such as the Climate COPs can facilitate better access to climate solutions and improved cross-regional learning.

12

As climate impacts intensify and increase in complexity, there is a greater reliance on media to communicate the implications for climate actions and response and help to guide the public debate. A shared vision of cooperation on climate change in the Mekong region therefore requires deeper engagement with media actors and outlets to bridge the gaps between science, policy, and practice.

2. Introduction and Overview

As noted in the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Sixth Assessment Report (IPCC AR6), the Asia-Pacific region has a disproportionate share of the world's population that is vulnerable to climate change. As the impacts of climate change become more unpredictable and complex, the development pathways of the region are increasingly constrained and the urgency of the response increases. Regional dialogue and cooperation can complement national and global efforts by identifying areas of common interest and initiating actions to enhance capacity and build new partnerships to strengthen climate resilience. The Mekong region, with a population of close to 350 million, is an area that requires a shared vision for managing its waterways and ecosystems to craft effective responses to climate impacts and emerging development challenges.

Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) Asia Centre and Chulalongkorn University, with the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Government of Australia, held a regional roundtable on 14 September 2023 to discuss the findings of the IPCC Assessment, identify the regional implications of climate change, elaborate on different sectoral and cross-cutting issues, and critically debate key barriers and enablers for sound policy and practice. The event brought together over 150 participants from governments, research institutions, UN agencies, development partners, private sector, civil society, and local community representatives.

The regional roundtable was part of Mekong Environmental Resilience week hosted by SEI and involving the Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network (MTT). The week's activities also included the Mekong Regional Water, Energy, and Climate Alliance Forum. Both events emphasised managing regional resources to support the most vulnerable and marginalised communities of the Mekong region. A key goal held in common was thus to expand and share the knowledge base for enhancing the adaptive capacities of these communities to reduce and/or manage the risks posed by climate change while improving livelihoods and supporting broader development goals as embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Key thematic areas chosen for four parallel sessions included water resources and extreme events, energy transitions, urban futures, and food security. These themes were chosen to reflect the emerging dynamics of the Mekong region in several respects. First, as a shared resource, the design and governance of water management regimes in the Mekong need to be adaptive and robust due to the complexity and uncertainty of future climate impacts. Second, an integrated approach to resource management recognises that water, ecosystem services, food systems, and energy services are not only interlinked but must also evolve with the changing climate. Third and finally, the rapidly urbanizing population of the region means that the changing scale and demand patterns of water, energy and food systems are creating new rural-urban relations: responding to climate change requires an all-of-society approach that fully incorporates these sectoral and spatial linkages.

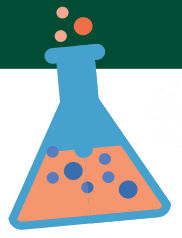
Recognizing this all-of-society approach, the roundtable emphasised not only interaction among the national and regional actors involved in these processes, but also the wider civil society and the media, who help to shape these debates and to communicate across the science-policy interface in a way that can translate into practical actions as well as systematic responses. The discussion panels thus also sought to enhance development partner coordination, so as to streamline policy priorities. Social inclusion and access to finance were both incorporated into the roundtable design as cross-cutting issues and were reflected in the profile of invited speakers and participants. The roundtable sought to complement other ongoing initiatives aiming to stimulate long-term regional partnerships.

This report provides a synthesis of key issues presented and debated during the roundtable, including the plenary sessions and the four parallel sessions. Six visual summaries, done in real time, are included here. The report captures key outcomes of the presentations and discussions, in terms of articulating current trends and identifying priorities for change to ensure a more climate resilient Mekong region for all.

3. Opening Plenary Sessions

The first plenary session provided evidence from the global science-policy interface, drawing on the comprehensive research synthesis of the recently completed IPCC 6th Assessment report. The IPCC AR6 also provided the scientific basis for the Global Stocktake (GST) of the Paris Agreement, which also ended this year with the 28th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP28). The presentations reflected the three working groups of the IPCC in elaborating on the three main dimensions of climate science/policy: (a) the Physical Science Basis; (b) Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability; and (c) Mitigation of Climate Change. The geographical focus narrowed in the second plenary session to implications of climate change for the Mekong region. The aim was to reflect on national and regional responses to climate change and consider the intersection with sustainable development goals to identify priorities for policy and practice.

3.1 Science-to-Policy: Key Relevant Findings from IPCC AR6



The IPCC AR6 highlighted the unprecedented average global warming of 1.1°C during the past century, which is unequivocally caused by human activity in the form of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, setting the world on a pathway to dangerous warming of 3.2°C in this century. OECD countries are historically responsible for the majority of emissions, but the current distribution is changing because of rapid economic development in the global South. Although Southeast Asia has historically less responsibility, climate-smart development policy requires being cautious about what type of infrastructure to build. Global estimated investment needs range from 2–31 times current averages across different sectors and regions, with Southeast Asia requiring an increase in investment by 6–12 times.

The physical science underscores that the Himalayas as the third polar of the world; the Himalayan glacier systems flow into China, India, and Southeast Asia, including the Mekong region. Global sea-levels are rising at 3.2 mm per year due to melting ice caps, twice as fast as in the past century. Ice melting into the ocean contributes to unstable slopes and landscapes, avalanches, floods, and adverse impacts on social and infrastructure systems. There is a need for more research and understanding on the impact of climate change in the Himalayan on the Mekong riverine water. Early action reduces climate risks at lower cost than addressing future damage. Improving response capacity and governance for coastal development is critical.

In terms of impacts, Southeast Asia has some of the highest biodiversity in the world, but it is currently declining and could face a 60% decline in this century, with low-altitude regions experiencing the greatest losses. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework created targets for 2030 to reduce loss of high biodiversity areas close to zero, to restore 30% of degraded areas, and to conserve at least 30% of existing areas. Thailand and neighbouring countries have committed to working towards these targets. Higher temperatures and prolonged droughts significantly increase the risk of forest fires and reduce adaptive capacities. Impacts on water sources directly affect food production, with food security issues in Africa, India, and small island states. Increase in rice production up to 50% in the next 30 years is needed to meet demand of a growing Mekong population. Adaptation measures can deplete underground water, increase soil salination, widen inequities, and cause loss of rural livelihoods.

Regarding mitigation, stabilisation of warming at 1.5°C with no overshoot requires a reduction in global CO2 emissions by 48% in 2030, 80% in 2040, and 99% in 2050. There are nevertheless significant opportunities on both the demand side and the supply side, with options available in every sector that can at least halve emissions by 2030. The cost of solar and wind energy and batteries for electric vehicles have gone down significantly in recent years and adoption rates are increasing. Demand-side measures can reduce the burden of supply-side decarbonisation needs, through infrastructure design, technology access and behavioural change. The shift away from all fossil fuels is critical but will be a huge transition, requiring new infrastructure and strengthened regional cooperation.

In terms of how different organisations and individuals in the Mekong can play a bigger role in improving the science-to-policy interface, several areas for improvement were noted in the discussion. The IPCC reports tend to have a European perspective and would benefit from greater insights from developing and emerging countries and especially Asia-Pacific where 60% of the world's population lives. More IPCC authors from the Mekong countries could be encouraged, and anyone can be a part of the review process. There is a need for more linkages across researchers in ASEAN and the Mekong region in terms of sharing of lessons/failures, especially in connection to transboundary issues related to forests and air pollution. It is important to assess co-benefits and acknowledge trade-offs between mitigation, adaptation, and development goals; inter-linkages among the three are especially common in land sectors where there are also greater opportunities for people to be facilitators of change compared to energy or industry sectors.

3.2 Mekong Perspectives on Climate Change Impacts and Responses

Mekong representatives acknowledge the serious impacts of climate change. Cooperative actions are needed to mitigate and cope with impacts at national, regional, and global levels. The Mekong region is highly vulnerable to climate impacts that have a massive economic impact. The impacts included significant hazards and floods in 2018, extreme drought in 2019 and 2020, and heat waves and serious air pollution in the past few years. Annual rainfall in northeastern Thailand has an increased trend since 2000. The analysis of rainfall anomalies showed 2–3 consecutive years of drought in the region every 5 years during 1981–2021. Extreme events are projected to increase in mid- (2040–2069) and far-future (2070–2100), affecting Thailand's water availability, food and energy security, and natural resource and ecosystem health.

Indigenous people are the most vulnerable to climate risks and water-related disasters such as flood, drought, storm, and landslide. Thailand adopted Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) as a tool for SDGs while community water management framework facilitates climate adaptation. Communities can undertake self-management on soil, water, and forest, increased water for drinking, consumption, and agriculture. The risks of rising temperatures are perceived widely as increasing faster than the capacity to respond to them.

In Cambodia, most local people rely on the agricultural sector, where rice production is affected by temperature increase and unreliable water availability. Moreover, fast-growing urban areas in Cambodia have led to significantly increasing energy demand, while supply is vulnerable to climate impacts. Lao PDR committed to implementing several activities across different sectors to support local communities to reduce impacts from climate change, including forestry management, watershed management, renewable energy and water, sanitation, and hygiene. Lao PDR has started building its first wind power project, the largest in Southeast Asia. The government is also promoting EVs and building resilient infrastructures in the region.

Climate-smart and digital technologies are important for farming systems in Southeast Asia, from smallholders to large industrial scale, allowing increased resource efficiency and reduced climate risk. Drought and heat resistant seeds are needed, and today's new breeding technologies are supported by artificial intelligence (AI). Smart products and value chains can link smart farmers with smart consumers to improve quality of life.

The Q&A session also addressed the following somewhat related issues:

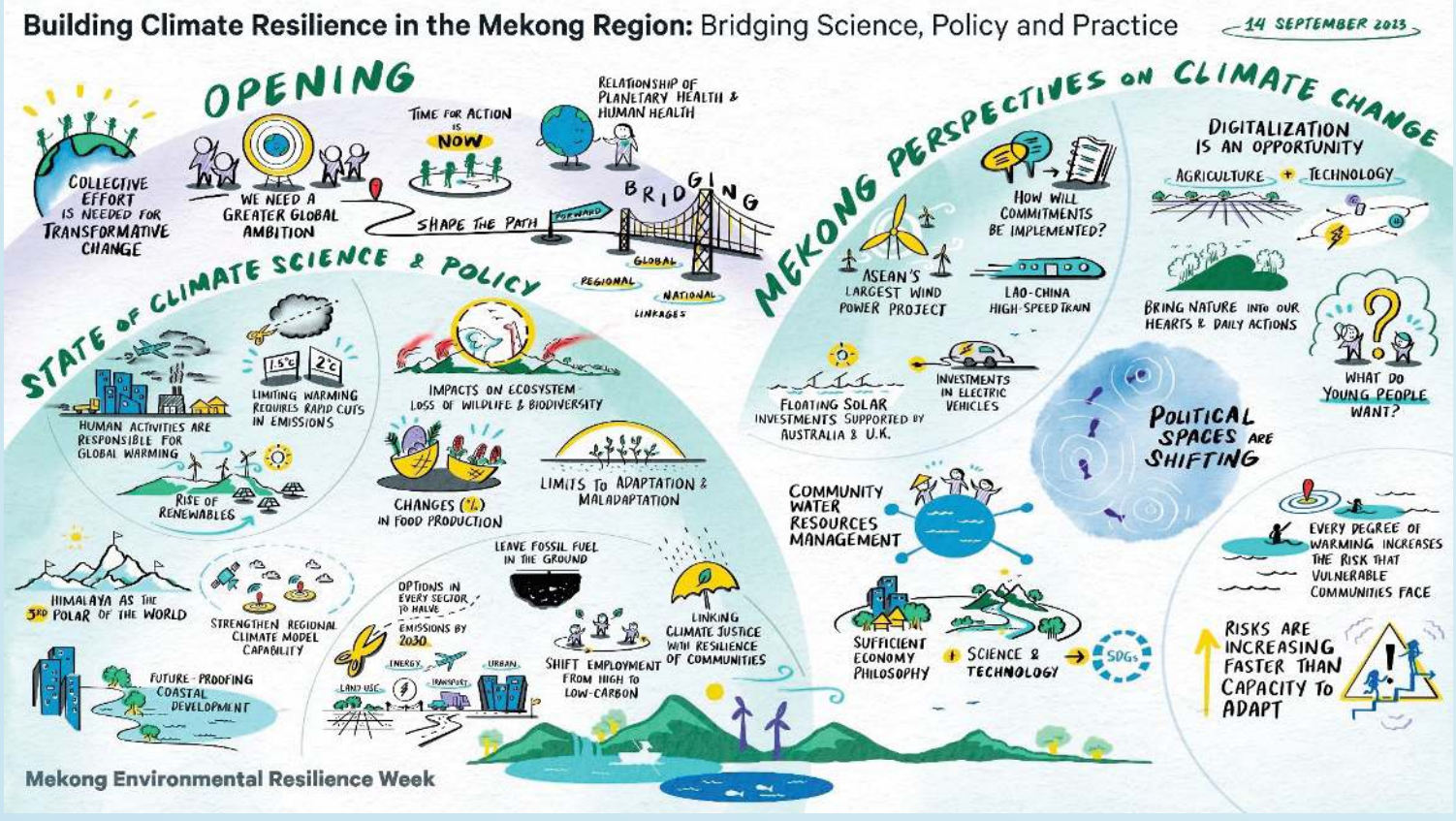
On the issue of how farmers and scientists can work together to increase synergies, it was noted that local knowledge needs to be integrated in technological systems to inform decisions.

Villagers in Thailand are measuring Mekong River levels with a bamboo stick and communicating the results over Line. There is a government system for early warning in place, but it is clearly not accessible or reliable for villagers. So the question remains as to how to increase accessibility of local people to basic data on water levels, rainfall, flood, and drought.

The existing systems need some work to be accessible, but also must include indigenous knowledge from people that know the river by living there for generations, not only scientific information.

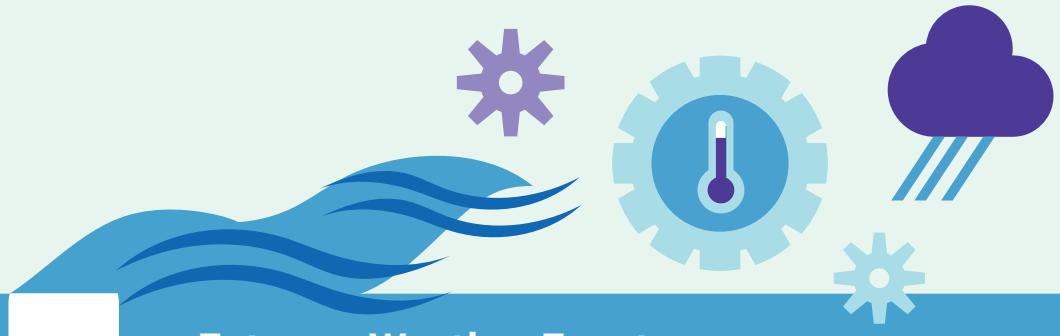
A graphical summary for the two opening plenary sessions is given in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Climate Science-to-Policy and the implications for the Mekong region



4. Parallel Sessions

Parallel sessions covered sector-specific topics in the regional response to climate change, including water (especially extreme events and changing water flows and levels), food systems, energy transitions, and urban environments. With an urbanising population in the Mekong region and integrated resource management becoming more essential, these sectors are increasingly inter-linked, and it will be important to seek co-benefits and synergies among mitigation, adaptation ad development goals and actions.

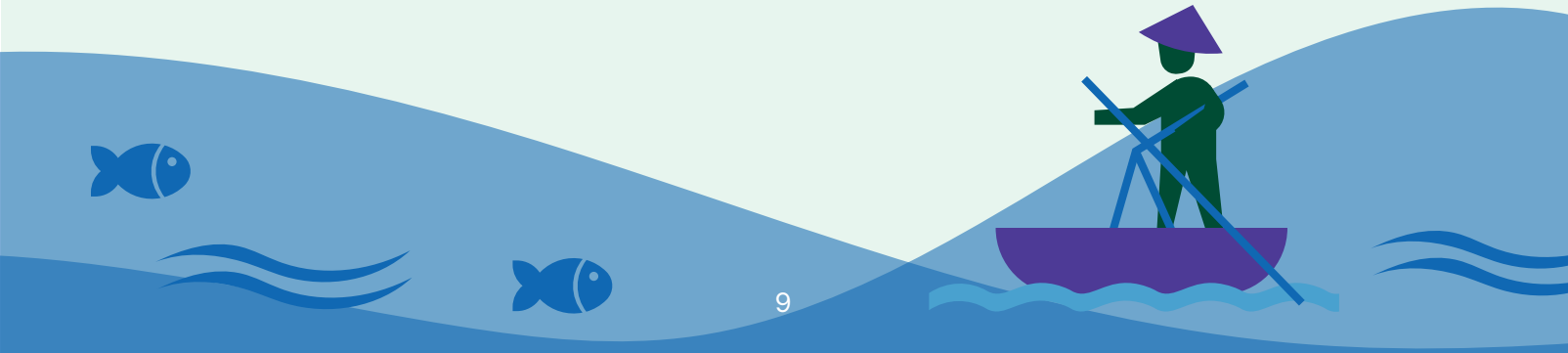


4.1 Extreme Weather Events, Changing River Flows, and Rising Sea Levels

Recent studies and local observations indicate that the Mekong region is seeing more extreme precipitation, leading to severe floods in the region in the last two decades, particularly in Lao PDR, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Meanwhile, the trend in extreme precipitation in China in Lancang River (Upper Mekong Basin) and some parts of northeastern Thailand is towards a statistically significant decline, which potentially increases the risk of droughts. For example, the projected drought risk map for Thailand under IPCC RCP 4.5 (the business-as-usual emission pathway) shows that the drought risk indicator for 2046–2065 has increased from the historical period (1970–2005).

When climate and weather patterns become more volatile, and flood and drought events in the Mekong region become more frequent and intense, the potential to cause devastating damage to the region's food security and economies increases. Those communities that are unprepared suffer the most. Observed data from the Mekong River Commission (MRC) shows that the river flows in the Mekong mainstream are changing from upstream to downstream due to the rapid development of infrastructure for water storage and the impacts of climate change.

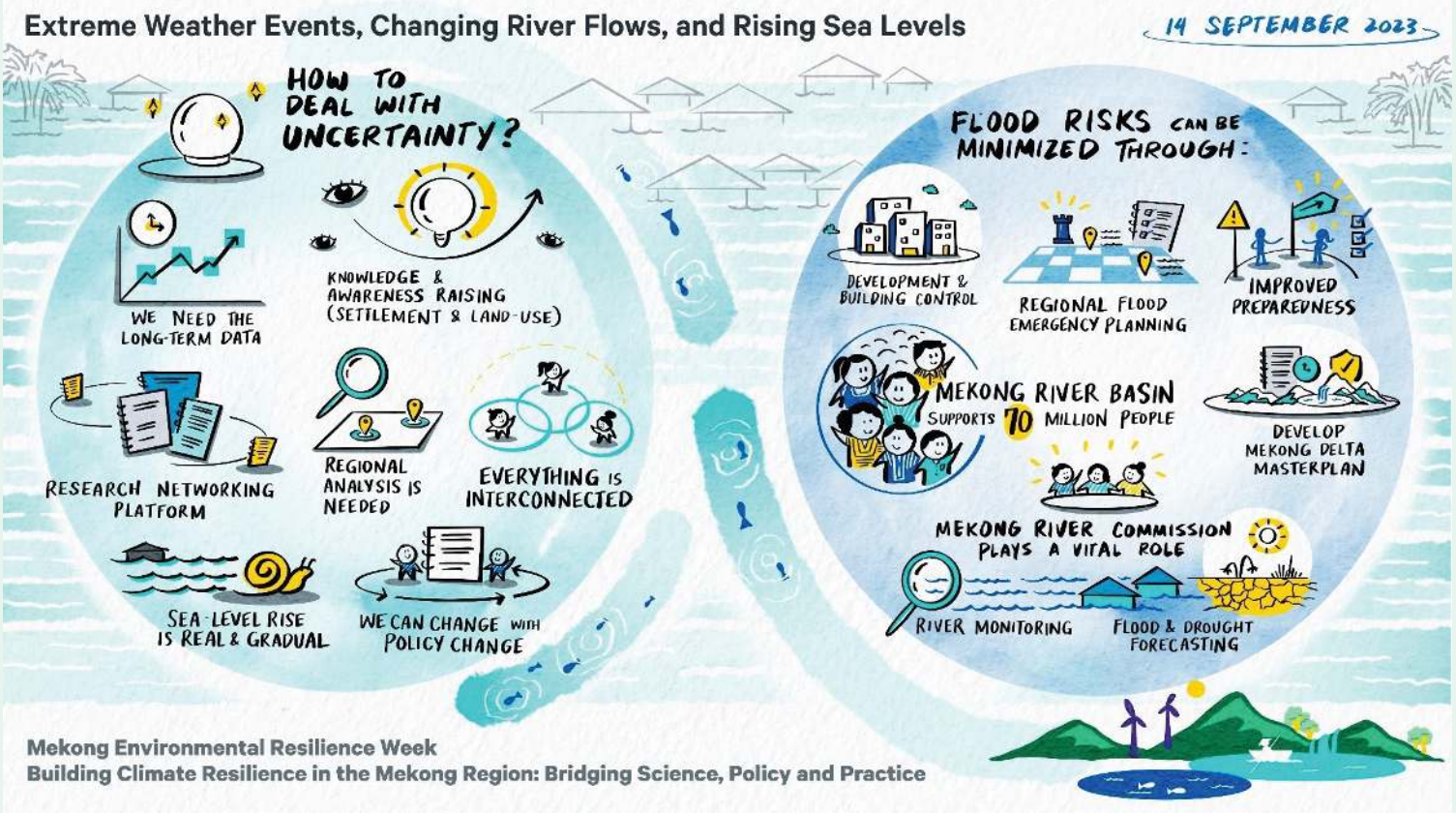
MRC has a key role as a source of information for the Mekong, including flood predictions updated on its website. It also develops medium to long-term flood and drought predictions to share with stakeholders, which are discussed in regular meetings with communities, rural villages, and national level stakeholders. Water management information should be shared between countries and at sub-national and regional levels. This includes developing a Mekong Delta Masterplan, which can be adjusted according to changing river flows, as more dams are built upstream, sea levels change, and urbanisation occurs in the Delta.



The following recommendations emerged from the discussion (see also Figure 2 below):

- Regional analysis to understand climate change impacts and improve regional warning systems.
- Enhanced cooperation among Mekong countries and between Upper and Lower Mekong countries, to increase the sharing hydro-met and reservoir operation data will improve reservoir coordination.
- Continued strengthening of community-based warning systems and raising general awareness.
- Policy actions should prioritise providing resources including finance to support local adaptation to the changes and inclusive local knowledge in the planning process.

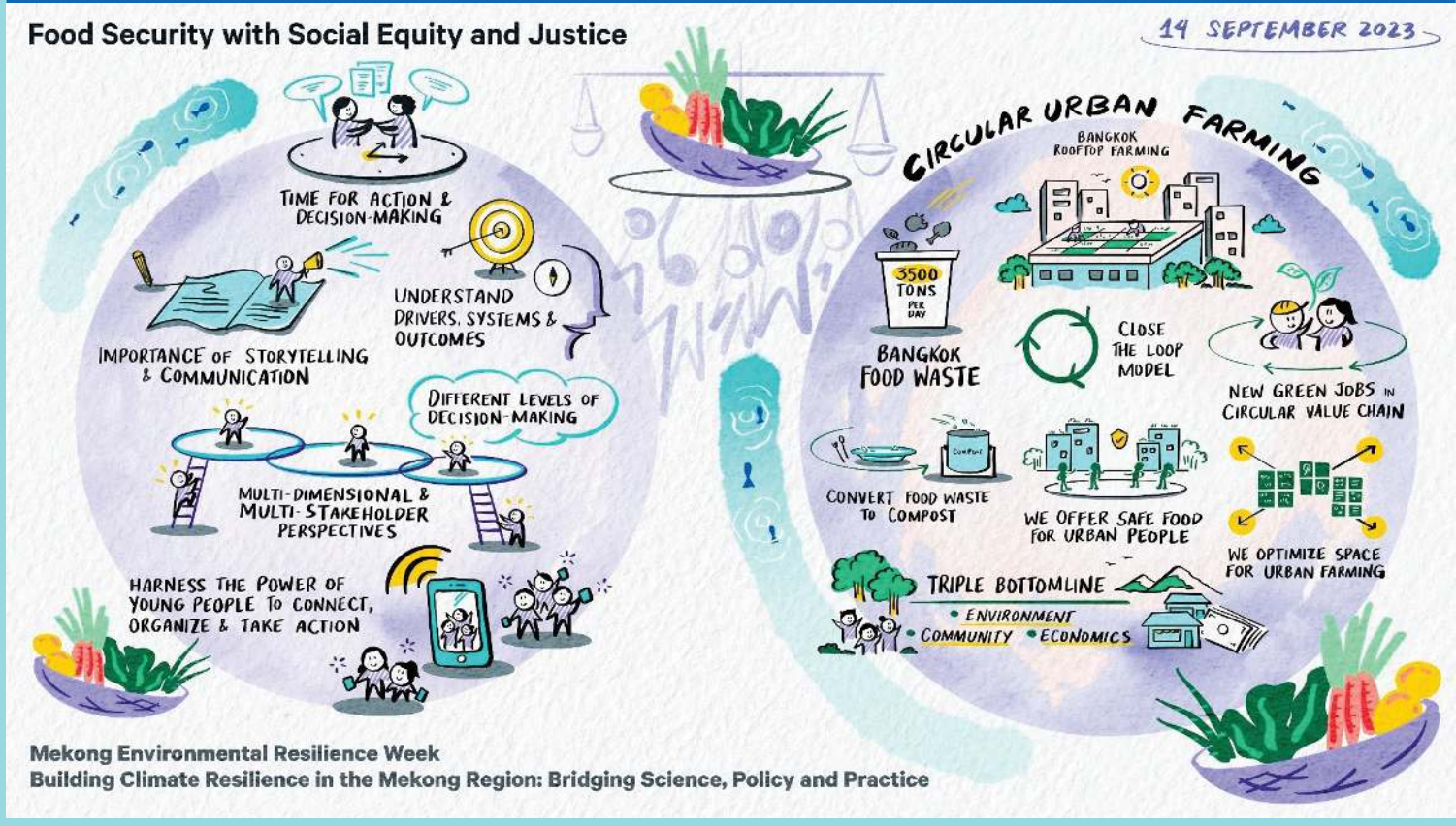
Figure 2: Water Resources – Extreme events, River Flows, and Rising Sea Levels



4.2 Food Security with Social Equity and Justice

Food security is a critical issue for the region and needs to be addressed with social equity and justice in mind, by giving special attention to marginalised and vulnerable groups and emphasizing an integrated approaches that goes beyond food availability and access (see Figure 3). Food security should encompass not only the quantity but also the quality of food, focusing more on nutrition, livelihoods and closing the loops of food waste and loss. Furthermore, gender needs to be mainstreamed into all project planning activities and decision-making processes related to food systems. This includes identifying and removing barriers faced by women, youth, and marginalised groups in the food systems, acknowledging their pivotal roles, and ensuring they benefit from food security initiatives.

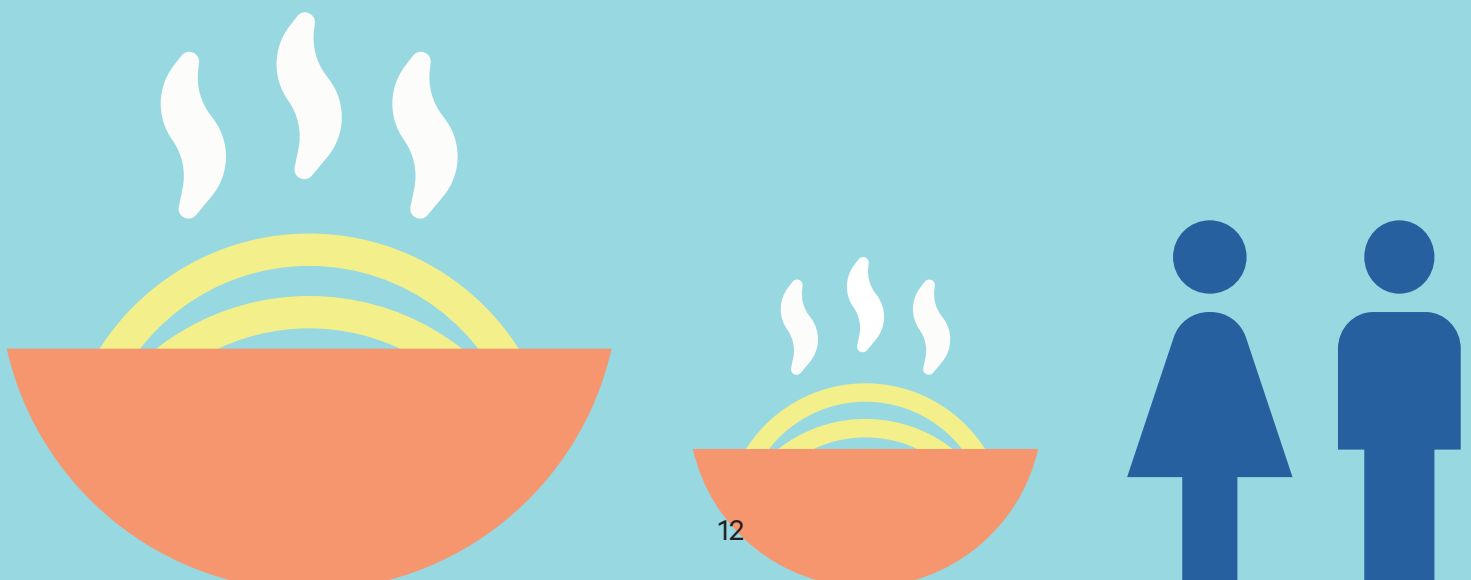
Figure 3: Advancing Food Security with Social Equity and Justice



It is essential to empower farmers and communities for influencing action at different decision-making levels and in co-creating knowledge through participatory approaches in policy processes and addressing power structures within governance systems. The complexity of food systems means taking into consideration the multi-dimensions of food security and applying a bottom-up decision-making process by the different engaged stakeholders. Otherwise, the cost of inaction risks being higher than the cost of action.

The following recommendations emerged from the discussion (see also Figure 3):

- Food security metrics should consider not only food availability but also nutrition and environmental sustainability. Policy makers should prioritise people's livelihoods, health, and more sustainable food systems.
- Food security projects and policies should incorporate a gender-responsive approach and intersectionality. This approach entails identifying and addressing gender-based barriers, and empowering women and youth in food value chains so that they benefit from food security initiatives and policies.
- Inclusive decision-making processes involving stakeholders at various levels, from local communities to national governments, should be promoted and fostered. Decision makers should ensure marginalised and vulnerable groups have a voice and agency in shaping food systems.
- Communication and storytelling about food security challenges and solutions needs to actively engage stakeholders in effective knowledge sharing and communication strategies to create a compelling narrative that resonates with policymakers, stakeholders, and the public.
- There is an urgent call for promoting regional cooperation to address common food security challenges and encouraging cross-border initiatives that leverage regional opportunities and resources for a more comprehensive and sustainable approach.
- Good practices and models for sustainable agriculture and food systems should be identified, shared, and scaled up. Funders should invest in projects that have demonstrated positive social, environmental, and economic impacts and can be replicated in various contexts.



4.3 Urban Futures in a Changing Climate

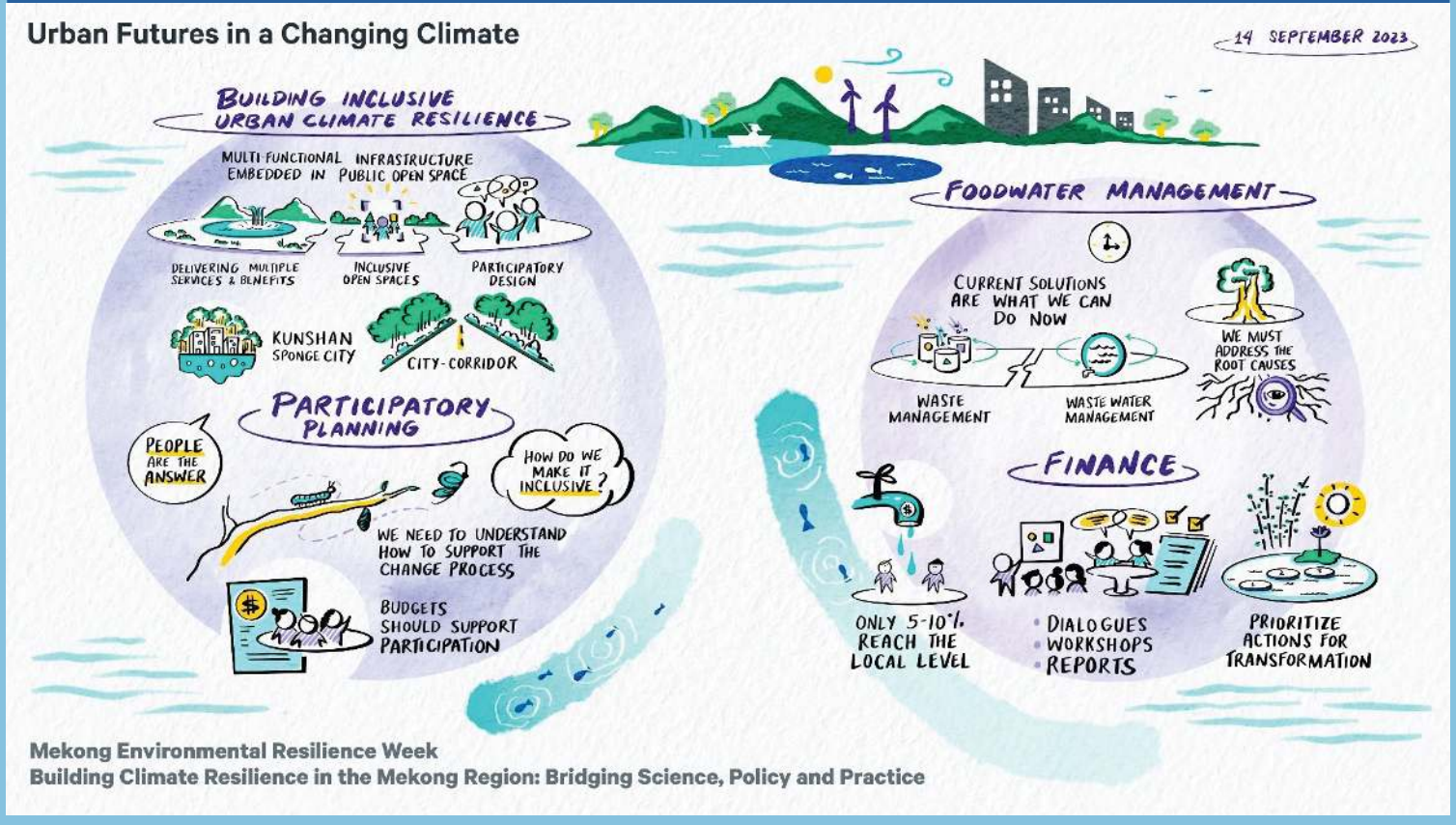
By 2050, the majority of the Mekong region's population are expected to live in urban areas. The impacts of climate change may exacerbate the challenges already facing urban areas in the region. The challenges include ensuring secure and affordable housing for all, waste management, access to green and open space, and ensuring downscaled finance that can be locally controlled by municipalities and communities.

Experience from organised low-income communities across Asia shows that urban resilience can be fostered by and amongst local vulnerable communities when they network amongst themselves, and with city governments. Networked communities can have a coordinated voice to enable change within planning for resilience. In particular, a more area-based approach can help to ensure inclusive resilience where all affected persons within an area can participate to achieve better outcomes for all in the area.

Holistic approaches to climate change resilience are also essential, such as multifunctional open public spaces. Nature-based solutions can play a role when integrated into urban environments, whether in the form of large public parks, or street greening combined with rest areas. Accessible green public space for all is important for the physical and mental wellbeing of urban residents. See also Figure 4.

However, a challenge for urban settings to implement climate change adaptation and resilience building lies in the lack of climate funding flows that reach the local level–estimated at less than 15%, yet local-level action is where change needs to happen. This is an important area for reform in order to see more effective climate action in cities.

Figure 4: Urban Futures in a Changing Climate



4.4 Energy Security and Transition to Renewables

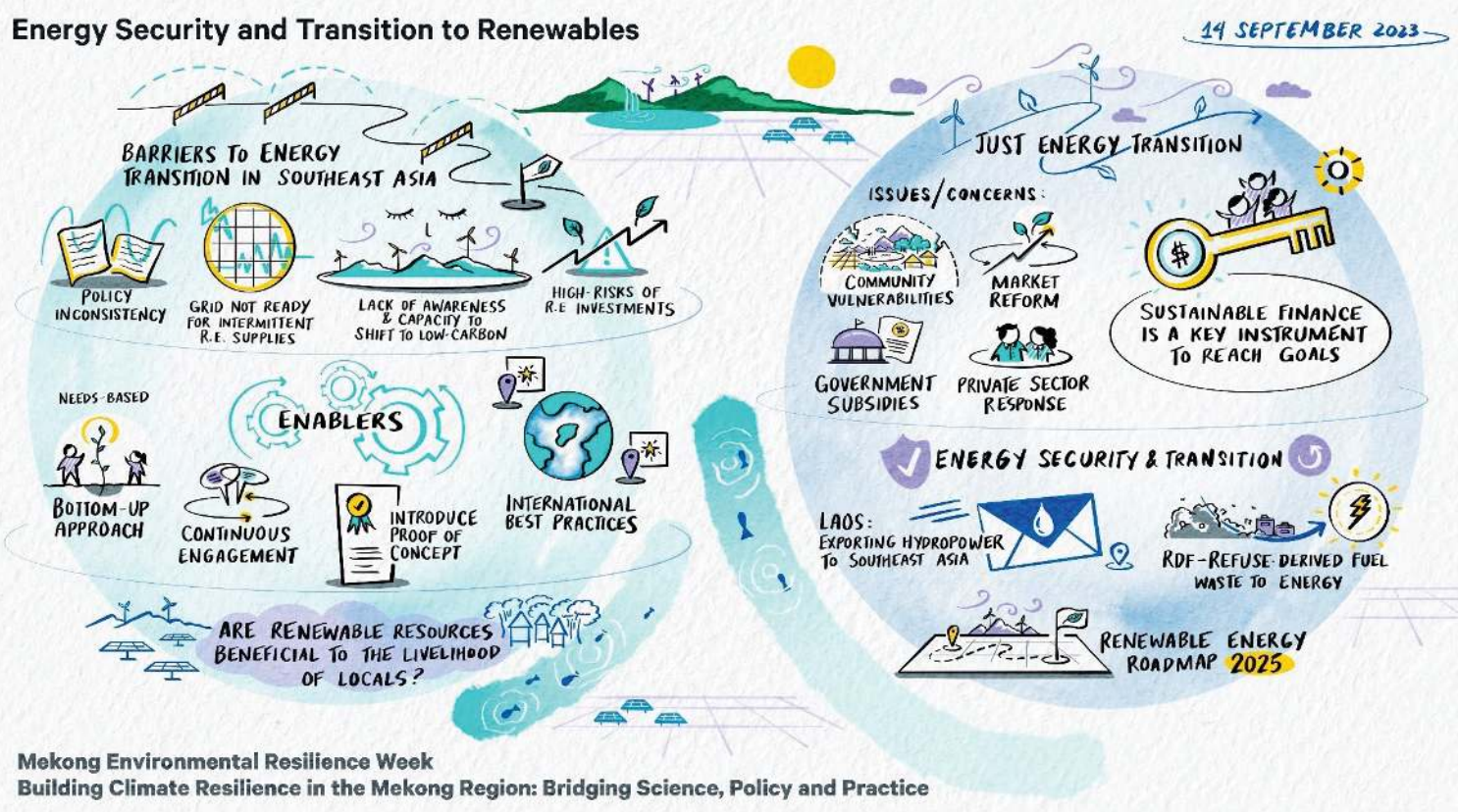
The panel discussed how the Mekong can carry out its energy transition, where for example it is making progress towards decarbonisation of electricity generation. In the case of Lao PDR, which has a renewable energy roadmap to 2025, they aim to increase the share of renewable energy to 30% of total energy consumption, with high potential in biodiesel, small hydropower, solar, biogas, biomass, and wind energy.

The panel considered how a Just Energy Transition can be achieved–though they highlighted that a clear definition of 'just' is still lacking. For example, in Vietnam, a Just Energy Transition is interpreted to mean protecting vulnerable people against risk and enabling them to capitalise on opportunities. The government is providing subsidies to households, hospitals, and schools, but when tariffs go up, this means government expenditure on these items increases. Meanwhile, power plants are established in exclusive zones in coastal areas, which can displace fishing communities; impacts on job loss in the coal and mining sector need to be better assessed.

However, concerns remained about the barriers to energy transition in the Mekong region. These include policy inconsistencies within and between national and international climate commitments, high risks of renewable energy and energy efficiency investments, grid infrastructure not ready to take up intermittent renewable energy supplies, and a lack of awareness and capacity to shift towards low carbon energy systems. Governments fear the too rapid uptake of renewable energy without having the right infrastructure and capacity in place, which has happened in some countries in ASEAN.

Governments need to be reassured that there is no necessary trade-off between energy security and renewable energy. Additionally, financial tools that can enable the transition should be explored, such as sustainable debt, which still has a very small market compared to conventional debt. See also Figure 5.

Figure 5: Energy Security and Transition to Renewables



5. Closing Plenary Sessions

The closing plenary sessions including a reporting back and synthesis on sectoral views and a panel with regional media representatives.

5.1 Sectoral and cross-cutting views on Climate Policy Actions and Pathways

The first of the two closing plenary sessions involved not only the review on the sectoral perspectives of the parallel sessions, but also considered cross-cutting issues and how these might be better inter-linked to foster a more holistic climate policy response. The discussants also considered how to carry messages forward into regional and global fora such as the UN regional events and the Climate COPs, so that regional issues can receive wider exposure and policy debate.

5.1.1 Extreme Weather

The definition of extreme weather needs to be linked to extreme damage. The Vietnam Delta panel shared lessons that fighting against dams is difficult, and therefore adaptation is needed. MRC panel showed a strong practice in providing warning information to countries, which is disseminated to local communities. The gap that needs to be addressed is how communities respond to the information provided, due to different perceptions. There needs to be another step in how to deal with disaster or reduce the risk from severe events. Technology provides efficiency to receive data, but also need an application to report back. Real time adaptation information as to how people adapt could result in better planning and preparation.

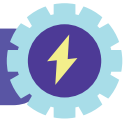
5.1.2 Food security

The reflections span the grassroots localisation, regional policy lens, and research lens. To synthesise these perspectives is challenging, but a commonality is that we cannot reduce the concept of food security to food production. Food security is a complex issue and related significant to nutrients. From a regional perspective, we need to be cautious whether the interventions are causing more problems or creating new barriers. The term ‘holistic’ is said to not be a win-win situation, but rather it enables people to take a long-term view. There is often no win-win situation, as there are always some people struggling. We need to work in a more systematic way, to develop a robust policy on food security. We need to explore the future of food manufacturers on food security, especially in providing enough nutrients.

5.1.3 Urban

Panels discussed implementing solutions on multifunctional space, how to work with community groups, how to work with grants in green cities programs funded by ASEAN. Response is centralised to climate finance to community and local governments level. It was noted that it is fully stuck at the national level. Issues were addressed in top-down and there was a lack of voice or local government negotiation processes. The responses are not highlighted enough on the root causes, not decentralised, and not scaled up enough. The benefits of networking to make decisions are crucial. The cities are known to come together to make decisions, city network decides to upgrade adaptation process. A more city-wide approach is to take a narrative approach, looking at all facilities and housing, social equity issues, involving all stakeholders. Lastly, there is an opportunity to trigger the multistakeholder process even with limited funds, learnings can be replicated and applied to other areas.

5.1.4 Renewable energy



Two key messages were that renewable energy and transition processes are clearly underway. However, the session considers how we can supply renewable energy in different places. Panels discussed just energy from suppliers and the situation of users. The role of regulators in power trade is to apply the same standard so there is efficient international trading. The important response to just energy transition is to make users to be aware of the benefit so they willing to commit to global climate objectives. To accelerate a just energy transition requires that a wider range of actors understand the role and advantages of renewable energy.

5.1.5 Engagement and inclusiveness

The parallel sessions placed a particular emphasis on engagement and inclusiveness (due to Just Transitions issues) and so cross-cutting conclusions are listed separately below:

- Policy directions on evolving community transition processes may be referred to as adaptation processes. Engagement with communities maybe not be sufficient as co-production may need to be introduced into the adaptation process.
- Reference to communities in the context of Just Transitions can mean any sectors, however a lot of individuals/communities/sectors are not included. Those who have direct impact should be included, rather than being treated as outsiders.
- Inclusiveness does not mean spoon-feeding information, but to jointly generate knowledge.
- Involving communities has to be cautious on whether the objective is to involve data science, as sometimes it is not facts per se, but rather a need to balance the information in involving everyone.
- Co-production can be a messy and complicated process. At the end of the day, someone or some group must decide. An inclusive approach is idealistic but difficult to accomplish. We need to assess whether the scope of inclusion is acceptable and avoid being unrealistic.
- Supporting the implementation process with expertise to local communities is important. The challenge is doing it on a limited scale and to look beyond the consultations themselves to focus more on effective implementation at community level.

5.1.6 Regional and multilateral processes

Similarly, to above, the parallel sessions placed emphasis on Regional and Multilateral processes (as per the remit of the event) and so some cross-cutting conclusions were discussed and are summarized here:

- Many Mekong countries are limited by finance; investment should go through local levels, not just be top down. Going beyond consultations to be more inclusive at top levels is also recommended.
- It is important to develop methods of co-production that involves as many relevant stakeholders as feasible and appropriate across different levels and dimensions.
- There needs to be a lot more informed sessions at the national and local level on human rights. Human rights theme is not addressed enough in the COP processes and a safe space is needed in the COPs, especially so that marginalised groups are better included in COP processes.
- The national and regional levels can do more to inform decision makers, and to consider local knowledge as data. We need to think about how these data goes into the discussion of policy platforms. We need a safe space for all societal actors, so they can express their interests freely.

5.2 Changing Narratives: Transforming the Media Landscape to Influence Policies and Empower Communities

The power of media to shape public discourse and influence policy action on climate change has been widely recognised, including in the latest IPCC report: this “shaping” power can usefully build public support to accelerate climate mitigation. But it can also be used to do exactly the opposite.

In the Mekong region, the media faces many challenges. The media representatives shared their perspectives from their work on connecting with the science of climate change, shaping discourses, and also working with local communities who are on the frontline of climate risks. It is also easier for the media to pitch the climate story if they can show collaborations with research institutions.

01 | "Climate change reporting" in the Mekong region faces many challenges:

One of the key challenges is that media in the Mekong region is either owned or controlled by powerful actors including the state and large corporations. For example, in Vietnam, media can only report about climate and climate policies using technicalities, which often prevent people from joining in the discourse. Some journalists in Vietnam find a way out by including people-oriented solutions in their reporting.

02 | The need to strengthen media-science-policy partnerships:

Media and scientists need to collaborate better to distil and present climate science and engage with policymakers and the public.

Media needs "climate literacy," so that journalists can become more familiar with the different scientific aspects of climate change. To achieve this, media-science partnerships and learning opportunities are important. The media participants cited the example of SEI's "media grants" that allow regional journalists to work together with scientists as a good illustration of such partnerships to build the media's knowledge about climate science.

There is also a huge gap in understanding between local communities and policymakers about the direct impacts of climate change on natural resources and local livelihoods. The media in Thailand, for example, has been trying to bring out local stories about climate change into the mainstream media. This also allows for more local participation in state decision-making.

Closing the gap between local needs and national policies on climate change can be done with better collaboration among media, policymakers, researchers, and civil society. The regional media relies on scientific information from both the regional and international community and close collaboration with researchers.

One solution proposed was to establish a platform or channel where journalists and researchers can maintain consistent communication about climate change that can also help media to understand the complexities of the climate crisis.

03 | Climate stories are not just about the climate:

Analysing and telling local contexts and stories is crucial to empowering local communities and connecting science to realities on the ground. It is crucial to link climate action to climate justice explicitly.

The use of multimedia in climate stories is important to produce compelling and engaging stories. But media also needs time and understanding of the topics to create good photos, videos and graphics that can also be promoted in social media. Although timelines can be tight, the good news is that climate journalists are not doing breaking news, so they can spend more time in researching the climate change stories.

Social media continues to be a powerful tool in the Mekong region to produce and share climate stories. in some cases, social media can help to directly inform people about climate-related events like floods or storms long before the state or other media has reported on the event. Similarly, community radio is increasingly returning to use as a powerful tool for disseminating information about climate risks. As news and social media evolves, the challenge is to find innovative ways to communicate climate stories.

Graphical depictions for the two closing plenary sessions are given in Figure 6.

Figure 6: An overview of Sectoral Perspectives, Policy Actions for COP, and the Media Landscape