

## Introduction

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### **What is the Regional Environmental Forum?**

The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), the Thailand Environment Institute (TEI) and the World Resources Institute (WRI) organized a Regional Environmental Forum (REF) for mainland Southeast Asia, on 14-15 November 2002 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The Forum brought together independent environmental experts from research institutes, universities, and non-governmental organizations in the region.

The purpose of the meeting was twofold. First, the meeting provided a platform for discussing the implications of regional developments for the natural environment and people's livelihoods. From these discussions, the Forum was intended to generate constructive recommendations for national governments, regional institutions and other groups on how to improve environmental governance in mainland Southeast Asia.

Second, the meeting provided an opportunity for independent analysts from the six Mekong countries to create and strengthen professional relationships, and identify common agendas. The Forum was intended to promote the creation of a regional network to monitor environmental governance on a regular basis.

This Introduction provides a short summary of the format and accomplishments of the first regional Forum including the Consensus Statement of the Forum. The Statement represents the main output of the two days' deliberations. This is followed by revised versions of the Country Perspective Papers that were presented at the Forum. The papers provide options for sustainable management of the Mekong region's environment through improvements in governance, from the perspective of the experts in each country. Finally, we include a list of meeting participants.

### **Why a Regional Civil Society Forum for Mainland Southeast Asia?**

The convening of the Forum reflects a broader, growing concern among the people of mainland Southeast Asia about degradation of their environment, and costly environmental trade-offs of large scale development activities. Political and economic integration has proceeded quickly: in the past five years, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Burma (Myanmar) have been admitted to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The governments of the Mekong countries have committed to significant shared infrastructure schemes under the Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Subregion Program. These include a regional power grid (powered by large hydropower dams) and system of development corridors. In these political and economic fora, environmental issues are sidelined and are insufficiently integrated with talks on regional security, investment, and other issues.

Meanwhile, damming and deforestation have contributed to high-profile environmental disasters, such as fatal floods in Cambodia's northeast and in Vietnam's Mekong delta.

Public concerns about environmental security in the Mekong's downstream riparian countries have only increased as plans for upstream development are gradually realized. Most recently, China is moving forward with plans to construct dams on the upper Mekong and blast the Mekong's rapids in order to increase commercial shipping among the upstream riparians. Together, these incidents and perceived future threats raise questions about the roles of regional institutions and national actors in activities to develop shared resources, and the responsibilities of developers to broader society.

The problem with planned regional developments is not only *what* they cause (unwanted environmental degradation) but *how* they are decided. Single governments take unilateral development decisions that will affect all riparian countries in a watershed. National and regional officials plan policies or projects on the assumption that they will benefit certain social groups, but they overlook or fail to mitigate the risks to other communities.

At the same time, governments have not achieved coordinated and effective responses to other forms of environmental degradation in the region. Illegal trade in forest products threatens the health of forest ecosystems and puts pressure on local production systems that rely on access to these resources. This is a regional problem because China's thirst for natural medicines and Thailand and China's logging bans spur the extraction of timber and endangered plants and animals in neighboring countries.

Internationally, norms for environmental sustainability and public participation in environmental decision-making have evolved significantly in the last dozen years. The Rio Declaration of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 1992, the World Commission on Water and World Commission on Dams, and a plethora of similar consultative processes during the 1990s have created pressure on public institutions to open their decision-making processes and adopt ecosystem management approaches. International norms in environmental governance include transboundary cooperation, full integration of environmental concerns into development decision-making, and public access to environmental information and decision-making. These norms are summarized in Box 1.

***Box 1: Emerging international norms of environmental governance***

- *Integration of environment into development decision-making* – Environmental considerations should be a part of all development planning and decision-making, from the outset of policy and program priority formulation to the implementation of project-specific activities. The Mekong governments have made efforts to mainstream environmental issues into policymaking, such as creating stricter requirements for environmental impact assessments. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) has added an Environment Program to its structure. Despite this progress, however, across the region the integration of environmental considerations into broader decision-making processes remains piecemeal.

- *Transboundary cooperation* – Sustainable regional development must recognize the transboundary impacts of environmental management decisions. In particular, decision-makers must be aware of both the environmental and social nature of these impacts. In the Mekong region, planning for communications and energy infrastructure development holds a central position within national and regional economic development strategies. The current and potential transboundary impacts of such developments underscore the importance of cooperative approaches.
- *Public access to information and decision-making* – Basic legal and policy frameworks should provide the public with access to information and decision-making concerning the environmental degradation that affects their lives, and with equitable access to judicial recourse in the event of damages. There are some promising developments in the Mekong region, such as the 1997 Thai Constitution’s provision for public access to information and the development of the Asian Development Bank’s internet-based tools for facilitating information provision. Nonetheless, basic access of the general public to information and meaningful roles in decision-making are by no means secured.

One of the Mekong region’s particular challenges is that it lacks a strong civil society movement that in other parts of the world has pressured public institutions to improve their public accountability. The situation of civil society differs radically among the countries of the region. For example, Thailand has a vibrant civil society, comprising community-based movements and religious organizations as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and research institutes. But in comparison, civil society — especially domestic NGOs — in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and China is still weak, and in Burma (Myanmar), a functional civil society does not exist. What is more, there is not yet a strong Mekong regional civil society network to act as a counterpart and pressure group on the governmental processes that are driving regional development. There is neither a strong network of NGOs and researchers, nor a wider civil society network including social movements.

CICP, TEI, and WRI decided to convene a group of environmental experts from NGOs and research institutes to address the need for more transparent, integrated management of the region’s environment. The first Regional Environmental Forum for Mainland Southeast Asia was therefore an experiment. It was an experiment to see whether participants were interested in strengthening and formalizing a network to monitor regional environmental governance processes over time. It was also the first step of a longer-term experiment to see whether such a group could effectively influence regional debates.

## **What Did the Forum Do?**

In preparation for the REF, the organizers conducted a survey regarding trends in environmental conditions, key issues in environmental management and roles of institutions. The survey was intended to capture the views of non-governmental “opinion leaders” rather than a representative sample of public opinion.

Around 80 environmental experts from NGOs and research institutions in the five Mekong countries received the survey and 30 responded. The REF organizers collected and synthesized the data, and presented it on the first day of the Forum as a catalyst for further discussion. Because of funding constraints, the organizers were unable to support all survey recipients to attend the meeting itself. The organizers encouraged meeting participants to fill out the survey before the event.

Survey respondents indicated that environmental conditions in the Mekong region are deteriorating across the board — from forest and freshwater to marine resources. Survey respondents emphasized the role of governments in increasing environmental policy performance, by increasing the collection and disclosure of environmental information and increasing the opportunities for citizen participation in planning. They also expressed the hope that civil society groups could play an increased role in decisions that affect the environment at a regional level. Respondents noted the significant gap in mainland Southeast Asia between environmental laws and policies, and their actual implementation.

The Forum was attended by 35 researchers from Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Yunnan China PRC and Burma (Myanmar). Most came from non-governmental institutions, although a small number came from quasi-autonomous government research institutes. All participants took part in their personal capacities and were invited on the basis of their ability to provide an independent voice on environmental issues.

The program lasted for two days. The first day featured general introductions, and a presentation of the REF Survey of Perceptions on Environmental Governance. While the survey results generated interest, participants indicated that a more rigorous survey would be helpful in the future, as opposed to the survey of expert opinion undertaken in 2002. Authors presented their Country Perspective Papers for critical feedback. Each paper provided an overview of the environmental situation and environmental policy framework in the author’s country, and assessed the country’s contribution to environmental governance at the Mekong regional level. Authors also discussed the future prospects for improving environmental governance at the national and regional levels. Based on colleagues’ feedback at the Forum meeting, the authors have revised the papers for publication in this volume. The Country Perspective Papers solely represent the opinions of the authors and in no way represent the views of the broader group of participants at the Forum meeting.

On the second day, participants broke out into working groups to formulate recommendations for improved regional environmental governance for decision-makers

and other regional actors. Participants at the Forum focused discussions on broad issues of environmental governance, rather than any specific development project or program. The groups focused on three main topics: Access to Information, Participation, and Transboundary/Regional Issues. Once working groups had drafted recommendations, they presented them to the plenary session for refinement and approval. The three sets of recommendations were synthesized into a final Consensus Statement of the Forum.

The REF was held shortly after high profile ministerial meetings such as the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN+3 Meeting, ASEAN-China meeting, and the meeting of Greater Mekong Subregion leaders, all of which took place in Phnom Penh. A major civil society gathering, including NGOs and farmers' movements, entitled the Dialogue on River Basin Development and Civil Society, also took place in early November in Ubol Rachatani, Thailand.

Discussions at the REF were situated very much in the context of these parallel meetings and with a view to identifying a niche for the REF group. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, executive director of CICP, opened the REF with remarks on the recent ASEAN summits. He called on civil society colleagues to mobilize for additional, effective input to future summits through the "Track II" discussions, which take place in parallel with the "Track I" ASEAN ministerial processes. The unofficial Track II talks include participants from academic and government who are acting in their personal capacity. They address regional political and security issues, including some issues that the official talks are not yet ready to address.

At the end of the REF meeting, participants established a Steering Committee. The Steering Committee will deliberate whether there should be another Forum and if so, whether it should be organized in parallel to official processes, or on an independent timeline.

### **What is the Forum's Impact?**

CICP, TEI and WRI hoped that broad distribution of the Forum's recommendations would raise the profile of regional environmental governance concerns, and awareness of sound policy options, among decision-makers and the general public. We are pleased that the Consensus Statement has succeeded in garnering much attention.

Following the meeting, the organizers issued the Consensus Statement and a press release to the local and regional media. The *Bangkok Post* ran two articles about the Forum's activities. Khmer, Chinese, English and French-language press and radio stations in Cambodia interviewed Forum participants and carried news of the meeting. In addition, the *Bangkok Post* articles and the Consensus Statement were distributed widely on regional and international listservs and in newsletters.

The media coverage generated many inquiries from national and international institutions about next steps. Embassies, regional agencies such as UNESCAP, and international

organizations such as UNDP sought more information about the survey and follow-up opportunities for exchange.

It is early to gauge the practical results of the Forum. But the organizers hope that this report will encourage interest among concerned readers for future dialogues. We also hope that the Forum's recommendations will be carried forward in the work of participants and concerned stakeholders to improve the policy and practice of environmental governance in mainland Southeast Asia.

### **Contact Us**

We invite readers to check our website at <http://www.ref-msea.org> for updates about future activities of the Forum and ways they can contribute or be involved. Alternately, you may contact Dr Somrudee Nicro and Prin Visavakum at Thailand Environment Institute, [somrudee@tei.or.th](mailto:somrudee@tei.or.th) and [pond@tei.or.th](mailto:pond@tei.or.th) ; or Dr Kao Kim Hourn at Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace at [cicp@camnet.org.kh](mailto:cicp@camnet.org.kh) for more information.

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*Organizers of the first Regional Environmental Forum*

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