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Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

MEKONG-AUSTRALIA PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT

2023

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GLOSSARY

ADIS	Alumni Development Impact Survey
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AVEG	Australia-Vietnam Economic Engagement Grant Program
CCTCP	Cyber and Critical Tech Cooperation Program
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSP	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
CCSU	Cyber Cooperation Support Unit
DFAT	Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EEES	Australia-Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Strategy
EOPO	End-of-Program Outcome
ERF	Economic Resilience Fund
FDI	Foreign Direct investment
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
LDPA	Laos Disabled Peoples Association
MAP	Mekong-Australia Partnership
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MFICII	Mekong Foreign Investment and Critical Infrastructure Initiative
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
MRC	Mekong River Commission
MSME	Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises
NIDIR	Cambodia's National Institute for Diplomacy and International Relations
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIDIR	Cambodia's National Institute for Diplomacy and International Relations
ODA	Official Development Assistance
P4I	Partnerships for Infrastructure
PMU	Project Management Unit

SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
VDF	Village Development Fund
WEC	Water, Energy and Climate
WPA	Wine Producers Australia

Executive Summary

In its fourth year of implementation the Mekong-Australia Partnership (MAP) has continued to support sustainable development and environmental and economic resilience in the Mekong subregion (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) through bilateral and regional activities that complement existing bilateral funding. This Annual Report focuses on the progress and achievements of MAP activities across the five Pillars of its first phase – (1) Economic Resilience, (2) Water, Energy and Climate (WEC), (3) Human Capacity, (4) Cyber and (5) Trade and Investment – from 1 January to 31 December 2023.

Key findings on progress and achievements at the MAP Portfolio level

Across the MAP Pillars, 2023 saw strengthened cooperation with partner governments, private sector partners and communities in the Mekong subregion that significantly contributed to the achievement of Pillar outcomes (as shown in the table below). This has resulted in strong progress towards achieving the overall MAP End-of-Program Outcomes (EOPOs) and contributing to a peaceful, stable and prosperous Mekong subregion.

MAP-funded activities supported economic recovery efforts, as well as targeted initiatives to strengthen institutions and human capacity across key areas, including; Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI); water; environment; energy; education; cybersecurity; public financial management; infrastructure; and trade and investment. Activity reporting showed positive feedback from partner country governments and activity recipients, high participation in MAP activities, and continued requests for training, workshops, study visits, short courses and regional events to enable policy dialogue and learning across the Pillars.

Through the provision of technical assistance and capacity building, MAP activities led to reforms and regulatory changes across partner country governments, which have resulted in strengthened institutional functioning and informed decision making. MAP activities have also enabled the upskilling and training of government officials, students, community members and civil society organisation (CSO) partners. Of note, MAP-funded targeted GEDSI initiatives across the Mekong subregion enabled women to have a voice and be included in decisions that affect them. Examples of these contributions are shown throughout this Annual Report.

It is important to note that the findings within this Annual Report are based on available existing resources and may not provide a comprehensive picture. Despite many MAP activities concluding in this reporting period, progress reporting focussed on the achievement of outputs (the direct results of MAP-funded activities) as opposed to reporting on outcomes that demonstrate the broader impacts of MAP investments.

Key findings on progress and achievements at the MAP Pillar level

Summary of Pillar Progress







Pillar 1 – Economic Resilience

In 2023, Pillar activities contributed to achieving outcomes and building partnerships with the Mekong subregion partner governments, private sector partners and non-government organisations (NGOs). For a region with varying economic challenges, political environments and operational constraints, this Pillar demonstrated respectable gains. These were partly due to its demand-driven nature, the reasonable scope, size and timeframes of Pillar activities, and co-funded donor programs. The achievement of Pillar outcomes was evident through notable examples whereby technical assistance and recommendations informed new legislation, practices and strengthened social and consumer protection, which in turn created enabling environments for businesses and promoted foreign direct investment.

Activities within this Pillar also made meaningful progress in advancing GEDSI outcomes. For example, MAP's provision of technical assistance to Laos' statistical system facilitated the adoption of new practices to enable more gender and disability inclusive statistical data collection and reporting.

01 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary of Pillar Progress

 <p>Pillar 2 – Water, Energy and Climate</p>	<p>This Pillar’s activities have been pivotal in laying the foundational work to enhance water security across the Mekong subregion, building the capacity of partners to plan and implement initiatives on clean energy, and enhancing the capacity of smallholder farmers, vulnerable groups, and Mekong authorities to adapt to and mitigate climate change impacts. Regionally, and across countries, MAP supported the institutionalisation of several policies and practices that strengthen water security. These include the regional Guidelines for Fish Pass Monitoring in the Lower Mekong Basin; the River Basin Monitoring Tool in Cambodia; Vietnam’s amended Law on Water Resources, which came into force in November 2023; the completion and trial implementation of the first comprehensive guidance for the coordination of flows in a major river basin in Laos; and the implementation of the Reservoir Sediment and Water Quality Index in Thailand. Through initiatives such as the Proactive Regional Planning process by the Mekong River Commission (MRC), efforts have been made to increase awareness and capacity in the adoption of sustainable energy solutions. This Pillar contributed to an increased capability of organisations and individuals across the Mekong to become better equipped to respond to the challenges posed by climate change, such as through piloting innovative farming models in Vietnam, strengthening urban planning in Thailand by integrating nature-based solutions in the design of urban public spaces, and strengthening disaster risk management in Laos.</p>
 <p>Pillar 3 – Human Capacity</p>	<p>The short-term activities within this Pillar equipped alumni with new knowledge, skills, and networks across different sectors of interest in the Mekong subregion to tackle national and regional challenges. More than three-quarters of short course alumni from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were able to provide valid examples of their contribution to the sustainable development of their country, including on policy or strategy development, program implementation and upskilling others. Alumni contributed to bilateral cooperation through the provision of advice and information to others on Australian expertise, business and education opportunities. Almost one-third of alumni from Laos and Cambodia contributed directly to this outcome by facilitating a collaborative project between their respective countries and Australia. Reflections from Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) posts validated significant diplomatic gains achieved through this Pillar’s activities.</p>
 <p>Pillar 4 – Cyber</p>	<p>Many activities in this Pillar commenced in this reporting period, however early evidence suggested that outputs have contributed to positive results and are well positioned to support the achievement of outcomes. Early evidence shows that materials provided have been useful inputs for future policy and legislative developments. The activity reporting showed that workshops, advocacy materials and research products have built the capacity and knowledge of policymakers across a variety of cyber-related themes. Across the Mekong subregion, this Pillar’s activities contributed towards enhancing access to cyber-related information across communities; improving understanding of existing cyber capability; bolstering confidence and capacity of stakeholders to use available resources and processes; strengthening the knowledge base to inform future cyber activities; and strengthening action plans and protocols to progress cyber issues and respond to threats.</p>
 <p>Pillar 5 – Trade and Investment</p>	<p>Under this pillar a range of diverse activities focused on growing two-way trade and investment was delivered. A key initiative included the implementation of the Australia-Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Strategy (EEES), which included ongoing initiatives such as the appointment of business champions and EEES Grants. In 2023, 14 EEES Grant Program (AVEG) grants were completed in the fields of education, skills and training; science, technology and innovation; services; tourism; and fostering fertile businesses and investments. AVEG enabled the implementation of the EEES by funding projects that created economic opportunities and deepened business cooperation between Australia and Vietnam. AVEG Round Two opened in early 2023, with the intention to further deepen Australia and Vietnam’s economic relationship to meet the policy objectives of the EEES. A notable achievement for this Pillar over the 2023 reporting period was the success of the AusHub across three sectors: wine, fruits and wool. In a collaborative effort between the Australian Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam (AusCham) and DFAT, AusHub was established in 2022 with the objective to foster new bilateral trade and investment opportunities in alignment with EEES.</p>

Funding for the first phase of MAP concluded in June 2024, with some activities due for completion in the 2024-25 financial year. MAP investments will continue to focus on strengthening partnerships with the Mekong subregion and influencing policy dialogue that will contribute to further achievement of MAP’s EOPOs. The second phase of MAP is well positioned to build upon the established partnerships and results across the Mekong subregion that were developed in the first phase.

02 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The first phase of MAP comprised a four-year \$232 million program (2020-21 to 2023-24) funded by the Australian Government. MAP was launched in November 2020 aiming to bolster the Mekong subregion's resilience and support inclusive, sustainable growth. The Mekong subregion (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) is home to over 240 million people and is important to Australia, with a strong history of cooperation and deep connections through government and people. The three Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) least developed member states (Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar) are in the subregion.

Through MAP, Australia seeks to enhance its engagement with the Mekong subregion and to flexibly respond to shared regional challenges by building capabilities and resilience across sectors, to support a peaceful, stable and prosperous region. MAP is integral to building relationships, as well as sharing knowledge and skills for sustainable development. MAP works alongside other programs run by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and with other development partners in Southeast Asia, including multilateral organisations and CSOs.

The first phase of MAP has been overseen and managed by the Office of Southeast Asia within DFAT. In its fourth year of implementation, MAP has continued to make subregion-wide investments, through new bilateral, multi-country and regional activities that complement existing bilateral funding. Official Development Assistance (ODA) and non-ODA funding was allocated to the following five MAP Pillars:

- Pillar 1: Economic Resilience (\$60.7m ODA and \$2.4m non-ODA)
- Pillar 2: Water, Energy and Climate (WEC, \$45.9m ODA)
- Pillar 3: Human Capacity (\$28.4m ODA)
- Pillar 4: Cyber (\$8.6m ODA)
- Pillar 5: Trade and Investment (\$16.9m non-ODA).

In the 2023 reporting period, MAP provided significant ODA and non-ODA funding through the five MAP Pillars that are aligned with the Australian Government's Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response and Australia's new International Development Policy.

Purpose of this Annual Report

This 2023 Annual Report presents the progress of the overall MAP Portfolio and its five Pillars for the period commencing 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023. Assessments of results and progress are based exclusively on available activity and completion reporting during this period, with the exception of a key informant interview to develop a case study for Pillar 5.

This introductory section presents the overview of the MAP portfolio and the five Pillars. The Report then provides a summary of the progress of achievements at the Portfolio level (Section 3) and Pillar level (Section 4).

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MAP goal and outcomes

The overall goals of the first phase of MAP are ‘to foster an inclusive and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and support an open, prosperous, independent and stable Mekong subregion and Indo-Pacific region in which Australia is well regarded’. Supporting these goals are three EOPOs to which the five Pillars align and contribute towards. Each of the five Pillars have their own goals and underpinning Pillar outcomes. These are detailed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: MAP EOPOs, Pillar Goals and Pillar Outcomes


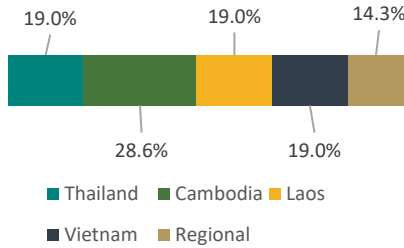


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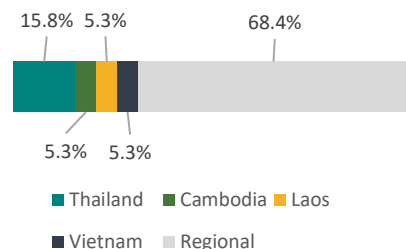

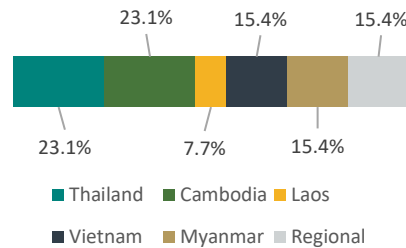
Overview of MAP Pillars

An overview of MAP's five Pillars is detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Overview of MAP Pillars

	Overview	Implementation arrangements	Volume and types of activities
 <p>Pillar 1 - Economic Resilience</p>	<p>Economic Resilience formed the largest of the five MAP Pillars. Implemented between 2020-21 and 2023-24, this Pillar was designed to share Australia's technical knowledge with the Mekong subregion to inform evidence-based economic decisions and investments.</p> <p>The overarching aim of this Pillar was to support the Mekong subregion's economic recovery from COVID-19, economic resilience to external shocks and pressures, and capacity to withstand challenges.</p> <p>The activities within this Pillar complemented Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I), another Australian Government initiative that focuses on partnering with Southeast Asia to foster inclusive growth through sustainable infrastructure.</p>	<p>The Economic Resilience Pillar comprised two components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the Economic Resilience Fund (ERF), with a \$60.7 million budget of ODA funding the Mekong Foreign Investment and Critical Infrastructure Initiative (MFICII), with a \$2.4 million budget of non-ODA funding. <p>While the two components had separate implementation and management arrangements, both utilised a similar demand-driven approach whereby activities were proposed and selected based on agreed criteria with partner governments. Further, both components built on other DFAT or trusted partner activities.</p>	<p>Of the 21 activities implemented in this reporting period, three activities were regional (14.3%) and the remaining 18 activities were bilateral (85.7%) as shown in the diagram below.</p>  <p>Activities included technical assistance, resource development, research, workshops and capacity development.</p>

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	Overview	Implementation arrangements	Volume and types of activities
 <p>Pillar 2 – Water, Energy and Climate (or Environmental Resilience)</p>	<p>The WEC Pillar combined the former Greater Mekong Water Resources Program with additional bilateral, regional, and multi-country initiatives over the financial years 2019-2020 to 2024-25.</p> <p>This Pillar supported Mekong subregion countries and regional architecture to improve water security, enhance access and ability to implement clean energy solutions, and strengthen capacity to adapt to and mitigate climate change and pollution.</p>	<p>The Pillar is overseen by the WEC Steering Committee which provided high-level direction, guidance, and advice on the implementation of the Pillar.</p> <p>The Bangkok-based Project Management Unit (PMU) managed WEC at the pillar level, providing budget management, program oversight and regional coordination, including the development of pipelines and reporting on the portfolio of activities across the region. The PMU also supported DFAT posts with activity development, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and learning, and communications.</p>	<p>Of the 19 activities implemented in this reporting period, 13 activities (68.4%) were regional and the remaining six activities (31.6%) were bilateral as shown in the diagram below.</p>  <p>Activities included technical assistance, strategy/policy development, implementation support, research projects, training, and capacity development.</p>
 <p>Pillar 3 – Human Capacity</p>	<p>This Pillar delivered education, knowledge transfer and building of enduring relationships that advanced mutual interests.</p> <p>It provided short-term awards to current and emerging leaders for study and professional development, long-term masters-level scholarships in Australia and enrichment support.</p> <p>These activities provide current and future decision-makers with access to Australian expertise and networks, different ways of thinking, and skills to enhance critical decision-making relevant for regional development.</p>	<p>Delivery of the Pillar's activities is carried out bilaterally by DFAT posts, with funds and activity implementation managed primarily through Australia Awards programs in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.</p> <p>In the absence of an Australia Awards program in Thailand, the delivery of short-term awards is managed by the University of Queensland. The Laos Australia Institute supported the Australian Embassy in Bangkok during the selection and mobilisation of long-term Thai scholars.</p>	<p>Of the 26 short-term activities implemented in this reporting period, five activities were regional (15.4%) and the remaining 21 activities (84.6%) were bilateral as shown in the diagram below.</p>  <p>Of the 47 long-term scholars mobilised, eight scholars completed their masters degrees by December 2023 (three Cambodian, two Lao, and three Thai scholars).</p>

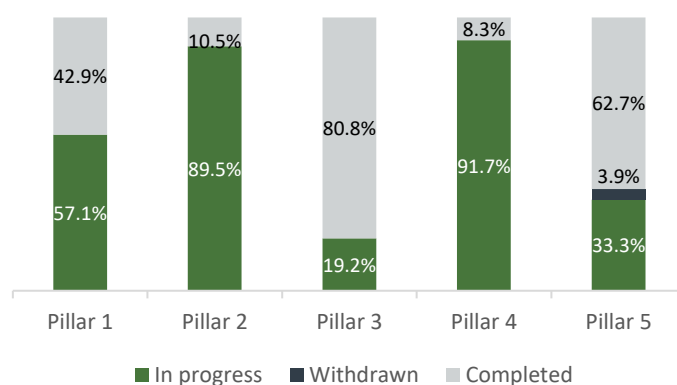
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	Overview	Implementation arrangements	Volume and types of activities
 <p>Pillar 4 - Cyber</p>	<p>This Pillar aimed to strengthen cyber and critical technology resilience in the Mekong subregion, particularly in relation to telecommunications and critical infrastructure.</p> <p>The Cyber Pillar contributed directly to DFAT's wider Cyber and Critical Tech Cooperation Program (CCTCP) by expanding its portfolio and types of activities. Implemented since May 2016, CCTCP is a nine-year \$74.07 million investment that supported the implementation of Australia's 2021 International Cyber and Critical Tech Engagement Strategy in the Indo-Pacific region by championing an open, free and secure cyberspace.</p>	<p>DFAT leads Australia's international engagement on cyber and critical technology across the Australian Government. The Cyber Cooperation Support Unit (CCSU) finished work at the end of June 2023. MAP cyber work previously undertaken by the CCSU is now managed by DFAT's Cyber Cooperation Program.</p> <p>Activities are delivered by a variety of implementing partners including from industry, academia, NGOs, CSOs, Australian Government departments and United Nations (UN) agencies that are selected via a mixture of open tender, competitive grant rounds and direct sourcing.</p>	<p>Of the 12 activities implemented in the reporting period, six activities were regional (50.0%) and the remaining six activities were bilateral (50.0%) as shown in the diagram below.</p>  <p>■ Thailand ■ Laos ■ Vietnam ■ Regional</p> <p>Activities in Cambodia were organised for the region and so have been placed under 'Regional'.</p> <p>Activities included grants, training, research and advocacy and technical assistance/workshops.</p>
 <p>Pillar 5 - Trade and Investment</p>	<p>This Pillar focused on enhancing bilateral trade and investment between Australia and Vietnam to facilitate sustainable, inclusive economic growth for both countries. It centred on the implementation of the EEES.</p> <p>The EEES supports Australia and Vietnam's joint ambition to become top ten trading partners and double two-way investment. The EEES Implementation Plan covers an initial period from 2021 to 2025.</p>	<p>The activities within this Pillar were structured around the EEES' ten areas of practical cooperation in key economic sectors to promote trade and investment between Australia and Vietnam. Eight of the areas are sector-focused, while the remaining two areas represent cross-cutting themes.</p> <p>The eight sectors were: Education, Skills, Training; Resources and Energy; Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; Manufacturing; Tourism; Science, Technology and Innovation; Digital Economy; and Services.</p> <p>The two cross-cutting thematic areas were fostering fertile business and investment environments, and promotion of free and open trade and investment.</p>	<p>Of the 51 MAP initiatives, 32 were completed, with an additional 16 on track. Three initiatives were withdrawn or cancelled.</p> <p>Activities included the facilitation of business-led forums for discussion, relationship building events or dialogues, grant-funded research studies and technical advice.</p>

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Across the 129 MAP-funded activities relevant to the 2023 reporting period, 50.4 per cent were completed, while 48.1 per cent of activities remained in progress during the reporting period (with the remaining 1.5 per cent withdrawn). A breakdown of the completion status of activities for each Pillar is shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Relative proportion of individual MAP Pillar activities by their completion status



The high number of short-term activities within the Human Capacity Pillar (Pillar 3) completed in 2023 significantly contributed to the overall MAP activity completion rate for this reporting period.

A further detailed breakdown of Pillar-level activity by status is shown below at Table 2.

Table 2: List of completed and in progress activities by Pillar and country

Pillar	Status						Regional Total
1 – ERF/MFICII	In progress	4	3	3	-	-	12
	Completed	2	1	1	4	-	9
2 – WEC	In progress	-	-	1	3	-	13
	Completed	1	1	-	-	-	2
3 - Human Capacity	In progress	2	1	-	1	-	5
	Completed	4	1	4	4	4	21
4 - Cyber	In progress	-	2	2	1	-	6
	Completed	-	-	-	1	-	1
5 – Trade and Investment	In progress	-	-	17	-	-	17
	Other	-	-	2	-	-	2
	Completed	-	-	32	-	-	32

03 OVERALL MAP PORTFOLIO PROGRESS

Assessment of achievement against MAP EOPOs

Due to the COVID-19 context in which MAP was established, the flexibility provided by MAP has been beneficial for government, regional architecture and implementing partners. The Strategic Review of MAP conducted in 2023 noted that partner countries appreciated “Australia’s practical, flexible, and demand-driven approach”. However, the varied breadth and depth of MAP activities across the five pillars created some challenges for activity and pillar reporting in line with MAP’s three EOPOs. The challenges aggregating and assessing whole-of-MAP results during the 2023 reporting period primarily related to the: (1) inconsistent application of MEL Frameworks and progress reporting across MAP Pillars; and (2) almost 48 per cent of MAP-funded activities for the 2023 reporting period that were ‘in progress’ as of 31 December 2023.

Despite the challenges with measuring and assessing outcomes at the MAP portfolio level and against the three EOPOs, there were many examples from activity reporting that showed how MAP-funded activities made progress towards strengthening Australia’s economic, political and development cooperation relationships across the Mekong subregion and built institutional capacity and knowledge across a range of sectors. This section provides an overarching assessment against MAP’s three EOPOs by assessing the achievements at the Pillar and activity levels and highlights key examples that demonstrate progress towards EOPOs.

EOPO 1 – Promotion of a stable, prosperous, and independent Mekong subregion through providing high quality support to subregional states to deliver inclusive national development agendas and sustained economic growth, and by building institutional capacity and knowledge on sustainable development practice and foreign investment analysis

Evidence and examples from the Economic Resilience Pillar (Pillar 1) and Human Capacity Pillar (Pillar 3) demonstrate the achievement of **EOPO 1**, with many MAP activities relevant to this EOPO concluding in the 2023 reporting period. These activities demonstrated how investments resulted in the successful provision of high-quality technical assistance and capacity building that led to technical recommendations informing new or amended legislation, decrees and practices. As a result, several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between Australia and Mekong partner governments were agreed upon to continue training, capacity building, technical assistance and other partnership activities in the future. A notable example of the strengthening of institutional capacity and knowledge of sustainable development practice was the Mekong Safeguards Program (implemented in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam) which engaged with 13 organisations including businesses, NGOs and CSOs in 2023, leading to an increased use of Environmental, Social and Governance standards in decision-making and infrastructure projects.

Two key examples in Cambodia demonstrate MAP’s partnership-based approaches and support for inclusive economic growth and foreign direct investment policies. First, Cambodia and Australia collaborated to publish a Handbook on Investing in Cambodia, which provides a comprehensive guide for prospective investors looking to invest in Cambodia. The Handbook is the first publication to provide information on the new sub-decree (published in June 2023) on the Law on Investment which provides enhanced measures to attract investment into Cambodia including simplified registration procedures, enhanced guarantees and protections, and fiscal incentives. In the second example, a targeted MAP activity strengthened household resilience and inclusive national development. The Improving Social Protection and Health in Cambodia activity, implemented in partnership with the German Corporation for International Cooperation, identified approximately 500,000 additional households to register in the IDPoor database. This enabled these households to receive assistance through the ‘Cash Transfer Program for at-risk households during high inflation and affected by floods’ and other social protection programs.

EOPO 2 – Through strengthening cooperative relationships with Australia and developing institutional and human capacity, Mekong subregion countries reduce vulnerability, and demonstrate multidimensional resilience to economic, energy, environmental and cyber challenges

Through the Human Capacity Pillar (Pillar 3) and Water, Energy and Climate Pillar (Pillar 2), there was demonstrated evidence of the achievement of **EOPO 2**. There is ample evidence from activities conducted in 2023 that MAP improved institutional and human capacity by equipping alumni with new knowledge, skills, and

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networks across different sectors of interest to tackle national and regional challenges. From Pillar 3, around 683 participants (251 male / 281 female / seven people living with a disability / two minority) from across the Mekong subregion attended short-term activities including in-person and online short courses, relationship building activities and training. The short courses contributed to cooperation between Australia and partner countries.

The Alumni Development Impact Survey (ADIS) or equivalent surveys undertaken for Australia Awards Short Courses across the countries showed that for short courses, 91 per cent of alumni in Cambodia, 83 per cent of alumni in Laos, 100 per cent of alumni in Vietnam, and 75 per cent of alumni in Thailand reported using newly gained skills, knowledge and networks to contribute to sustainable development. Examples of the use of new knowledge, skills, and networks among alumni included:

- applying knowledge in project proposal formulation to develop a project aimed at empowering students with skills necessary for employment readiness at the university level
- promoting ethnic minority representation in teams and enhancing workplace policies that supported gender equality
- delivering capacity-building training, activity budgeting, planning, implementation, and team performance assessments.

This was also evidenced by more than three-quarters of alumni responding to ADIS from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos being able to provide valid examples of their contribution to the sustainable development of their countries. The provision of advice and information by alumni to others on Australian expertise, businesses and education opportunities contributed demonstrably to bilateral cooperation. Almost one-third of alumni from Laos and Cambodia contributed to this EOPO by facilitating a collaborative project or coordinating a mutual agreement between their respective countries and Australia. Some alumni also went on to receive promotions and undertake key roles following participation in MAP-funded activities. For example, the World Bank's provision of a Leadership and Innovation Program in Cambodia included a participant who was subsequently appointed Minister of Health, and remarked that the skills gained from this activity helped to address challenges in their ministry.

Notable examples of the institutionalisation of several policies, legislation and practices intended to improve environmental resilience and water security across the Mekong subregion include:

- the regional Guidelines for Fish Pass Monitoring in the Lower Mekong Basin
- the River Basin Monitoring Tool in Cambodia
- Vietnam's amended Law on Water Resources came into force in November 2023
- the completion and trial implementation of the first comprehensive guidance for the coordination of flows in a major river basin in Laos
- the implementation of the Reservoir Sediment and Water Quality Index in Thailand.

Under this EOPO, there was evidence of affected communities increasing environmental resilience and reducing household vulnerabilities to climate change due to targeted initiatives such as:

- In Rattanakiri Province in **Cambodia**, after training sessions on early warning systems and disaster risk management in three communities, 57 participants (including 37 women participants) from the Kaeng Sann and Malik communes were trained in the utilisation of a national Early Warning System (and hazard prediction tool). Additional awareness raising activities were subsequently extended to three other villages, reaching a total of 148 people. As a result of these efforts, participants reported an improved understanding of, and access to, 1294, enabling them to utilise the information effectively in preparing for climate risks and disasters.
- In **Vietnam**, the flood-based fish farming and integrated floating rice-fish Nature-based Solution (NbS) model was piloted in Vinh Dai (100 hectares) and Thanh Hung (50 hectares) communes. Farmers from these two target communes successfully conducted collective fish and floating rice farming activities. The farmers demonstrated a reduction in their input costs through the more precise (via use of drones) application of

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fertilisers and pesticides, reduced extra-labour needs, and generated additional income from providing agricultural drone services to others. Data collected showed that the experimental NbS models offer significant contributions to the local ecosystem and biodiversity with better water quality, better soil health, with higher sedimentation and water retention capacity.

- In **Laos**, six Village Development Fund (VDF) management committees were successfully established in Laos. A total of 66 VDF management committee members received training on financial literacy, business development and VDF governance, credit, internal controls and audit. Each VDF was given a seed fund of approximately USD5,000 to finance various climate-resilient livelihoods. As a result, six target villages accessed microfinance support and established saving mechanisms with 108 households producing livelihood/business development plans (78 per cent female) to access loans for livelihood activity implementation (agroforestry, livestock, and cultivation). These households are currently implementing different projects - integrated or mixed year-round farming, natural water retention measure systems, organic fertiliser/ pesticides production, plant grafting production and fish processing.

MAP activities also helped to build the capacity of regional and in-country partners to plan and implement initiatives on clean energy. For example, initiatives like the MRC's Proactive Regional Planning process and the organisation of Clean Energy Week in Cambodia increased awareness and capacity for the adoption of sustainable energy solutions. Alumni from Vietnam applied learnings from Australia's experience to the: finalisation of a carbon market development project, which is expected to be piloted in 2025 and applied nationwide in 2028; provided advice and policy solutions to the Electricity Authority of Vietnam; and developed an electrical operational plan for the central region of Vietnam with an adjusted cost calculation method for a higher rate of renewable energy penetration.

While there were positive indications that Cyber-focused activities contributed to increased skills and knowledge that will build cyber resilience, it should be noted that many Pillar 4 activities remained in progress and there was limited follow-up of participants to understand their longer-term application of new skills, knowledge, understanding or networks developed through their participation in MAP activities. There is not yet clear evidence of cyber and critical technology policy and legislation being developed or examples of effective and enhanced resistance to cyber threats as a result of MAP activities. Of note, in line with requests from UN Women's partners for increased support to maintain a gender and digital rights network and a tool to facilitate collaborative efforts to advance the Women, Peace and Cybersecurity agenda, a joint roadmap was developed during a MAP-supported Regional Workshop to enhance capacities and pilot e-learning modules.

EOPO 3 – Australia's economic, political and development relationships in the Mekong subregion are strengthened and continue to develop positively

For **EOPO 3**, reporting and evidence indicated the achievement of this EOPO. Activity reporting across all Pillars provided clear examples of activities resulting in the strengthening of economic, political and development relationships across the Mekong subregion. This was further evidenced by the breadth of relationships and continued engagement with key partner government stakeholders (including through establishing MoUs) across MAP Pillars. To a lesser extent, there was also evidence of relationships being strengthened with private sector partners, activity recipients, community members, development partners and other stakeholders. The Strategic Review of MAP conducted in 2023 reported that MAP had "expanded and deepened Australia's engagement in the Mekong subregion as a credible and responsive partner of choice on mutually important policy priorities."

Notable examples below demonstrate how relationships were strengthened across countries and Pillars through the provision of technical assistance and training, which led to increased understanding, skills and networks:

- Australia's success in stepping up relations with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party was directly attributed to the success of MAP's capacity building activities. Since the establishment of MAP, capacity building activities in **Laos** focused on building leadership capacity for existing and emerging Lao leaders in Party organisations, resulting in the expansion of capacity building activities for the Lao Party into new areas such as human rights.

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- the third Australian Treasury – **Vietnam** Ministry of Finance Economic Policy Dialogue meeting was held in Hanoi in August 2023. The event discussed a range of issues, including global minimum tax, capital markets and green transition. Feedback from participants indicated that they found the dialogue useful for sharing learnings and expertise on common economic issues that both countries were addressing. The Ministry of Finance expressed an interest in renewing the MoU beyond 2023 and continuing the Economic Policy Dialogues to continue to build capacity and strengthen institutional links with Vietnam.
- following their participation in the 'Fundamentals of Governance for Mining Industry Regulators' short course delivered in 2023, all 14 **Cambodian** participants who attended the World Mining Congress in Brisbane either agreed or strongly agreed that the course equipped them with enhanced skills, knowledge, and networks, bolstering their ability to contribute to the advancement of Cambodia's extractive industry. Participants acquired knowledge on community engagement, Indigenous Rights, transparency, accountability, energy sustainability, mine closure and environmental impacts.

Achievements in Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI)

GEDSI is a foundational cross-cutting theme across MAP. Its approach is guided by DFAT's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy (2016); DFAT's Development for All 2015-2020: Strategy for strengthening disability-inclusive development in Australia's Aid Program (2015); and the strategic objectives outlined in the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in DFAT's Aid Program: Good Practice Note (2022).

Across MAP Pillars, achievements and results relating to advancing GEDSI were primarily a result of targeted GEDSI initiatives. There was also evidence of efforts to mainstream GEDSI across MAP pillars and collect gender-disaggregated data (where possible) across the Economic Resilience (Pillar 1), WEC (Pillar 2), Human Capacity (Pillar 3) and Cyber (Pillar 4) Pillars. In Pillar 1, gender-disaggregated data was generally available for activities that delivered workshops and trainings (as opposed to technical assistance). In Pillar 2, gender-disaggregated data was collected for all activities except for one research project on fish monitoring, and there was also evidence of strategies for gender equality for some activities. In Pillar 3, all activities collected gender-disaggregated data and some activities further disaggregated data by people with a disability and/or minority groups. For Pillar 4, gender-disaggregated data was collected for all but one activity. It was not clear if gender-disaggregated data was collected for Pillar 5 due to differing reporting requirements for non-ODA funding.

The 2023 reporting period observed notable achievements for targeted GEDSI initiatives across the Pillars, with some resulting in systemic changes within MAP countries. For example:

- in **Laos**, the *Strengthening Gender and Social Inclusion Data and Analysis in the Lao PDR Statistical System* activity provided technical assistance to Laos' statistical system, which resulted in the adoption of new practices to enable more gender and disability-inclusive statistical data collection and reporting. Meaningful progress was evidenced through the establishment of a Lao Statistics Bureau-chaired GEDSI working group, and the reporting of some disaggregated data by sex, ethnicity, and other disaggregation categories in select SDG indicators in the 2024 Voluntary National Review (VNR) report. As a direct result of the technical assistance provided, the 2024 VNR report will now include a dedicated chapter on GEDSI. This will enable the Government of Laos to monitor SDGs focused on marginalised groups.
- through the Australia Mekong Water Facility, in **Vietnam**, the Hanoi Association for People with Disabilities (DP Hanoi) contributed to the national water legislation reform process through a GEDSI impact assessment of the proposed Amendment of the Law on Water Resources and its accompanying implementation Decree. DP Hanoi provided recommendations to mainstream GEDSI in the law (e.g. community consultations should ensure people with disabilities could actively participate through the provision of sign language interpreters, text documents in an accessible format, and language support for ethnic minority women). Partners took steps to facilitate inclusive activities, avoid harm to community members, and empower a national rights organisation to work with the Government of Vietnam in a meaningful way. The assessment focused on the participation of the community in water planning, water exploitation, accessibility to water information systems and to ensure that the exploitation and use of water will not affect the daily activities and socio-economic development of people living in or around these areas.

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- In **Thailand** the Mekong Safeguards Program undertook community outreach needs assessments and capability training for the communities, business owners and stakeholders affected by a high-speed railway development between Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima. The program worked with the Thai Government to ensure that communities impacted were consulted and able to mitigate any negative impacts on households living in the path of the railway. The development had a large impact footprint with the potential to affect 206 households and 544 microbusinesses. The program conducted outreach, focus groups and needs assessments with 46 local stakeholders (25 of whom were women) and ensured engagement by less represented groups including women-owned and run microbusinesses (20 stakeholders), people with hearing, visual and physical disabilities (nine stakeholders) and older persons (three stakeholders). Future planned activities are designed to empower women-owned businesses by specifically training them to meet the requirements for government support and to facilitate access to new markets as a result of the high-speed railway development.
- An online GEDSI short course for **Myanmar** resulted in the following observation from the course mentor: “The participants who presented in the final session exhibited commendable skills in translating the knowledge acquired during the course into tangible and meaningful actions ... some participants showcased a nuanced understanding of intersectionality, reflecting a comprehensive approach to GEDSI. Particularly impressive was the fact that two participants had collaborated, a development that undoubtedly fostered meaningful connections within their respective organisations. This collaborative effort stood out as a noteworthy outcome for the program.”

Progress towards climate objectives and energy transition

Climate change was another cross-cutting theme across MAP. Climate change objectives and approaches for MAP were guided by DFAT’s Climate Change Action Strategy (2020-2025) and Australia’s International Development Policy (2023).

In 2023, climate objectives had an increased focus across several Pillars. This was particularly evident for capacity building and technical assistance activities within the WEC Pillar (Pillar 2). For example, at the regional level and with MAP support, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) launched a TV Channel on Mekong Flood and Drought Forecasting, aimed at improving public awareness and understanding of Mekong River conditions in the Lower Mekong Basin. The TV Channel provides regular updates on current water levels and flows and forecasted flood and drought risks for people living along the Mekong River, broadcasting in English with subtitles in Mekong languages. It runs weekly during the rainy season and monthly during the dry season on the MRC Secretariat’s social media channels of Facebook and YouTube, reaching millions of people.

There was also evidence of targeted climate and energy-related activities and some mainstreaming of climate considerations across key subregional activities. For example, within the Human Capacity Pillar (Pillar 3), climate-focused activities included a masterclass on Climate Change and Energy Transition delivered in Vietnam, and a masterclass on Responding to the Climate Change Challenge in Thailand. In Laos, with MAP (Pillar 2) support, the World Wildlife Fund supported six climate-vulnerable communities in the Siphandone Riverscape, using ecosystem-based adaptation strategies to restore the flooded forests and riverbanks that provide essential resources for plants, animals and people. Activities within the Economic Resilience Pillar (Pillar 1) such as the Mekong Safeguards Program also considered climate and environment impacts, while others considered the people affected by climate change.

There was a concentrated focus on climate in Vietnam and Thailand throughout 2023. Vietnam was identified as a top-tier priority country partner in the Australian Government’s international climate and energy strategy, and this was reflected as a new pillar in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Australia and Vietnam. There was clear evidence of mainstreaming of climate considerations into MAP activities focused on capacity building in Vietnam. In the Vietnam-specific Trade and Investment Pillar (Pillar 5), the second round of the AVEG program emphasised a greater focus on grant proposals that covered priority areas supporting Australian businesses to contribute to climate change solutions and energy transition.

In Thailand, the University of Queensland delivered one of three masterclasses on ‘Responding to the Climate Change Challenge’. A highlight of the masterclass was that participants engaged in dialogue with Australian

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Government agencies to understand how climate policies are linked to gender policy, foreign policy and other policies. Participants visited the Office for Women and DFAT in Canberra and met the Clean Energy Finance Corporation to talk about climate finance and review the Australian Renewable Energy Target. 100 per cent of the participants either agreed or completely agreed that they were satisfied with the short course. One participant stated that the “Yarning circle on climate change impacts on Aboriginal people was very good... It is great to have [sessions] like this!” In addition to the positive feedback, the participants made an average improvement of 52 per cent in their test results after the short course delivery.

Vietnam’s 2023 activities supported progress toward energy transition and climate adaptation

In Vietnam, courses were developed in close cooperation with Government of Vietnam agencies to address Vietnam’s need to effectively manage electricity supply, integrate renewables, and manage the effects of climate change. The identification of MAP-funded short courses was operationally aligned with EEES.

As a result of the ‘*Strengthening Power System and Market Operation in the Context of Renewable Energy*’ short course, designed and delivered by Curtin University, the activity completion report highlighted that Vietnam’s National Load Dispatch Centre delegation engaged positively with all 52 industry guest speakers from 27 prominent organisations in Australia.

Intended to contribute to high-level policy formulation and ongoing dialogue, the masterclass on *Climate Change and Energy Transition* (delivered by the Institute for Climate, Energy & Disaster Solutions and the Australian National University) was delivered to 18 Members of Parliament and other high-ranking officials from Vietnam’s National Assembly and coincided with the 50th anniversary of Australia-Vietnam diplomatic relations. Feedback from participants rated the masterclass five out of five.

The *Transforming to a competitive electricity market in the context of increasing renewable energy integration* course (delivered by Griffith University) provided Vietnamese energy sector experts with exposure to a broad range of relevant Australian industry stakeholders, through guest presentations and case studies on factors impacting the viability and sustainability of energy projects and products. Sessions organised for the post-course in Hanoi were rated very highly, at 4.5 out of five or higher.

The ‘*Building the Ecosystem to Support Carbon Market Establishment*’ course (delivered by Curtin University) had a broad range of partner organisation representatives, including the Carbon Market Institute and the Clean Energy Regulator in Australia, the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre in Thailand, the Singapore AirCarbon Exchange, and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment in Vietnam. Guest speakers’ expertise, insights and practical knowledge was seen to be valuable and enhanced the learning experience for participants.

04 SUMMARY OF MAP PILLAR PROGRESS

This section presents a summary of each Pillar's progress against their intended Pillar outcomes.



Pillar 1 – Economic Resilience



Pillar outcomes:

- **Outcome 1:** Strengthened government capacity and resilience among Mekong subregion countries for public financial, investment, and economic management
- **Outcome 2:** Improved and more inclusive household resilience among countries in the Mekong subregion
- **Outcome 3:** Improved and more inclusive enabling environments for businesses in Mekong subregion countries
- **Outcome 4:** Mekong subregion countries identify and manage risks to critical infrastructure; attract and retain high quality, productive foreign investment; and make sound, well-informed decisions on foreign investment proposals.

The Economic Resilience Pillar is the largest of the five MAP Pillars. Implemented from 2020-21 to 2023-24, this Pillar is designed to share Australia's technical knowledge with the Mekong subregion to inform evidence-based economic decisions and investments. The overarching aim of this Pillar is to support the Mekong subregion's economic recovery from COVID-19, economic resilience, and capacity to withstand challenges to its stability. The activities within this Pillar complement P4I, another Australian Government initiative that focuses on partnering with Southeast Asia to foster inclusive growth through sustainable infrastructure.

The Economic Resilience Pillar comprises of two components: (1) the ERF, with a \$60.7 million budget of ODA funding; and (2) MFICII, with an \$2.4 million budget of non-ODA funding. A total of 21 activities were implemented within this Pillar across the Mekong subregion during the 2023 reporting period, with the majority of activities focused on one country, while three activities were regional.

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Summary of progress and achievement against outcomes

As of December 2023, nine of 21 Pillar activities have concluded

As this Pillar is demand-driven, activities were not evenly spread across the four Pillar-level outcomes and the Mekong subregion. A breakdown of activities by outcome was as follows:

- **Outcome 1** included nine activities (one of which is completed and eight ongoing) across all Mekong countries
- **Outcome 2** included three activities that were rolled out in Vietnam and Cambodia
- **Outcome 3** included one activity that was implemented in Vietnam and Thailand
- **Outcome 4** included eight smaller-scale activities, completed in 2023, which included regional and country-level capacity-building activities across Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

As the activities were centred around providing technical assistance, reporting was primarily focused on outputs delivered, which limits the assessment of achievements and progress against the Pillar's outcomes.

The Pillar continues to demonstrate achievement of outcomes in a gradual manner

Outcome 1, focused on governments adopting technical recommendations to inform legislation and new practices, achieved the following results during the 2023 reporting period:

- The Government of Cambodia adopted the recommendations made by the *Cambodia Trust Fund on Public Financial Management and Service Delivery* activity to improve their business process activities. They subsequently developed their own dashboard to monitor the timeliness of their financial transactions processing
- As part of the *Public Financial Management for Stability Laos* activity, the World Bank provided technical support to the government which led to the adoption of the Prime Minister's Decree on Budget Formulation in August 2023. The adoption of the Decree will enable a strong authorising environment for ministers to coordinate and jointly prepare the state budget policy statement. A notable policy reform was the reversal of the Value Added Tax from seven per cent back to 10 per cent through a presidential decree to enhance domestic revenue mobilisation and help Laos raise one per cent of GDP.

Outcome 2, focused on strengthening inclusive household resilience among countries in the Mekong subregion, recorded the following highlights across the three activities:

- In Vietnam, three Community Based Disaster Risk Assessments were conducted in three communes to identify natural disasters and climate change risks. These reports were used in 2023-2024 disaster risk management (DRM) planning and the results were integrated into the Social Economic Development Plan of the commune and provincial levels. This integration ensures that adequate resources and budget allocation are directed towards essential DRM activities
- The Government of Vietnam used advice from the *Vietnam-Australia Consumer Protection Partnership* to inform the passing of the Law on Protection of Consumers' Rights (amended)
- The Cambodian Consumer Protection Authority worked with successive experts through the *Cambodia-Australia Consumer Protection Partnership* to make improvements to its consumer complaints handling processes.

Outcome 3 focused on creating inclusive enabling environments for businesses in Mekong subregion countries. As part of the *WE RISE Together* program, in Vietnam, the Ministry of Finance adopted new guidance that enables the targeting of technical advice and human resource development support to women-owned SMEs, and SMEs that employ female workers. The program engaged various policymakers within the Ministry of Planning and Investment and the Ministry of Finance. In Thailand, the Office for Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion submitted the draft definition of women owned businesses for SMEs to the SMEs Promotion Committee (Chaired by the Prime Minister) in November 2023.

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Outcome 4 focussed on supporting Mekong countries to attract quality and sustainable foreign direct investment (FDI) from diverse sources and manage risks around FDI in line with each country's national interest considerations. This was achieved through dialogues to deepen Australia's engagement with the Mekong subregion and through shared technical expertise on foreign investment policy. A key result from 2023 included:

- The development of the Handbook on Investing in Cambodia which was launched by Australia's Special Envoy Nicholas Moore in Cambodia. The handbook was a joint project with the Council for the Development of Cambodia and was positively received by investment officials and investors as it contained up-to-date information, including details of the sub-decree released to support the 2021 Law on Investment. Cambodia's Prime Minister publicly thanked Australia for the Handbook at the ASEAN Special Summit in Melbourne.

This Pillar advanced gender and social inclusion in 2023 primarily through two targeted initiatives:

The *Strengthening Gender and Social Inclusion Data and Analysis in the Lao PDR Statistical System* activity, and the *WE RISE Together* program, promoted gender-responsive procurement in Thailand and Vietnam. Both of these activities are detailed earlier in Section 3 of this report.



Pillar 2 – Water, Energy and Climate



Pillar outcomes:

- **Outcome 1:** Improved local, national and transboundary water security
- **Outcome 2:** Clean energy transitions, more integrated system planning, and Mekong sub-regional cooperation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- **Outcome 3:** Improved capacity of smallholder farmers, vulnerable groups and Mekong authorities to adapt to and mitigate climate and pollution impacts through agricultural, urban and ecosystem interventions.

The WEC Pillar has the second highest allocation of MAP funding, at \$45.9 million. Collectively, the bilateral, regional, and multi-country activities within this Pillar strengthen the environmental resilience of the Mekong subregion countries. This Pillar is grounded in the understanding that Mekong subregion countries and communities are confronted by interrelated water, energy and climate challenges. Accordingly, this investment supports Mekong subregion countries to improve water security; enhance access and ability to implement clean energy solutions; and strengthen capacity to adapt to and mitigate climate change and pollution.

In 2023, this Pillar funded 19 activities, with the majority being regional in nature and implemented across Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. There was one regional activity with limited engagement in Myanmar.

Summary of progress and achievement against outcomes

In this reporting period, 17 of 19 Pillar activities remain in progress

This Pillar continued to have a high proportion of activities that remained 'in progress' during this reporting period. While this contributed to challenges with assessing the achievement of Pillar outcomes, it should be noted that this Pillar has more consistently utilised MEL Frameworks and monitored activity progress, which enabled the demonstration of progress towards outcomes.

The activities within this Pillar largely focused on Outcome 1 (focused on water) and Outcome 3 (focused on climate change), with new activities added to this Pillar in 2023 for Outcome 2 (focused on energy).

In 2023, this Pillar made significant contributions to progressing results across the three Pillar outcomes

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Under **Outcome 1**, MAP has significantly contributed to laying the foundational work to enhance water security. At the regional level, MAP supported the MRC by contributing to its basket fund (core funding for the organisation to deliver services to member countries and projects). The technical assistance through eWater has strengthened MRC's modelling capability, data and information management and communication systems, which enhances its role as a regional knowledge-hub and provides effective services to its member countries and relevant stakeholders. MRC also developed an online app to share real-time data to riverine communities and member countries to enhance resilience to changing river and climate conditions. Individual country projects, such as the approval of sustainable groundwater management plans in Laos and the implementation of community-based disaster risk reduction and management plans as well as data-based and technology-enabled early warning system in Vietnam, have laid the foundation for improved water management practices. Regionally, and across countries, several policies and practices were institutionalised to strengthen water security, including Prime Minister Hun Manet's approval of the Laos Nam Xam River Basin Management Plan in August 2023 (see others in Section 3).

Under **Outcome Two**, Pillar activities have helped to build the capacity of regional and in-country partners to plan and implement initiatives on clean energy. For example, awareness and capacity in the adoption of sustainable energy solutions were increased through the organisation of Clean Energy Week in Cambodia and the Proactive Regional Planning process by the MRC. Australia's support to the Energy Transition Task Force (coordinated through the Asian Development Bank) has facilitated regional discussions on renewable energy transitions, including technical assessments on the opportunities of two gigawatts of solar photovoltaic capacity in combination with battery energy storage systems in Cambodia. The *Electricity Bills Must Be Fair* campaign in Thailand was launched in August 2023 by a diverse coalition of groups (consumer, environmental, local development, groups working on Thai banks/finance, etc) through Oxfam's Inclusion Project Phase 2 (IP2). The campaign, aimed to raise awareness and understanding of energy development issues, reached 7,295 individuals, with 227 organisations endorsing the campaign statement which proposes key changes to make electricity fairer and more sustainable.

Under **Outcome Three**, MAP focused on building the capacity of smallholder farmers, vulnerable groups, and Mekong authorities to develop climate resilience by adapting to and mitigating climate change impacts. At the regional level, this Pillar continues to actively assist Mekong countries through the MRC to address national and transboundary climate challenges. In 2023, MRC continued enhancing its flood and drought monitoring capability: 11 new hydrological and meteorological stations under the Core River Monitoring Network have been successfully installed along the Mekong River, enabling the MRC to receive and disseminate real-time data to Mekong country governments and the wider public. Other interventions have included piloting innovative farming models in Vietnam, strengthening disaster risk management in Laos, and integrating nature-based solutions in the design of urban public spaces in Thailand. Through training programs, capacity building initiatives, and the development of climate-resilient livelihoods, this Pillar contributed to increased ability of organisations and individuals across the Mekong subregion to become better equipped to respond to the challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation.

GEDSI mainstreaming was demonstrated across multiple Pillar 2 investments. In addition to the two of 19 activities that specifically target gender outcomes, investments under this Pillar have made targeted efforts to ensure that gender equality, along with disability equity and social inclusion, is mainstreamed into implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and learning. There are three notable examples: first, IP2 partnered with the Laos Disabled Peoples Association (LDPA) to conduct trainings for CSOs in Laos on disability inclusive development and social inclusion strategies. The training led to the preparation of plans to ensure that the CSO's activities were disability inclusive. A participant reported that the "LDPA helps us gain more awareness of the obstacles that persons with disabilities are facing and how we can work together to tackle the issue". The IP2 project's engagement of people living with disability in leadership roles contributed to challenging and changing social norms, attitudes and behaviours, and social stigma towards people with disabilities in Laos. Second, the Hanoi Association for People with Disabilities and Water Legislation in Vietnam project contributed to the national water legislation reform process through a GEDSI impact assessment of the

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proposed Amendment of the Law on Water Resources and its accompanying implementation Decree. Finally, the FishTech project in Cambodia conducted a scoping visit and deep dive analysis into the building of Sleng Weir fish passage in Siem Riep. The all-women local and international gender equality and disability inclusion scoping team consulted with different and diverse members of the community and NGOs and as a result, a ramp was implemented in the sky bridge of the fish pass in place of steps, demonstrating that an informed GEDSI analysis can lead to tangible improvements for community members. This Pillar contributed significantly to strengthening relationships and partnerships across the subregion.

In 2023, together with its partners, this Pillar engaged 85 national ministries and regional/international stakeholders across the Mekong subregion, ranging from environment, natural resource and energy ministries to science and technology, construction, foreign affairs, transport and women's affairs. The Pillar also engaged with 37 CSOs, 11 private companies and 11 universities to facilitate constructive and evidenced-based policy discussions on WEC issues. In total, 12,688 people participated in training and learning events across Pillar activities in 2023. While data was not consistently disaggregated, it is estimated that 5,639 of participants were women, 6,654 were men, 119 were people living with a disability, 210 were indigenous persons and 11 were youth.



Pillar 3 – Human Capacity



Pillar outcomes:

- **Outcome 1:** Alumni use their skills, knowledge, and networks to contribute to sustainable development
- **Outcome 2:** Alumni contribute to cooperation between Australia and partner countries.

The Human Capacity Pillar (Pillar 3) aims to improve institutional and human capacity within the Mekong subregion countries through the delivery of education, knowledge transfer, and the building of enduring relationships that advance mutual interests. With a budget allocation of \$28.4 million over three years (2021-22 to 2023-24), the Pillar provides short-term awards to current and emerging leaders for study and professional development, long-term Masters-level scholarships in Australia and enrichment support. This provides current and future decision-makers with access to Australian expertise and networks, diverse ways of thinking, and skills to enhance critical decision-making needed for regional and partner countries' development.

The delivery of this Pillar's activities is undertaken bilaterally by DFAT posts, with funds and activity implementation managed primarily through Australia Awards programs in Vietnam (Aus4Skills), Cambodia (Australia Awards Cambodia), Laos (Laos Australia Institute), and Myanmar (Australia Awards Myanmar). In the absence of an Australia Awards program in Thailand, the delivery of short-term Awards is managed by the University of Queensland. The Laos Australia Institute supported the Australian Embassy in Bangkok during the selection and mobilisation of long-term Thai scholars.

Summary of progress and achievement against outcomes

In this reporting period, 21 of 26 Pillar activities have concluded

In 2023, 26 short-term activities were implemented, with 21 completed in 2023 and five still in progress into 2024. Approximately 683 participants (251 male / 281 female / seven people living with a disability / two minority) from across the Mekong subregion attended short-term activities including in person and online short courses, relationship building activities and other training. The short courses focused on building alumni

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skills, knowledge, and networks, while others focused on and contributed to cooperation between Australia and Mekong subregion countries.

There is evidence to show the achievement of both Pillar Outcomes, to varying extents

Under **Outcome 1**, MAP-funded short-term activities equipped alumni with new knowledge, skills, and networks across different sectors of interest in the Mekong subregion to tackle national and regional challenges. Evidence suggested progress towards Outcome 1 was most prominent for short courses with an in-Australia component, followed by in-country delivery and online modalities. More than three-quarters of alumni from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were able to provide valid examples of their contribution to the sustainable development of their nation, where 80 per cent of examples were related to policy or strategy development, 50 per cent to program implementation, and 20 per cent to upskilling others. Completion reports from nearly all countries suggest that alumni acquired relevant and useful knowledge, skills, and to some extent networks (Myanmar and online courses being the exception) through a diverse range of activities offered under this Pillar.

Notable results from short-term activities (such as those shown below and throughout this Report) demonstrated that Outcome 1 was achieved:

- Alumni from Vietnam applied learnings from Australia's experience to the finalisation of a carbon market development project, which is expected to be piloted in 2025 and applied nationwide in 2028; provided advice and policy solutions to the Electricity Authority of Vietnam; developed an electrical operational plan for the central region of Vietnam with an adjusted cost calculation method for a higher rate of renewable energy penetration
- Lao alumni applied new knowledge to project formulation on 'work readiness' aimed at empowering students with skills necessary for employment; promoted ethnic minority representation and enhanced workplace policies that support gender equality; improved HR management systems by introducing improved team performance assessments and delivering capacity-building training
- 100 per cent of participants from the Police Academy of Cambodia who attended the 'Advancing Leadership in Law Enforcement' course stated that they were likely or very likely to use their new knowledge and skills.

While most evidence (including survey results) showed greater progress toward Outcome 1, considerable achievements were made in 2023 that continued to demonstrate progress against **Outcome 2**. Alumni contributed to bilateral cooperation under Outcome 2 through their provision of advice and information to others on Australian expertise, business and education opportunities. Almost one-third of alumni from Laos and Cambodia contributed directly to this outcome by facilitating a collaborative project between their country and Australia. More than half of Vietnamese alumni stated that they maintained links with Australia, predominantly with academic institutions and with some private sector organisations, which is evidenced in the 46 examples of such relationships relevant to Outcome 2. Reflections from DFAT posts also validated diplomatic gains achieved through this Pillar's activities. A common perception from posts was that activities enabled them to support national priorities and engage with key stakeholders such as Party organisations (particularly in the case of Laos and Vietnam) and in complementary ways when an existing long-term or sectoral program support is absent.

Notable results showing progress and demonstrating that Outcome 2 has been achieved included:

- the Thailand-Australia Competition Law Implementation Program II delivered by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, provided targeted and practical technical assistance to the Trade Competition Commission of Thailand in support of effective competition law implementation.
- the regional 'HR Leadership for Future Work' course delivered in Laos by the Griffith University saw diverse participation across the five Mekong subregion countries. This course exceeded expectations with 22 participants reporting satisfaction with the applicability of the course content (aimed at raising the capability and productivity of the ASEAN workforce for the future) and regional networking opportunities.

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- three weeks after a study visit, which brought three leaders from Cambodia's National Institute for Diplomacy and International Relations (NIDIR) to Australia to exchange learning with Australia's Diplomatic Academy. The NIDIR valued this exchange and welcomed further on 'future thinking, negotiation skills, and English report writing training'.
- following a short course, the Ministry of Finance in Vietnam collaborated with Curtin University to develop a carbon market in Vietnam. Alumni have maintained contact with lecturers to discuss technical issues in the electricity market and data management. Another short course enabled Electricity of Vietnam and the Australian Energy Market Operator to connect and learn from good practices in system operation.

Masters-level scholarships were awarded to 47 scholars from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar. With the remaining scholars due to complete their Masters degrees in 2024, it remains too early to tell how long-term scholarships are contributing to the Pillar outcomes.

GEDSI mainstreaming was evident within this Pillar as well as GEDSI outcomes as a result of targeted initiatives

While there was evidence that most short courses mainstreamed GEDSI, four courses directly focused on it. These were: *Combating Gender-based Violence Training Curriculum Development support* (Cambodia); *Regional Alumni Workshop on Inclusive Education* (Cambodia); *GEDSI Mainstreaming* (Myanmar); and *Building Gender-Inclusive Institutions masterclass* (Thailand). Although Laos did not have a targeted GEDSI course, GEDSI is incorporated as a standard topic for most of its activities. This is reflected in its Human Resource Development Impact Survey data which demonstrates that short course activities increased participants' GEDSI knowledge (as reported by 78 per cent of participants). Alumni have incorporated this into their work, with 30 per cent pursuing workplace projects to advance GEDSI in their organisations). According to ADIS results, 30 per cent of 87 MAP alumni used their skills and knowledge to make contributions to their organisations. Five of these contribution examples had national/cross-sectoral impacts.



Pillar 4 – Cyber



Pillar outcomes:

- **Outcome 1:** Cyber and critical technology policy and legislation in targeted Mekong states is developed and strengthened
- **Outcome 2:** Secure, transparent, and economically viable telecommunications and critical infrastructure policy and legislation is developed across the Mekong
- **Outcome 3:** States in the Mekong region display an effective and enhanced resistance to cyber and technology-enabled influence and coercion.

The Cyber Pillar (Pillar 4) aims to strengthen cyber and critical technology resilience in the Mekong subregion, particularly in relation to telecommunications and critical infrastructure security. With a budget of \$8.6 million, the activities within this Pillar primarily comprise of grants, training, research and advocacy, and technical assistance/workshops. The activities are delivered by a variety of implementing partners including from industry, academia, NGOs, CSOs, Australian Government departments and UN agencies. A total of 12 activities were implemented in the Mekong subregion under this Pillar between January 2023 and December 2023. Of the activities implemented, six activities were regional and the remaining six activities were bilateral.

DFAT leads Australia's international engagement on cyber and critical technology across the Australian Government. This Cyber Pillar contributes directly to DFAT's wider CCTCP by expanding its portfolio and types of activities. Implemented since May 2016, CCTCP is a nine-year and \$74.07 million investment that supports the implementation of Australia's 2021 International Cyber and Critical Tech Engagement Strategy in the Indo-Pacific

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region by championing an open, free and secure cyberspace. The CCSU concluded at the end of June 2023. Work previously undertaken by the CCSU now sits in DFAT's Cyber Cooperation Program.

Summary of progress and achievement against outcomes

In this reporting period, one activity within this Pillar has been completed

Of the 12 activities, seven of these activities were ongoing from 2022 and one was completed in 2023. Five new activities commenced in 2023, which are expected to be completed by the end of 2024. The recent commencement of many activities in 2023 meant that the reporting on the delivery of workshops, training and informational materials that occurred during the reporting period primarily related to outputs rather than outcomes.

This Pillar has made steady progress with many activities commencing implementation in 2023

While there was limited evidence to date that activities have resulted in the achievement of this Pillar's outcomes, early evidence suggested that outputs are contributing to positive results and are well positioned to support achievement of Outcomes 1 and 3.

Six activities contributed towards **Outcome 1**, with evidence showing that workshops, advocacy materials and research products have built the capacity and knowledge of policymakers across a variety of cyber themes. Early evidence suggested that materials used and provided through activities are useful inputs for future policy and legislative developments. However, there are not yet reports of specific policies or legislation being developed or strengthened in Mekong subregion countries as a result of this Pillar's activities. The examples below show how the Pillar's outputs are contributing towards Outcome 1.

Enhancing access to cyber-related information across communities

- a total of 13 cyber security workshops were delivered to Thai Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), reaching 184 participants who expressed their intent to use the Cyber Fitness portal developed. Approximately 80 per cent of post-training survey respondents indicated that workshops improved their awareness (*Activity: Cyber Fitness for Thai MSMEs*).
- a cybersecurity handbook was developed and launched in partnership with Vietnam Women Entrepreneurs Council. In addition to this, ten research products including Action Briefs, Advocacy Briefs, Research Summaries and Project Briefs were also developed (*Activity: Women, Peace and Cybersecurity: Promoting Women's Peace and Security in the Digital World*).
- training was delivered to three Australian-supported fellows from Mekong subregion countries in policy-making positions on Women in Cyber: Multilateral Negotiations and Capacity Building which enhanced participants' understanding and knowledge of key cyber issues (*Activity: Australian Support for the Women in International Security and Cyberspace (Women in Cyber Fellowship Network)*).

Improving understanding of existing cyber capability

- a national cybersecurity assessment was conducted in Thailand (*Activity: Women, Peace and Cybersecurity: Promoting Women's Peace and Security in the Digital World*).
- initial research was conducted to understand the needs and areas of demand for cyber capacity building (*Activity: Building Resilient Legal Advice for Cyber and Critical Technologies in Vietnam*).
- increased knowledge of policymakers and cyber diplomats was evidenced through participation in training workshops (*Activity: Cybersecurity Policy Capacity Building for Cambodia Laos and Vietnam*).

Strengthened action plans to progress cyber issues

- a joint roadmap for 'women, peace and cybersecurity in South-East Asia' was developed (*Activity: Women, Peace and Cybersecurity: Promoting Women's Peace and Security in the Digital World*).

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This reporting period saw no activities designed or implemented to contribute to achieving Outcome 2. Hence, **Outcome 2** has not been achieved to date.

Contributing to **Outcome 3**, six activities strengthened the capacity of partners to increase cyber resilience. These capacity building activities were largely demand-driven and led to ongoing communication between Australia and the Mekong subregion countries to understand and respond to partners' needs and requests. The examples below demonstrated how the Pillar's outputs contributed towards Outcome 3.

Strengthening the knowledge base to inform future cyber activities

- training was provided to participants from Cambodia and Vietnam on response to cyber security threats (Activity: *Cyber Security Incident Response Training in the Mekong*)
- training on incident response was delivered to more than 200 participants across government and critical infrastructure providers (Activity: *Cyber Security Defensiveness Readiness Programs – Laos and Thailand*)
- a capacity building study tour of Australia's cyber security facilities was undertaken by seven Lao government officials, including training on digital forensics, incident response and scam awareness (Activity: *Mekong Cyber Security Uplift – Part 2 (Laos)*)
- informational products were provided to build foundational understanding and provide guidance about cyber security and priority action (Activity: *Mekong Cyber Security Uplift – Part 2 (Laos)*).

Strengthened action plans and protocols to progress cyber issues and respond to threats

- cyber security incident response plans and specific playbooks were shared with participants to respond to identified potential threats (Activity: *Cyber Security Incident Response Training in the Mekong*).

This Pillar has engaged a wide range of stakeholders and strengthened cooperation and partnerships

Activities undertaken as part of this Pillar engaged a range of stakeholders across the public, academic and private sectors. Stakeholders were engaged to varying degrees ranging from participation in a single event or capacity building activity to longer-term collaborative relationships to shape Pillar support in-country. In total, engagement with 48 organisations was reported, with the majority of these being government organisations. These engagements led to indications of behaviour change by activity participants; ongoing and recurrent requests for additional support and engagement, including ongoing coordination and collaboration between implementing partners and government officials to identify the most appropriate use of Pillar resources; and positive feedback from stakeholders engaged through the various activities.

Pillar 5 – Trade and Investment (non-ODA)



Pillar outcome:

The implementation of the 2021 Australia-Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Strategy (EEES) which supports Australia and Vietnam's joint ambition to become top ten trading partners and double two-way investment.

The Trade and Investment Pillar (Pillar 5) focuses on enhancing bilateral trade and investment between Australia and Vietnam to facilitate sustainable, inclusive economic growth for both countries. With a budget of \$19.16 million of non-ODA funding, Pillar 5 is centred on the implementation of the EEES.

The EEES contains 103 initiatives, of which 50 per cent are MAP funded. Of the 51 MAP initiatives, 32 initiatives have been completed, with an additional 16 on track.

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Summary of progress and achievement against outcomes

During the reporting period, 14 AVEG grants were completed in the fields of education, skills and training; science, technology and innovation; services; tourism; and fostering fertile businesses and investments. AVEG enabled the implementation of the EEES by funding projects that created economic opportunities and deepened industry cooperation between Australia and Vietnam. AVEG Round Two opened in early 2023, intending to further deepen Australia and Vietnam's economic relationship and assist Australia and Vietnam in meeting the policy objectives of the EEES.

A notable achievement for this Pillar over the 2023 reporting period was the success of AusHub across three sectors: wine, fruits and wool. In a collaborative effort between the Australian Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam (AusCham) and DFAT, AusHub was established in late 2022. The objective was to foster new bilateral trade and investment opportunities in alignment with the EEES. The EEES identified agriculture, forestry and fisheries as key sectors in the economic relationship between the two countries. AusHub was specifically designed to broaden two-way export opportunities within the agriculture, forestry and fisheries industries.

The three-year partnership between AusCham and DFAT aimed to facilitate Australian industry bodies' entry into Vietnamese markets, thereby creating new bilateral trade and investment opportunities. AusHub's primary focus was to act as a trade facilitating body, supporting increased Australian agrifood, fibre, and forestry exports into Vietnam. It enabled selected agricultural industries to establish a physical presence in Vietnam, thereby enhancing in-market engagement. AusHub also collaborated with industry associations and peak bodies in Australia that showed a keen interest in Vietnam as a new or expanding market for their sectors.

AusHub recruited and facilitated the operations of three industry representatives. These representatives, with their in-depth knowledge and strong connections with industry stakeholders, provided Australian industry bodies with a comprehensive understanding of the Vietnamese market, enabling them to execute an informed strategy for market entry. After a careful assessment of expressions of interest, AusHub identified three industry bodies as strategic partners: Summerfruit Australia, WoolProducers Australia, and Wine Australia and provided support throughout 2023-24.

AusHub's team members and industry representatives undertook various outreach activities, facilitated networking events, provided key findings and market intelligence to ensure the success of each project. AusHub engaged with industry stakeholders through events such as consultations, networking sessions, and exhibitions. These focused on supporting enhanced bilateral trade and investment opportunities between Australia and Vietnam. The collaboration between Wine Australia and AusHub aimed to increase demand and the premium paid for Australian wine in the Vietnamese market. The Summerfruit Program, co-managed by Summerfruit Australia and AusHub, focused on outreach, engagement, and market research to promote Australian summerfruit exports. The AusHub collaboration with Wool Producers Australia focused on identifying the feasibility of diversified early-stage wool processing and supporting activities.

The summary below illustrates how AusHub worked in collaboration with its strategic partners across the three industries and provides examples of initiatives that led to the results and success of AusHub.

WoolProducers Australia (WPA): In 2023, WoolProducers Australia (WPA) received a second Agricultural Trade and Market Access Cooperation grant to expand on the findings of the 2022 Phase 1 report. This report provided routes for diversified early-stage wool processing, marking a significant milestone for both Vietnamese and Australian stakeholders. AusHub played an important role in this project, facilitating engagements with various stakeholders in the wool industry. The aim was to investigate the feasibility of early-stage wool processing capacity in the Vietnam market, which could potentially lead to capacity expansion and growth in the wool industry. This enabled stronger collaboration for growth and investment between the wool industries of Australia and Vietnam. In 2024, WPA agreed to fund their industry representative in Vietnam for an additional year.

Summerfruit Australia: AusHub, in collaboration with Summerfruit Australia, embarked on a comprehensive program to promote the export development of Australian summer fruit. This program spanned from April 2023 to April 2024, and included a series of outreach, engagement, and market research activities. The objective was to establish a robust local supply chain, enhance cold chain management practices, and broaden

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market opportunities for Australian summer fruit. AusHub conducted training programs aimed at improving cold chain management, a critical aspect of maintaining the quality of fresh produce during transportation. Additionally, consumer education initiatives were launched to increase awareness and demand in the Vietnamese market. These efforts have resulted in an increase in exports of Australian summer fruits in Vietnam.

Wine Australia: AusHub worked closely with Wine Australia with the strategic priority of increasing the demand and premium paid for Australian wine in the Vietnamese market. Recognising the rapidly growing middle class in Vietnam and the increasing appetite for premium beverages, AusHub facilitated connections between Australian wineries and importers. This was done through a series of networking events and business-to-business meetings. AusHub launched educational initiatives aimed at improving Vietnamese stakeholders' knowledge of Australian wines. These initiatives included wine tasting events, seminars, and workshops that showcased the diversity and quality of Australian wines. These efforts have contributed to a stronger presence of Australian wines in the Vietnamese market and an increase in the premium paid for them.

To date, AusHub has achieved significant results in its mission to boost bilateral trade and investment between Australia and Vietnam. The broad network and collaborative efforts of AusHub have been instrumental in the success of these initiatives. Over the course of the fiscal year 2023-24, AusHub organised 25 events, attracting over 800 attendees and completed eight localisation projects. These efforts have resulted in the establishment of partnerships between 56 Australian growers/exporters and Vietnamese distributors and retailers. With regard to specific industries, AusHub facilitated the export of an estimated 2.3 million litres of Australian wine and 137 tonnes of summer fruit to Vietnam from March 2023 to March 2024.

These achievements underscored AusHub's commitment to promoting Australian products in Vietnam and assisting with their market entry and expansion. The sustainability of AusHub is further evidenced by the continuation of industry representation for Wool Producers Australia into the fiscal year 2024-25 and Wine Australia's ongoing collaboration with AusHub for the delivery and execution of in-market activities on an ad hoc basis.

05 CONCLUSION

In 2023, the first phase of MAP made significant progress in strengthening Australia's economic, political and development cooperation across the Mekong subregion through targeted investments across five Pillars. The demand-driven nature of MAP to date has demonstrated that the Mekong subregion countries have remained interested to cooperate, trade and work with international partners and other countries to tackle regional challenges.

The Strategic Review of MAP conducted in 2023 highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement and achieving targeted investment outcomes. The Review noted that partner countries appreciated "Australia's practical, flexible, and demand-driven approach". The Review concluded that MAP is "a flexible and responsive funding mechanism" and has "expanded and deepened Australia's engagement in the Mekong subregion as a credible and responsive partner of choice on mutually important policy priorities."

Due to the COVID-19 context in which MAP was established, the flexibility provided by MAP has been beneficial for implementing partners. However, it conversely created challenges for activity reporting in line with the three EOPOs. In this reporting period, the continued inconsistent use and application of MEL Frameworks across MAP Pillars meant challenges relating to aggregating and assessing whole-of-MAP results remained. For the second phase of MAP, there is an opportunity to develop fit for purpose MEL Frameworks from the outset and ensure more systematic reporting to support the achievement and measurement of outcomes.

While progress in GEDSI is evident across all Pillars, inconsistencies in progress reporting and gender-disaggregated data remained to enable meaningful analysis of GEDSI outcomes. Across MAP Pillars, positive examples were documented to demonstrate behaviour change resulting from GEDSI-related short courses, capacity building sessions and trainings, in addition to the impacts of governmental reforms to enable more gender and disability inclusive statistical data collection. In future reporting, the standardisation of disaggregated data and capturing of outcomes relating to GEDSI across MAP activities will allow for robust analysis and recommendations for GEDSI.

As the first phase of MAP concluded in June 2024, it is expected that the positive progress and results evidenced in 2023 will continue for activities that are due to be completed in FY 2024-25. The second phase of MAP is well positioned to build upon the established partnerships and results across the subregion that were developed in the first phase, as well as applying lessons learned to support the resilience and prosperity of the Mekong subregion.