

**THE MEKONG THOUGHT LEADERSHIP AND THINK TANKS NETWORK PROGRAM
MID-TERM EVALUATION**

FINAL REPORT

**Richard Friend
(Independent Consultant)**

Table of Contents

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
II. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS	4
III. INTRODUCTION: MTE TERMS OF REFERENCE AND OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT	6
IV. EVALUATION QUESTIONS	7
V. LIMITATIONS.....	16
VI. OVERVIEW – SUMMARY OF PROGRESS	16
VII. WHAT MTT AIMS TO ACHIEVE: GOAL, OUTCOME, OUTPUT/OBJECTIVES, COMPONENTS	19
VIII. EVALUATION PRINCIPLES TABLE	40
IX. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES OVER THE NEXT YEAR	44
X. FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS	45
APPENDICES	48

I. Executive Summary

The purpose of the Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE) of the Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network (MTT) program is **to take stock of program progress and evaluate where the program stands against its set targets in terms of expected outcomes, outputs and planned activities, and to support the program to improve implementation, and ensure impact and sustainability.** It is intended that the Mid-Term Evaluation is *“a guide for all parties concerned (DFAT, MTT Program Secretariat hosted in SEI Asia, MTT Program Steering Committee, and key partners) to help improve the implementation for the remaining period”*.

Led by the Stockholm Environment Institute-Asia (SEI Asia), the MTT Program is a consortium of 8 partners from the Mekong region and Australia, that received an additional 17 expressions of support from other national and regional organisations. Such involvement from a range of partners indicates a high level of national and regional ownership of the program that in turn speaks to the potential for long-term sustainability.

The MTT Program is ambitious and complex, operating within a three-year (2023-2025) timeframe. The program’s total value is AUD 6,350,000.00. The program addresses issues that are highly relevant, structured around a strategic approach that demonstrates the potential for significant long-term impact. The program itself targets Knowledge Based Policy Influencing Organisations (KBPIOs) – a broad definition of think tanks that allows the program to target a range of organisations operating at the interface of research and impact on policy and practice, from university departments to local NGOs.

MTT is structured around 5 components.

Component 1: Development of a home-grown regional network/alliance of KBPIOs:

Component 2: Enhancing climate resilience of water and energy systems through policy research and collaboration among PIOs

Component 3: Inclusive engagement with policy, practice and the public beyond dialogues for effective change

Component 4: Professional development of agents of change

Component 5: Effective program management, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL), communications and partnerships for long-term sustainability

Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects have been awarded through an open, competitive call for proposals. It is through Component 2 and the support for Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects that the bulk of research evidence will be generated, and it is this component that involves the highest proportion of the overall budget allocation. The program targets individual capacity of early and mid-career professionals through the Fellowship program under Component 3, with some of the Fellows supporting the strategic scoping studies on core programmatic themes. It is through Components 1 and 3 that the space for policy engagement at the national and regional level beyond the sub-projects is to be created, with platforms for the evidence emerging from the Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects supported under Component 2.

The MTT Program has made significant progress, and program activities are largely on-track. The MTT Program has been successful in establishing management structures and processes. However, the program has faced several operational challenges that have led to some delays in implementation. The first phase of the MTT Program (June to December 2022) involved close collaboration between SEI, DFAT as well as other program consortium members to strengthen the program design, and engagement with all parties concerned so that the Theory of Change (ToC), Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, and strategies to integrate GEDSI principles could be incorporated into the design and implementation of the program.

At this mid-term stage and looking towards the completion of the program, the challenges for the MTT program are at the more strategic scale in meeting objectives and outcomes. It is appropriate at this stage in the program to revisit some of the elements of the Theory of Change (ToC) and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) plan, to ensure that the individual elements of the program are more than the sum of their parts and contribute to the strategic ambitions of the MTT program and beyond.

II. Key Recommendations

The MTE presents a series of key recommendations:

1. **The EOPO indicators do not reflect the core focus on policy interfaces and need to be restructured.** The phrasing of the EOPO across the program creates some ambiguity as to whether the focus is on policy interfaces or policy outcomes. Not being able to deliver impact at the national or regional policy level is not unexpected – it is extremely challenging, particularly in the current political context, and the limited timeframe of the program. However, the focus on research-policy interfaces being robust and inclusive that is expressed in the EOPO statement is relevant and appropriate.

Recommendation: The EOPO indicators should be restructured to represent the commitment to these interfaces being robust and inclusive, and responsive to GEDSI principles. Doing so requires clear explanations of what is meant by policy interfaces, and in what ways such interfaces might be considered robust and inclusive. Similarly, what is meant by vulnerable groups and how policies might be responsive to their needs requires clarification with an additional indicator that applies GEDSI principles.

2. The MTT Program has been successful in building a coalition of diverse KBPIO partners across the countries of the Mekong region. If the primary focus of the program is on building their capacity to engage in research-policy interfaces so that these are robust and inclusive, and represent the needs of marginalised, vulnerable and at-risk communities, it is essential the program is framed in such a way as to allow for viable policy entry points, and that they have the necessary technical and managerial capacities.

Recommendation: The MTT program should plan future activities to continually enhance the necessary capacities for the KBPIOs to engage in research-policy interfaces more effectively beyond considering the experience of the alliance members and lessons from project implementation.

3. The framing of the MTT program around the Water-Energy-Climate (WEC) nexus has been a core organising principle for the program in responding to the DFAT MAP-WEC's call, but the long-term traction for this framing might require re-evaluation. The primary concern is that the current framing might constrain the ability of the program to influence policy, and to structure research projects.

Recommendation: Beyond the current program, the MTT program and partners should consider alternative framings that might prove to be more effective, for example, focusing on climate change and water, and perhaps placing centre stage commitments to issues of equity (see point 4 below). The value of the nexus approach might more readily be addressed in a framing around systems and complexity (and perhaps, resilience) as such terminologies are already being applied within the program.

4. The strong coalition of core implementing partners, and the growing membership of the network and alliance provide an important platform for long-term support to evidence-based policy making in the region. The events that have been convened so far have been widely regarded as being highly positive and complement SEI's track record under the SUMERNET program. The ability to convene such public dialogue and put research evidence in the public domain are in themselves important contributions to evidence-based policy. The MTT Program's commitment to going 'beyond dialogues' speaks to the challenges of ensuring such public engagement leads to tangible (and attributable) change in policy, and the need for new models for such dialogue and deliberation that are appropriate to the circumstances of the Mekong region.

Recommendation: In the remaining period of the program, it will be important for the MTT to have a clear strategy for implementing such events, while allowing for some degree of experimentation in appropriate approaches and formats, drawing on the experience of the FS and RR projects, and the capacity among the MTT Fellows.

5. The MTT Program has been successful in providing sub-grants to 4 Flagship Studies and 7 Rapid Response projects that are addressing policy issues that are relevant and have potential for impact. The FS and RR projects are central to the MTT Program's overall strategy. The MTT program needs to provide more proactive guidance across the program, but particularly to the Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects. While most if not all these projects can be expected to complete on time and generate important research evidence and influence, the pressure is likely to be on completing required project products – papers and briefs – that may lead to less impact in terms of intended outcomes.

Recommendation: In order to capture and synthesise learning within and across these projects, the MTT program team (from the Secretariat, Component Leads, Technical Advisors) needs to provide more support to their implementation. Given the central role of the FS and RR projects in the MTT Program strategy, there is a significant risk in leaving such learning to the final stages of the program – and even if this can be achieved, it is unlikely to contribute to the higher-level programmatic outcome and objectives. This also will require more direct engagement from the GEDSI technical advisors. It is recognised that such a shift has cost implications that the MTT program will need to address considering available resources.

6. The MTT Program has made very significant contributions to understanding the linkages between the WEC nexus and GEDSI and has clearly built capacity of partner organisations that is much appreciated. However, partial and incomplete implementation of appropriate GEDSI strategies might further undermine long-term commitments to GEDSI or exacerbate existing inequalities.

Recommendation: The GEDSI strategy should further consider how research processes can support more meaningful engagement and ownership according to gender and disability, and intersectionalities of poverty, marginalisation and vulnerability. Policy recommendations emerging from the FS and RR projects should be GEDSI-proofed as an integral part of disseminating lessons and findings. Addressing these challenges will require additional technical support from GEDSI advisors.

7. Knowledge co-production is also fundamental to the overall strategy of the MTT Program as a mechanism for ensuring buy-in from policy actors as well as representation from marginalised groups. The experience of applying such approaches varies among program partners. The need for additional support has already been recognised in Component 2.

Recommendation: MTT Program Component 2 in cooperation with Component 3 should include developing strategic guidance and building capacity on knowledge co-production processes to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of vulnerable, marginalised and at-risk peoples. In addition to the core WEC nexus framing, the MTT Program has commitments to GEDSI, and knowledge co-production. The ways in which these commitments are inter-related could guide more effective alignment within the FS and RR projects.

8. The MTT Program is generating lessons on policy influence and has a commitment in Component 3 to move beyond dialogues. Current strategies to influence and engage in policy processes in FS and RR projects are somewhat limited in scope. The application of principles of knowledge co-production should be refined to allow for demand-led policy engagement (responding to the identified needs of government and citizens), brokering and setting policy priorities and agendas.

Recommendation: Components 3 and Component 1 are in a strong position to provide additional support across the Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects under Component 2 to develop policy-oriented strategies, and to strengthen their effectiveness. In addition, Component 3 should pursue more comprehensive assessment of national and policy landscapes to identify appropriate entry points and framings, while steering dialogue activities towards specific policy areas.

III. Introduction: MTE Terms of Reference and Overview of The Report

As stated in the Mid Term Evaluation (MTE) Terms of Reference, the purpose of the MTE of the Mekong Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Network (MTT) program is **to take stock of program progress and evaluate where the program stands against its set targets in terms of expected outcomes, outputs and planned activities, and to support the program to improve implementation, and ensure impact and sustainability**. It is intended that the Mid-Term Evaluation is ***“a guide for all parties concerned (DFAT, MTT Program Secretariat hosted in SEI Asia, MTT Program Steering Committee, and key partners) to help improve the implementation for the remaining period”***.

MTT program responds to a call for proposals from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Australian Government under the Mekong Australia Partnership (MAP) that was titled “Water, Energy and Climate Thought Leadership and Think Tanks Networking”, with the overall aim and contribution to the wider MAP explained as being to *“support and expand on existing public policy research, analysis, and dialogues relevant to the MAP-WEC thematic and geographical coverage. It is aimed directly at the MAP-WEC **evidence and analysis** intermediate outcome but will also contribute toward other intermediate outcomes through the subject-matter of analysis, research and dialogues supported, and methodologies employed”*. The call established the framing around the theme of the Water, Energy and Climate Change (WEC) nexus, highlighting the potential role of think tanks in generating public policy research evidence and influencing policy, while addressing cross-cutting issues, including commitments to Gender, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI).

As such, the call introduced some important conceptual framings and terminologies that are relatively new to the research and policy communities in the Mekong region, particularly the WEC nexus and GEDSI. The original framing around think tanks has been expanded in the MTT program to incorporate a more diverse

range of organisations involved in different forms of research and knowledge production to influence policy processes, termed as Knowledge Based Policy Influence Organisations (KBPIOs). Under this broad umbrella of KBPIOs the MTT program engages with university departments, NGOs, civil society organisation and community groups and government research institutes, as well as more traditional think tanks.

The MTT program's focus on research, evidence and policy is a close fit to SEI's core organisational purpose. In the Mekong region, the MTT program builds on nearly 20 years' experience of the regional Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET) a regional network and program managed by SEI with funding from Sida, with a focus on strengthening knowledge-based policy processes, building alliances of non-state actors and convening dialogue spaces, while supporting regional organisations and young professionals to develop their research skills, expertise and professional networks. SUMERNET has created a significant regional presence, with high-level convening power, hosting a wide network of individuals and organisations, many of whom are active in different roles in the MTT program, and which provides an umbrella for the MTT and opportunities for coordination and cost-sharing of key activities.

The MTT Program itself is a reflection of SEI's own presence in the Mekong region. Led by SEI Asia, the MTT Program is a consortium of 8 partners from the Mekong region and Australia, that received an additional 17 expressions of support from other national and regional organisations. Such involvement from a range of partners indicates a high level of national and regional ownership of the program that in turn speaks to the potential for long-term sustainability.

The Mid-term evaluation (MTE) has involved:

- Review of MTT program documents and supporting studies (viz. Program Design Document, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Strategy, GEDSI Strategy, Scoping Study of KBPIOs, Review of existing networks and programs, Design of MTT Alliance, MTT Alliance's Terms of Reference, Program 6-monthly progress reports, MTT annual policy forum agenda and its proceedings, grant decision documentation).
- Meetings with MTT Program Secretariat.
- Interviews with 5 Component Leads and/or Co-Leads.
- Interviews with GEDSI Advisors
- Interviews with MTT Program Steering Committee
- Interviews with 5 Fellows
- Interviews with 4 Flagship Studies (FS), and 7 Rapid Response (RR) studies and review of project proposals and supporting documents
- Field visits to 2 Flagship Studies, and 1 Rapid Response project (with representatives of DFAT, Australian Embassy Thailand, MTT Secretariat and program advisor) including the meetings with project's team, boundary partners and beneficiary communities.
Interviews with DFAT and Australian Embassy, Thailand

IV. Evaluation Questions

The agreed main evaluation questions for the MTE are summarised below. Full details of the main and sub-questions for the MTE are provided in the detailed table in Appendix 2. MTE Evaluation Plan.

1 Effectiveness

Has the program progressed toward/met its end-of-program outcome and objectives? covering these aspects:

- It progresses toward contribution to robust and inclusive water, energy, and **climate research and policy interfaces**^[1], ensuring cross-sectoral, evidence-informed policies and its responsiveness to marginalized communities' needs.

- It progresses toward strengthening capacities of national and regional KBPIOs, including (a) inclusive knowledge co-production through stakeholder engagement across sectors and locations, (b) engagement in policy processes, and (c) integration of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion.
- It progresses toward Capacity enhancement and networking of entry- and mid-career professionals and among KBPIOs.
- It progresses toward managing operational challenges, including risk management and other safeguarding measures if relevant

2. Efficiency

Has the program operated efficiently, considering principles of value for money (VfM)? Covering these aspects:

- Partner and subgrantee activity delivery.
- Program workplan, timeline and budget.
- Partner and staff expertise and skills.
- Progress toward achievement.

3. Accountability and Ethics

How has the program ensured accountability and transparency across the program? Covering these aspects:

- Budget management and financial accountability.
- Application of the 'do no harm' principle.
- Research activities under the program go through SUMERNET ethics review process
- Program's communications, reporting and accountability mechanisms

^[1] Note: This evaluation question refers specifically to the robustness and inclusivity of research and policy interfaces, while the EOPO indicators refer to the policy, practice, plan or action and not the interface.

4. Relevance

Has the program addressed the region's emerging issues related to water, energy, climate change and their inter-relationships? Has the program met the needs of KBPIOs in the region? Is the design of the program suitable, given the context? Covering these aspects:

- Ongoing efforts to identify and address current and emerging policy issues and needs in the region related to water, energy, climate change and their inter-relationships, considering a wide range of stakeholders.
- Inclusive knowledge-based policy processes in the Mekong region toward improved and more equitable water and energy security, adaptation, and mitigation of climate change in the Mekong Region for the benefit of all, especially the socially marginalized and at-risk communities.
- Capacity needs of KBPIOs in the region.
- Program cooperation with SUMERNET for possible knowledge exchange and sharing and joint activities.

- Continuing relationships with KBPIOs in the region, and with other networks/alliances to enhance a sense of regional ownership and home-grown

5. Impact

Has the Program progressed toward/contributed to improved and more equitable water and energy security, adaptation and mitigation of climate change in the Mekong Region for the benefit of all, especially the socially marginalized and at-risk communities? Covering these aspects:

- The Program and its grants are leading to more effective and equitable policies that are cross-sectoral, informed by evidence, and responsive to the needs of socially marginalized and at-risk communities.
- Strengthened capacities of national and regional KBPIOs, including inclusive knowledge co-production through stakeholder engagement across sectors and locations, engagement in policy processes, and integration of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion
- Capacity enhancement of entry- and mid-career professionals and networking among KBPIOs.
- Operational challenges management, including risk management and other safeguarding measures if relevant

6. Sustainability

Has the Program planned/built the potential or capacity for ongoing results beyond the program cycle? Covering these aspects:

- Strengthened capacities of KBPIOs in the region.
- The design, development and sustainability of the regional KBPIOs network/alliance.
- The potential of results of the ongoing activities and grants being sustained and/or upscaled beyond program implementation period.
- The Program activities in scanning other funding opportunities and potential partnership and cooperation with other relevant initiatives.

Principle	Main questions	Sub-questions	Information Sources
Effectiveness	<p><i>Has the program progressed toward/met its end-of-program outcome and objectives?</i> covering these aspects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It progresses toward contribution to robust and inclusive water, energy, and climate research and policy interfaces^[1], ensuring cross-sectoral, evidence-informed policies and its responsiveness to 	<p><i>Does the theory of change that underpins MTT still hold?</i> (NB Complementarity with questions of Relevance below)</p> <p>Critical review of the Theory of Change, particularly the problem statement, key assumptions, and EOPO</p> <p>To what extent is the MTT ToC understood and applied by MTT team</p>	<p>Program documents, MTT Secretariat and Component Leads</p> <p>All stakeholders and partner</p>

	<p>marginalized communities' needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It progresses toward strengthening capacities of national and regional KBPIOs, including (a) inclusive knowledge co-production through stakeholder engagement across sectors and locations, (b) engagement in policy processes, and (c) integration of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion. It progresses toward Capacity enhancement and networking of entry- and mid-career professionals and among KBPIOs. It progresses toward managing operational challenges, including risk management and other safeguarding measures if relevant. 	<p>members, partners and sub-grantees?</p> <p>Critical reflection on capacities – what capacities are being strengthened?</p> <p>To what extent are these individual versus organisational capacities? How will individual capacity strengthening contribute to EOPO?</p> <p>What indicators will demonstrate changes in organisational capacity? How will strengthened organisational capacities lead to EOPO?</p> <p>Capacity enhancement and networking – what changes at the level of policy arenas are emerging beyond these activities?</p>	<p>MTT Program Secretariat, Component Leads, FS and RR sub-grantees</p> <p>MTT Program Secretariat</p> <p>Interviews with all implementers, partners and stakeholders</p> <p>Interviews with all implementers, partners and stakeholders</p>
Efficiency	<p><i>Has the program operated efficiently, considering principles of value for money (VfM)?</i> <i>Covering these aspects:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner and subgrantee activity delivery. Program workplan, timeline and budget. Partner and staff expertise and skills. Progress toward achievement. 	<p>How has MTT responded to early implementation delays? Level and quality of support from MTT Secretariat to program partners and sub-grantees</p> <p>Number of grants, diversity of themes, countries, partners, disbursement of funds, and expenditure rates of sub-grantees</p> <p>Number and quality of trainings and events</p>	<p>MTT Secretariat and sub-grantees</p> <p>Documentary review – program proposals, progress reports, financial reports</p> <p>Interviews with FS and RR sub-grantees,</p>

		<p>Level of satisfaction with MTT Secretariat – for partners, stakeholders and donor</p> <p>Self-assessment of Most Significant Change in skills, expertise, knowledge – and unanticipated changes</p>	<p>partners, stakeholders and donor</p> <p>Document analysis – interviews with key informants (FS and RR sub-grant fieldwork)</p>
Accountability & Ethics	<p><i>How has the program ensured accountability and transparency across the program? Covering these aspects:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budget management and financial accountability. Application of the 'do no harm' principle. Research activities under the program go through SUMERNET ethics review process Program's communications, reporting and accountability mechanisms 	<p>Have MTT management systems and structures, processes allowed for efficient planning and implementation of key activities, and disbursement of program funds</p> <p>Relationship between sub-grantees and MTT program – what level of technical and administrative support is desired and made available?</p> <p>Relationship between fellows and host organisations, and with the wider MTT program.</p>	<p>Interviews and sub-grantee project fieldwork activities</p> <p>Targeted interviews with Fellows</p>
Relevance	<p><i>Has the program addressed the region's emerging issues related to water, energy, climate change and their inter-relationships? Has the program met the needs of KBPIOs in the region? Is the design of the program suitable, given the context? Covering these aspects:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing efforts to identify and address current and emerging policy issues and needs in the region related to water, energy, climate 	<p>Does program problem statement capture the nature and scope of the thematic (WEC) and policy challenge?</p> <p>Is there a shared understanding across the MTT program of the key issues related to WEC, KBPIOs, GEDSI and policy influence?</p>	<p>Document analysis – program document, MEL strategy, scoping studies</p> <p>Interviews with MTT Secretariat, Component Leads, GEDSI advisors and focal points, FS</p>

	<p>change and their inter-relationships, considering a wide range of stakeholders.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive knowledge-based policy processes in the Mekong region toward improved and more equitable water and energy security, adaptation, and mitigation of climate change in the Mekong Region for the benefit of all, especially the socially marginalized and at-risk communities. • Capacity needs of KBPIOs in the region. • Program cooperation with SUMERNET for possible knowledge exchange and sharing and joint activities. • Continuing relationships with KBPIOs in the region, and with other networks/alliances to enhance a sense of regional ownership and home-grown. 	<p>How are the needs of marginalised and at-risk peoples addressed in core research activities? In what ways is GEDSI applied? To what extent and in what ways is GEDSI being mainstreamed across the program?</p> <p>Does the WEC framing cover the key challenges and opportunities for marginalized and at-risk peoples, and operationalisation of GEDSI principles?</p> <p>How does WEC fit with the policy landscape in the region?</p> <p>How have relevant policy processes, policy actors (decision-makers, champions) been identified and targeted?</p> <p>Is the WEC understood by MTT – and does it provide a viable framing for policy entry – and addressing needs of marginalized and at-risk peoples, and GEDSI?</p> <p>Does the program focus reflect the needs of marginalized and at-risk peoples, and does it provide mechanisms for reducing negative impacts and/or promoting positive change</p>	<p>and RR sub-grantees.</p> <p>NB. Particular focus on the FS and RR projects</p> <p>Interviews with MTT Secretariat, Component Leads, GEDSI advisors and focal points, FS and RR sub-grantees.</p> <p>Interviews with sub-grantees and their policy/boundary partners (where possible)</p> <p>Review of GEDSI strategies. Interviews with MTT Secretariat, Component Leads, GEDSI</p>
--	--	--	--

		<p>Has the program gained and applied an adequate understanding of KBPIOs and their scope for policy influence?</p> <p>Is the current understanding of KBPIOs and the range of organisations adequate?</p> <p>Self-assessment (actors' perspectives) on capacity building needs of KBIOs and agents of change?</p> <p>Is there an adequate understanding of policy arenas and processes that MTT aims to influence?</p> <p>Is there an understanding of how to influence such policy processes?</p>	<p>advisors and focal points, FS and RR sub-grantees.</p> <p>Review of scoping studies. Interviews with MTT Secretariat and Component Leads, and advisors</p> <p>Interviews with FS and RR project implementers</p> <p>Interviews with FS and RR project implementers</p>
Impact	<p><i>Has the Program progressed toward/contributed to improved and more equitable water and energy security, adaptation and mitigation of climate change in the Mekong Region for the benefit of all, especially the socially marginalized and at-risk communities? Covering these aspects:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Program and its grants are leading to more effective and equitable policies that are cross-sectoral, informed by evidence, and responsive to the needs of socially marginalized and at-risk communities. Strengthened capacities of national and regional 	<p>At this stage we are unlikely to see evidence of impact – but we can review the progress markers (as defined in the MTT MEL) and assess their relevance and progress</p> <p>Are grants and fellowships progressing effectively, and delivering research insights, collaborative co-production processes and policy engagement that is on-course for policy impact?</p> <p>Is MTT facilitating learning within and across the program, and is such learning influencing strategic direction?</p>	<p>Review of supporting documents, progress reports. Interviews with FS and RR project implementers, and MTT Secretariat.</p>

	<p>KBPIOs, including inclusive knowledge co-production through stakeholder engagement across sectors and locations, engagement in policy processes, and integration of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity enhancement of entry- and mid-career professionals and networking among KBPIOs. • Operational challenges management, including risk management and other safeguarding measures if relevant. 	<p>The relationship between host organisations and fellows – levels of support and opportunities for individual professional development of fellows.</p>	<p>Interviews with Fellows and host organisations. MTT Secretariat.</p>
Sustainability	<p><i>Has the Program planned/built the potential or capacity for ongoing results beyond the program cycle? Covering these aspects:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthened capacities of KBPIOs in the region. • The design, development and sustainability of the regional KBPIOs network/alliance. • The potential of results of the ongoing activities and grants being sustained and/or upscaled beyond program implementation period. • The Program activities in scanning other funding opportunities and potential partnership and cooperation with 	<p>At this stage in the MTT program implementation the focus will be on generating evidence that long-term sustainability is being addressed across the program – especially in the design and development of the regional network/alliance.</p> <p>While the network and alliance is in its early stages, it is anticipated that some indicators of institutional commitment (such as in-kind, financial and technical inputs) will be revealed among network partners and members.</p> <p>Linkages with the Sumernet program, and potential for further financial support from Sida and DFAT will be explored.</p>	<p>Review scoping studies. Interviews with MTT Secretariat and Component 1 leads and advisors</p> <p>Interviews with DFAT and Sida.</p>

	other relevant initiatives.		
--	-----------------------------	--	--

^[1] Note: This evaluation question refers specifically to the robustness and inclusivity of research and policy interfaces, while the EOPO indicators refer to the policy, practice, plan or action and not the interface.

In addressing these evaluation questions the following themes are addressed in the report:

Policy

- The understanding of the policy landscape at regional and national levels.
- the extent to which and mechanism for relevant policy processes and practices are understood, identified and targeted
- partner, grantee and fellow strategies for policy engagement
- How program implementers and partners address the role of research and evidence in influencing policy processes
- The extent to which and mechanisms by which KBPIOs engage in and influence policy processes
- The extent to which individual agents of change (research fellows) and KBPIOs engage in and influence networking activities
- The extent to which networking processes and activities create new opportunities for engagement with policy actors, and in policy processes

Water, Energy and Climate (WEC)

- Understandings of WEC nexus and how these are applied in program activities
- Understandings of the WEC policy landscape, and strategic entry-points for exerting influence
- Mechanisms by which WEC nexus is addressed in program activities

Capacity and Capabilities

- the capacity gaps identified, and how capacity building interventions might contribute to improved individual and organisational capacity in ways that will influence policy processes
- Identification of indicators of organisational capacity change that would be in line with program strategy

Knowledge co-production

- The extent and ways in which knowledge is co-produced, and by whom – and what knowledge outputs are being generated
- The extent to which knowledge processes are cross-sectoral and/or cross-border

GEDSI Mainstreaming

- Analysis of vulnerabilities, marginalisation and risk applied across program
- The understanding and application of commitments to GEDSI across the MTT program – with consideration of issues related to disability
- The ways in which GEDSI commitments are being addressed in sub-grants, and the role and effectiveness of GEDSI focal points.
- The extent to which GEDSI commitments are targeted at reducing negative impacts, promoting inclusive policy spaces and processes, or transformative change to improve social and material circumstances
- The extent to which policy-oriented knowledge products mainstream GEDSI, and are interdisciplinary and co-produced

Program management, coordination, communication and learning

- Efficiency and effectiveness of program administration and technical support to partners, grantees and fellows

- Coordination across program components, program steering committee and donor
- Cooperation with SUMERNET and other relevant initiatives
- Communications across the program
- Learning across program
- Disbursement of funding across the program, and spending rates of grantees (FS and RR)

V. Limitations

The MTT program is a complex program involving a wide range of implementing organisations, partners and sub-grantees. Inevitably the MTE has faced some limitations. Given that the focus on the more strategic dimensions of the MTT program and strengthening further implementation, the MTE has drawn on qualitative methods. The MTE facilitated critical reflection and discussion in line with the priorities of the MTE Terms of Reference around taking stock of progress against expected outcomes, outputs and planned activities in order to support the program to improve implementation and ensure impact and sustainability. The MTE was able to review key program strategic documents, interview all key implementing actors, and significantly, conduct in-depth interviews and field visits with 3 sub-grantee projects.

During the period of the MTE, implementation of the Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects had only just begun, and so evidence of how projects are progressing against planned outcomes was limited, with only three projects available for fieldwork. Similarly, the timing of the MTE did not allow for the Consultant to participate in the regional dialogue platform events, that are also a key element of the MTT program under Components 1 and 3. Fieldwork with Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects provided important empirical evidence that supplemented interviews and reviews of project documents. Such fieldwork generated insights that would not have emerged otherwise, highlighting the methodological value of engaging directly with projects and stakeholders- implementers, partners and beneficiaries.

The Consultant facilitated consultation with the MTT Secretariat to discuss the first draft findings, and a consultation workshop with MTT Secretariat and DFAT management team to review the final report. The combination of methods allowed for triangulation and critical reflection on findings as they emerged during the MTE process and generating a high degree of confidence in evaluation recommendations.

VI. Overview – Summary of Progress

The MTT Program is ambitious and complex, operating within a three-year timeframe. The program addresses issues that are highly relevant, structured around a strategic approach that demonstrates the potential for significant long-term impact. The MTT Program has been successful in establishing management structures and processes.

The MTT Program Theory of Change (ToC) has a clear internal - building capacity of KBPIOs to conduct policy-relevant research that is anchored in challenges of the water-energy-climate (WEC) nexus, addressing GEDSI, knowledge co-production; creating space for policy dialogue and building a regional alliance and network; building capacity of individual research fellows; will lead to uptake of research evidence that in turn will lead to changes at national and regional policy scale. These challenges are especially acute given the broader context of policymaking in the Mekong region, and the often opaque means by which evidence shapes policy and practice.

The program has faced several operational challenges that have led to some delays in implementation. The first phase of the MTT Program (June to December 2022) involved close collaboration between SEI, DFAT as well as other program consortium members to strengthen the program design, and engagement with all parties concerned so that the Theory of Change (ToC), Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, and strategies to integrate GEDSI principles could be incorporated into the design and implementation of the program.

During the first quarter of 2024, DFAT conducted the Annual Performance Assessment of the MTT Programme during programme implementation from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023. The findings commended SEI's performance in the management of the program and regular communication with DFAT, delivering intended outputs and making significant progress against targets in the work plan, with achievements aligning with EOPO and intermediate outcomes, with effective financial management and risk assessment.

The MTT Program has made significant progress, and program activities are largely on-track, despite some initial delays.

- The scoping study of KBPIOs and reviewing of existing networks have been completed through engagement of a wide range of the stakeholders including online survey and follow up interviews. Competitive calls for FS, RR and fellowship grants with rigorous reviewing processes were launched, allowing the KBPIOs and early to mid-career professionals in the region to apply. The original design of FS and RR projects have been improved following the suggestions from the MTT Program secretariat, advisors and DFAT.
- 4 FS projects and 7 RR projects have now begun implementation, and 16 Fellowships have been awarded. The initial alliance and network have been designed with two alliance meetings that have been undertaken. More than 30 organizations have formally registered to be MTT Alliance members (as of end August 2024) and the program continues to attract more members. The first MTT annual policy forum was held in 2023, and next policy forums and first in-country policy dialogues are scheduled in the final quarter of 2024.
- The MTT GEDSI strategy and guidance note were developed and a series of trainings on various topics (e.g. GEDSI integration, inclusive knowledge co-production, policy engagement, communications) were delivered for the MTT program consortium and FS, RR and fellowship grantees. Some of these events and trainings are jointly organized in partnership with SUMERNET program to facilitate learning and networking among the grantees and allowing for cost-sharing.
- The program has convened high-level policy dialogues that have been well-received. The First Mekong Environmental Resilience Week (MERW) including MTT Policy Forum and Climate Roundtable was organised in 2023
- While core activities are progressing, expenditure rates are relatively low. There may well be a need for a no-cost extension considering the overall progress of the program including the implementation of granted projects. According to the MTT grant agreement with DFAT, it is possible for the MTT to request for the extension to one more year if necessary.

At this mid-term stage and looking towards the completion of the program, the challenges for the MTT program are at the more strategic scale in meeting objectives and outcomes. It is appropriate at this stage in the program to revisit some of the elements of the ToC and MEL plan, to ensure that the individual elements of the program are more than the sum of their parts and contribute to the strategic ambitions of the MTT program and beyond. There is an ambiguity in the EOPO and its indicators that needs to be resolved, so that the program focus is more clearly articulated on strengthening research-policy interfaces to be robust and inclusive, rather than on influencing change in policy. While the EOPO statement still stands, the two EOPO indicators may need to be modified.

Thematic interest in nexus issues is well established in the Mekong region, but the specific framing around the Water-Energy-Climate (WEC) nexus is more recent, and largely new to program partners. Each of the FS and RR projects is addressing cross sectoral issues that relate to all or some of the components of the WEC nexus. However, the long-term value of such a thematic framing is worth reconsidering. The MTT Program is now in a position to reflect on the extent to which the WEC framing provides an appropriate entry point into national and regional policy processes. Although the original call from DFAT was based on the WEC

nexus, DFAT has recently restructured the Mekong Australia Partnership (MAP), with the WEC theme now focusing on water and climate, with energy covered under a separate portfolio focused on energy transitions. A more effective and influential framing in the future might be structured around climate, and/or climate and water.

The main areas of activity and associated program expenditure rates are now progressing. Despite delays in processing proposals and issuing final contracts with sub-grantees for Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects proposals, these projects have all started implementation, but expenditure rates are below what would be expected. Given the central importance of these projects to the program, there are risks that the pressures of time might compromise the quality of research evidence and research outputs, and the extent of meaningful engagement with core principles of GEDSI, knowledge co-production, and policy processes. While the probability of such an eventuality might be low, the impacts on the program would be high. The capacity of the sub-grantee organisations varies, and the MTT Secretariat will need to consider the requirements for additional technical support to the individual projects.

The MTT program has developed a programmatic GEDSI strategy with an additional Guidance Note supporting implementation of the FS and RR projects, and to guide the design of network and dialogue events. This is an important innovation that has value beyond the MTT Program. Making the links between WEC and GEDSI has clearly been challenging, particularly in addressing issues of disability. At the same time, the MTT program as expressed in the EOPO, commitments to ensure that policy meets the needs of marginalised, vulnerable and at-risk communities. At this stage and in line with the original call from MAP DFAT, the GEDSI strategy is more focused on how to ensure participation, and to assess (and ultimately reduce) negative impacts. Looking to the future, there is scope for greater attention to ensure that people's needs are met, and how marginalised, vulnerable and at-risk people can participate in co-producing knowledge for their own purposes.

Each of the FS and RR projects are generating lessons on applying knowledge co-production in policy-oriented research. Knowledge co-production is a core principle underpinning the MTT program, both as a means of influencing policy, and as an end in itself. There remains scope for technical support, capacity building and training in the application of knowledge co-production in the FS and RR projects (as is proposed under Component 2) and for distilling lessons for future application.

Each of the FS and RR projects aims to exert some influence on policy processes. Within the individual projects, the focus is largely on sub-national policy issues but nonetheless has potential for uptake at the national and regional scale. One of the core challenges facing all projects is in ***how to achieve such policy influence***. The projects recognise that such influence is largely aspirational in the timeframe of their grants. Despite this, the projects are generating important lessons for the future on how research evidence might generate influence.

The Fellowship programme has supported 16 Fellows, with a good range of topics that are being covered, with individual Fellows making important contributions to the program (for example in refining the GEDSI strategy) and to their host organisations. The Fellows are very supportive of the program and the opportunities it has provided them.

The MTT program is generating considerable learning, within the individual FS and RR projects, and more significantly at the program level. The mechanisms for such learning are already established under each of the main components, including in Components 1 and 3, and there have been clear successes in the events already organised under Component 1. Moving forward, facilitation of learning addressing questions across FS/RR projects with similar thematic interests and/or applying similar policy engagement strategies, should be encouraged. Across the whole program, addressing the core underlying questions of how to influence policy would allow for synthesis of lessons, and strengthen the long-term impact of the program – i) What is

the role of (independent) research evidence in shaping policy and practice? ii) How to generate research in ways that influence policy in the specific context of the Mekong region? iii) How to convene and facilitate effective policy engagement and deliberation that goes beyond dialogues?

The MTT Program is well positioned to exert considerable influence in the Mekong region. The strong alliance and (growing) network of partners under Component 1, and the strong management systems that have been put in place, have created a platform for long-term engagement in support of evidence-based policy processes. Looking to the future beyond the timeframe of the program, having built momentum there are risks to the KBPIO community associated with not continuing some level of further support, particularly given the political context of the region, and pressures on civil society space for influencing policy. Evidence from similar initiatives in other parts of the world indicates the need for reliable long-term support to independent think tanks. In line with its commitment to strengthen capacities, the MTT Program has been successful in supporting organisations with limited or no previous experience in such a large, regional program. There appears to be a need and demand for continued capacity building of (some) KBPIOs, including administrative capacity as well as the more technical dimensions and strategies for policy influence. Established members of the MTT coalition are well-placed to provide such support (for example, Khon Kaen University's Centre for Civil Society and Non-Profit Management). The synergies between the MTT Program and the established SUMERNET program provide the basis for such continued support to think tanks in the Mekong region.

VII. What MTT Aims to Achieve: Goal, Outcome, Output/Objectives, Components

The MTE evaluates progress against achieving the End of Program Outcome (EOPO) and objectives, according to MEL indicators and progress markers, and the extent to which progress under objectives and components will lead to the EOPO. The MTT Program has developed a detailed MEL plan with a clearly articulated Theory of Change (ToC) that was produced in close collaboration with DFAT advisors and is applying innovative approaches to assess progress and capture lessons from the program.

The core hypothesis underpinning the program presents several conceptual and practical challenges. MTT is based on a series of hypotheses of causal change regarding how research and evidence influence policy outcomes, across the Water, Energy, Climate (WEC) nexus, and how such research and policy processes and interfaces can be inclusive and responsive to the needs and circumstances of 'vulnerable, marginalised and at-risk peoples'.

At the same time, the MTT program documents acknowledge the complexities of policy processes in the Mekong region, and some of the political challenges facing KBPIOs in fostering evidence-based policy processes and exerting influence.

The tension between aiming to strengthen policy processes to be more based on evidence, and the political realities of policy-making processes in the Mekong region illustrates the landscape that the MTT program is navigating.

The section below summarises the MTT program objectives and EOPO, and relevant indicators – with core issues for each highlighted in bold.

The **Long-term goal** of the program is to:

Contribute to improved and more equitable water and energy security, adaptation and mitigation to climate change in the Mekong Region for the benefit of all, especially the marginalized, vulnerable and at-risk communities.

The **End of Program Outcome** is defined as:

*Water, energy and climate research and policy **interfaces** are robust and more inclusive, resulting in more effective and equitable policies, which are cross-sectoral, informed by evidence, and are responding to the needs of vulnerable groups.*

End of **program indicators** for the EOPO are:

*1-1a: **Number of national and regional policy, practice, plan or action** in the Mekong region on water security, energy security and climate change mitigation and adaptation supported with information gathered or generated from research,*

*1.1b: **Robustness and inclusiveness of national or regional policy, practice, plan or action** on water security, energy security and climate change mitigation and adaptation supported with information gathered or generated from research under the investment.*

The progress markers for the EOPO are intended to provide a sense of the direction of travel of the MTT program, rather than a specific timeframe by which progress would be achieved. It is not expected that the timeframe of the MTE corresponds directly with the mid-term progress markers. Nonetheless, assessing how the MTT program has progressed against these progress markers provides insight as to the program's trajectory to reaching the EOPO.

Early	Mid-term	EOP
National and regional KBPIOs use the information they gathered or generated from research to engage with policy processes.	<i>National and regional KBPIOs influence the formulation of national and regional policy agendas in the Mekong region.</i>	National and regional KBPIOs support the formulation of national and regional policy agendas in the Mekong region

Restructuring EOPO Indicators

The phrasing of the EOPO raises some ambiguity regarding the immediate focus of the program and its longer terms aspirations. **While the EOPO is articulated in terms of research and policy interfaces, the robustness and inclusiveness of these interfaces are intended to result in changes at the level of policies, and that the quality of these policies is marked by their being 'cross-sectoral', 'informed by evidence', and 'responding to the needs of vulnerable groups'.** The way in which the EOPO statement is structured creates some ambiguity as to whether the focus of what will be achieved within the timeframe of the program is on the interface between research evidence and policy, or whether success should be seen in terms of more effective and equitable policies.

The ambiguity in the way that the EOPO is expressed is reflected in the indicators that are being applied. While the first clause of the EOPO statement is framed around policy interfaces being more robust and inclusive, the program indicators refer specifically to the number, robustness and inclusiveness of national and regional policy, practice plan or action – rather than the research-policy interfaces. Additionally, the current indicators do not reflect the EOPO phrasing around policies being more effective and equitable. This is understandable and appropriate. Determining whether policies are effective and equitable would require assessment of policy implementation, or at least, the potential for implementation. Such assessment of the impact of policy would be beyond the scope of a three-year program. Similarly, the mid-term and end-of-program Progress Markers for the EOPO suggest a direct role of KBPIOs in the formulation of national and regional policy agendas. Such a direct and attributable role in the formulation of policy agendas would appear to be beyond the scope of the program.

Interviews conducted during the MTE illustrate that for the MTT program Secretariat and Component Leads, the intended focus for the lifetime of the program is geared towards the interfaces of research and

policy, rather than the policies themselves. Such an interpretation corresponds with how key partners, including FS and RR sub-grantees understand the strategic ambitions of the program. It is widely recognised across the program, and with DFAT advisors, that demonstrating influence on policy that would be attributable to the program is probably beyond the 3-year timeframe of the program.

Although the current EOPO statement is somewhat ambiguous in that it combines two sub-clauses, the initial focus is stated in terms of research to policy interfaces. The focus of the EOPO can be clarified through the development of more appropriate indicators, rather than making any adjustments to the EOPO statement itself. The refined EOPO indicators should therefore provide some measurement of research-policy interfaces being robust and inclusive, that clearly link to the MTT program outputs (that are framed as Objectives in the MTT MEL Plan). Similarly, the EOPO Progress Markers would need to be amended to better reflect this programmatic focus of attention, and a more realistic ambition for the EOP, rather than the expectation that “*national and regional KBPIOs support the formulation of national and regional policy agendas in the Mekong region*”.

As is discussed in more detail below, such a focus would be a more accurate reflection of the intentions of the program, and the strong progress that is already being made, while being very much consistent with the structure of the Program Objectives and Components, and their focus on strengthening capacities of KBPIOs and Fellows as change agents. **Focusing on such interfaces and clarification of what would constitute robust and inclusive interfaces, also provides strategic guidance for the future on how KBPIOs might approach engagement in policy, and processes of knowledge co-production.**

Similarly, the EOPO indicators do not provide sufficient clarity on how policy interfaces might be inclusive or unpack what is meant by ‘vulnerable groups’. As is discussed in greater detail below in the section on Gender, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) it is important for the MTT program to provide some further clarity on how vulnerable groups might be identified and disaggregated particularly in terms of gender and disability, both in terms of policy interfaces being inclusive, and policy recommendations (rather than policies) being responsive to the needs of these groups. Greater clarity is required in order to determine the extent to which the MTT program has achieved such ambitions. It is recommended that an additional indicator is created at EOPO level that provides this clarity by incorporating GEDSI considerations in addressing three key elements – i) the extent to which policy interfaces are inclusive, and policy recommendations are based on effective representation of vulnerable groups, ii) indicators that policy recommendations do not generate negative impacts on vulnerable groups, and iii) policy recommendations generate positive benefits to vulnerable groups.

Components to Objectives to Outcome

The MTT Program is structured around 5 Components that are interconnected and mutually supportive and designed to contribute to 3 Program Objectives – that are essentially program outputs.

The 3 MTT Program Objectives, each with its own indicators and progress markers, are presented below. The focus of each of these objectives is firmly structured around strengthened and more effective capabilities of KBPIOs and for Objective 3, of individual early or mid-career professionals. As such, the MTT Program sets out a pathway to impact that is set around the linkages between such organisational and individual capacities as a means for building robust and inclusive research-policy interfaces.

The 3 objectives and their indicators are discussed in more detail below:

Objective 1: *The program intends to strengthen the role and effectiveness of national and regional KBPIOs in engaging with national and regional policy processes on water and energy security and climate change mitigation and adaptation.*

Number of policy processes wherein national and regional KBPIOs are part in their formulations as members, advisers, researchers, supporters or resource persons

Effectiveness and quality of national and regional KBPIOs' contributions to policy processes on water and energy security and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Early	Mid-term	EOP
National and regional KBPIOs learn to design inclusive knowledge co-production processes.	National and regional KBPIOs produce high quality and inclusive knowledge	National and regional KBPIOs use the insights from high quality and inclusive knowledge to inform policy discussions.

In line with the need for a more accurate set of EOPO indicators that reflect the target of policy interfaces rather than policy outcomes, the indicators for Objective 1 would need to be amended. Further elaboration of what constitutes a 'policy process' would also help guide the program towards specific types of research-policy interface.

Objective 2 *The program intends to **strengthen the role and capabilities** of national and regional KBPIOs in inclusive knowledge co-production processes by engaging with stakeholders across sectors, locations and countries on water, climate and energy issues and their interlinkages.*

Number of policy-oriented knowledge products developed by national and regional KBPIOs to inform policy processes

Knowledge co-production processes are cross-sectoral and/or cross-border

Early	Mid-term	EOP
National and regional KBPIOs learn to design inclusive knowledge co-production processes.	National and regional KBPIOs produce high quality and inclusive knowledge	National and regional KBPIOs use the insights from high quality and inclusive knowledge to inform policy discussions.

Objective 3: *The program intends to **enhance the capacity for networking** of national and regional KBPIOs **and build the capacity** of entry- and mid-career professionals in **delivering inclusive research and communicating and engaging with policy processes***

Number of collaborations of network members of national and regional KBPIOs to influence policy processes (beyond individual study/projects)

Quality of collaborations among national and regional KBPIOs in the network/alliance to influence policy processes

Number of policy processes being contributed to by entry- and mid-career professionals as members, advisers, researchers, supporters or resource persons

Quality of entry- and mid-career professionals' contributions to policy processes

Strengthening capacity is a cross-cutting theme for the program, whether talking about KBPIOs or individual Fellows, in knowledge co-production, networking or engagement in policy processes. The MTT program specifies capabilities of different KBPIOs and early career researchers.

Objective 2 refers directly to strengthening capabilities of national and regional KBPIOs specifically in knowledge co-production processes, and Objective 3 refers to their capacity for networking. The indicators for these objectives regarding KBPIO capacities are framed in terms of number of products and collaborations, and one indicator specifically to the quality of their collaborations under the network and alliance component.

Objective 3 also refers directly to individual capabilities of entry and mid-career professionals, specifically in areas relating to delivering inclusive research, communicating and engaging with policy processes – both through the Fellows program, and through the FS/RR sub-grants.

Addressing the capacity needs of national and regional KBPIOs is an appropriate focus. MTT scoping study (Lebel, et al, 2023) provides a detailed analysis of capacity needs, discussing gaps that include expertise in the more technical areas associated with the WEC nexus, but also more administrative and managerial needs. The need to strengthen administrative and managerial capacities of think tanks has been identified in other donor-funded initiatives (for example see Thorat et al., 2018. review of the IDRC Think Tank Initiative implemented over 11 years - <https://idrc-crdi.ca/en/initiative/think-tank-initiative>) and is discussed in greater detail below in the section on the Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects.

Components to Objectives

In the MTT program design, 5 Components – essentially work packages of activity areas – will contribute to the Objectives, that then in turn will deliver the EOPO:

The 5 Components are presented below:

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

It is through Component 2 and the support for Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects that the bulk of research evidence will be generated, and it is this component that involves the highest proportion of the overall budget allocation. The program targets individual capacity of early and mid-career professionals through the Fellowship program under Component 3, with some of the Fellows supporting the strategic scoping studies on core programmatic themes. It is through Components 1 and 3 that the space for policy engagement at the national and regional level beyond the sub-projects is to be created, with platforms for the evidence emerging from the Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects supported under Component 2.

It is also important to note that at this strategic scale, the program would benefit from a more clearly articulated understanding of what is meant by ‘policy processes’. This is a rather loose term that could cover the intricate internal workings of government decision-making, as well as any public discussion that is related to some policy issue. Similarly, policy is a broad term that covers a wide range of issues and

challenges. Some policy areas are more heavily politicised, while others are more readily open to research evidence. Policy arenas in the Mekong region related to water and energy have been highly contentious. Climate change policy is perhaps less contentious but inevitably creates winners and losers. The program document does clearly state that policy processes in the region tend not to be shaped by independent research evidence, and that the political space for generating such evidence from civil society is constrained – although the Program Document also suggests that there is growing demand for research evidence to inform policy. An important output from the FS and RR projects will be a clearer analysis of the specific policy landscape that they are operating in, and how to exert influence.

A key question to which the MTT Program could make a significant contribution is rather in terms of how policy processes can be influenced to be more responsive to evidence, data and information, and the needs of marginalised, vulnerable and at-risk communities. The MTT Program Objectives are structured around building capacity. Potentially the MTT program is generating lessons on how research evidence might engage in policy processes (and there is also substantial evidence beyond the program) but is not necessarily able to deliver such impact itself within the timeframe of the program. Distilling and synthesising the lessons that are emerging from the program might provide the basis for the design of a more strategic approach to policy influence for the region, and the basis for future interventions to support KBPIOs, and applied in the regional networks and alliance that is being established under Component 1.

WATER-ENERGY-CLIMATE (WEC) NEXUS

The water, energy and climate (WEC) nexus is a central conceptual pillar of the research and policy focus of the MTT program, that was presented in the original call for proposals from DFAT.

Concepts of a nexus that cuts across different sectors, highlighting interconnections between different resources, resource uses and sectors have an established history in the academic and advocacy realms, targeting gaps and inefficiencies in policy structures and processes. While the concept of the nexus is not new, the specific focus on water, energy and climate is a new framing that is not supported by any extensive academic literature (although there is a rich literature on nexus issues) and not identified directly as a policy framing.

There is a broad literature around nexus issues, however, these are generally framed in terms of Water-Energy-Food (WEF), Water-Energy-Food-Climate (WEFC) or Water-Energy-Food-Land-Climate (WEFLC). While the WEC framing is applied by UNEP it refers to Water, Environment and Climate Change (WEC). The academic literature on WEC nexus appears to be limited. A search from Google Scholar reveals two academic papers that apply the WEC framing that were published over 10 years ago – Scott, 2011 (129 citations) and a conference paper by Sahin et al., 2014 (with 15 citations).

At the policy level it is not clear how the WEC framing fits with national and regional policy priorities, or whether the WEC nexus provides strategic entry points for addressing wider policy challenges. One of the FS program team pointed out that much of the effort of the regional research-policy community of the last 15 years has been built around the Water-Energy-Food (WEF) nexus, but that governments are still struggling to apply these concepts in practice. The research and policy debates on the links between water and energy in the Mekong have largely been in terms of hydropower development. Water policy has historically been overly sectoral (across the world). To some degree these challenges are incorporated into SDG 6 addresses water security with a dual commitment to strengthening access to WASH, while also supporting Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM), a commitment that each of the countries in the Mekong region made in signing the 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. Each of the Mekong region countries has made commitments to implementing the SDGs, and in some cases, doing so at the sub-national level. Similarly, each of the countries has international and national commitments to addressing climate change, including energy transitions away from fossil fuels.

Framing policy-oriented research projects in terms of WEC does not appear to respond to specific demand from policy makers in the region but is more about contributing to a policy agenda that does not yet have a clear institutional or policy home. However, this approach might also be creating unanticipated additional challenges. The question for the program is, whether the WEC framing is the most useful for influencing policy, or whether it requires some modification.

All of the FS and RR projects are addressing aspects of cross-sectoral concern. Putting the WEC into practice in the research projects themselves is also somewhat challenging. The WEC nexus is clearly a rather new framing for the sub-grantees that are implementing the FS and RR projects. All the FS and RR projects are dealing with issues related to water resources (except for the ADPC FS project on urban heat), and to some degree, climate change, and clearly covering several sectors. The nexus between water and energy are central to three of the projects. As WEC is new for FS/RR partners, anchoring projects in WEC has required some creative framing of the projects.

Hydropower, and even climate change, can be highly contentious issues in the region. Historically, other than in Thailand, civil society actors have struggled to engage in national policy processes regarding hydropower development, and there are well-publicised cases of reported forced disappearance (in the case of Lao PDR) and of abuse of legal processes against civil society activists in Cambodia and Vietnam. As identified by some of the RR grantees, the framing around water and climate can be less controversial than addressing energy and hydropower directly. Three RR projects address challenges associated with hydropower development, applying the WEC framing in ways that allow them to navigate a contentious policy space – SEI’s FS project addresses equity challenges of managing existing infrastructure; UEH’s RR project addresses gender and disability issues in design and management of water infrastructure; Vinh University’s project on equitable sharing of water resources for ethnic communities; My Village and MJU projects are addressing fisheries in the context of areas that have experienced hydropower development.

At this stage, it is not clear how much traction the WEC nexus has within policy arenas in the region. The events that MTT Program has organised in partnership with SUMERNET have not been framed in terms of the WEC nexus, but rather climate change, environmental resilience and climate resilient development. Importantly, as part of new phase of Mekong Australia Partnership (MAP), DFAT is creating other program specifically about energy transitions, while maintaining water security and climate resilience as part of MAP2. If the intention of MTT is to identify policy entry points, the continued framing of the MTT initiative around WEC needs to be reviewed and potentially restructured.

CHANGE AGENTS: KNOWLEDGE BASED POLICY INFLUENCE ORGANISATIONS

The MTT Program has already demonstrated considerable success in building a broad collaboration of KBPIOs, that itself speaks to a high level of demand for such a regional initiative.

The original call from DFAT applied the following definition of think tanks:

“Public-policy research, analysis and engagement organisations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policy makers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy”.

MTT program has developed a broad definition of national and regional Think Tanks under the framing of Knowledge Based Policy Influencing Organisations (KBPIOs), a term that was initially applied by Wellstead and Howlett (2022), and that is set out in an internal program scoping document (Lebel, et al, 2023). As this scoping report explains, the working definition of KBPIOs that is applied in the MTT program, adapts the concept of KBPIOs to become Policy Influencing Organisations (PIOs) defined as being “organizations that provide policy advice, where *policy advice*, verbal or written, evaluates current or proposed policies and often makes recommendations to change or discontinue”. The definition of PIOs goes further by expanding

the emphasis on knowledge to include ‘practice based and local knowledge’, opening the scope to include grassroots organisations and smaller local or national NGOs that might not have strong formal research capacity or orientation. The sphere of policy influence of these organisations covers includes “giving commissioned advice, shaping public opinion about policies, and working together with other stakeholders to assess the consequences”.

This broader framing is appropriate for the Mekong region, opening space for engagement with a wide range of organisation types operating at different scales and with different degrees of expertise. Significantly it allows the MTT program to engage with a wide range of organisations that better capture the Mekong research landscape – national and international universities and university departments, government research institutes, NGOs, intergovernmental organisations. Such a range of organisations also represent diversity in terms of - scale (staff, budget), history of establishment and operation and engagement, research focus (topic, disciplinary perspectives), priorities and engagement expertise and strategies – and importantly, technical and managerial capacities. The MTT Program already involves a strong range of organisations in the core program alliance, as well as in the FS and RR projects, and the growing alliance.

The scoping report also identifies the range of strategies that are employed to engage in policy processes (Lebel, et al, 2023) – “*meet government* strategy, in which representatives of an organization frequently meet government officials in different roles to influence policy and decisions; *broadcast to public* strategy, in which organizations market their ideas in mass and social media with the intent of shaping public opinion; and actively *manage the boundaries* between science and policy”. As is discussed in more detail in the following sections, the range of strategies that are being applied in the FS and RR projects is rather limited, and their potential effectiveness unclear.

The scoping study provides an important discussion of capacity needs of different KBPIOs, identifying 3 key sets of priorities – i) project management, ii) policy research and iii) stakeholder engagement. These issues are discussed in greater detail below. However, at this point it is important to consider the significance of capacity gaps of some KBPIOs in project management. The administrative processes of formalising sub-grant agreements have certainly presented challenges to all the sub-grantee organisations. Even large international organisations and international/national universities with a track record of implementing donor funded projects have struggled to complete the sub-grant contractual arrangements smoothly, thus contributing to delays in project launch and reduced timeframes for project implementation.

This range of organisations also represent different core priorities and performance indicators that organisations set for their staff, with varying degrees of emphasis on more traditional research outputs as is associated with universities, versus policy engagement that might be more clearly associated with government research institutes, and advocacy as associated with NGOs.

At this stage, the range of lead organisations receiving support under the Flagship Studies and Rapid Response studies can be summarised:

- Intergovernmental organisations (Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre)
- International/regional post-graduate universities (Asian Institute of Technology, AIT)
- National and provincial universities (Vinh University, Can Tho University, Institute of Technology Cambodia, Mae Jo University, University of Economics (UEH))
- International research and policy organisations (Stockholm Environment Institute)
- National NGOs and think tanks (Thailand Environment Institute, My Village)
- Government research Institutes (Northern Agriculture and Forestry Centre, Lao)

As this summary list of lead implementing organisations for the FS and RR projects illustrates, the research under Component 2 is dominated by universities, including a number of smaller provincial universities (Mae Jo University, Vinh University, UEH, ITC) with less experience of participating in such internationally funded research projects.

Across this wide range of organisations there appears to be some significant differences in what counts as ‘research’ and ‘policy engagement and influence’. For the more traditionally oriented organisations, the emphasis on research outputs (especially publication of peer review papers) in individual staff performance criteria can outweigh any commitments to policy engagement, or meaningful support for more innovative (and resource-intensive) research processes that foster co-production and meaningful participation of policy actors or poor, marginalised and at-risk communities.

In contrast, advocacy-oriented NGOs might place more emphasis on generating evidence to support advocacy positions, rather than ensuring the quality of research according to established international scientific criteria. Can Tho University is an example of a university with a specific mandate from the Prime Minister to address the challenges of climate change in the Mekong Delta. In between these approaches, are the organisations that are more oriented towards acting as brokers and facilitators of multi-stakeholder dialogues. It will be important to consider these differences in organisational remit when identifying and broadening the network and alliance that is being established under the MTT program.

Given this diversity of organisations classed as KBPIOs and active in the FS and RR projects, there may be a need for additional support from the MTT Program to those that are less oriented towards and less adept at policy influencing processes, particularly where such processes are also resource intensive and time consuming. Given the tight time frames of the FS and RR projects and the need to complete the projects on time, the concern is that the focus of attention will be on completing the research outputs that are required under their sub-grants and more easily measured, rather than delivering in the more challenging areas of policy engagement and knowledge co-production.

CHANGE AGENTS: FELLOWS

The MTT Program supports early and mid-career regional Fellows (under component 4), applying a similar model to the SUMERNET Young Professionals program who are expected to become individual agents of change.

The indicators for these Fellows under Objective 3 are:

Number of policy processes being contributed to by entry- and mid-career professionals as members, advisers, researchers, supporters or resource persons

Quality of entry- and mid-career professionals' contributions to policy processes

With progress markers for Mekong region’s early and mid-level professionals

Early	Mid-term	EOP
Early- and mid-level professionals participate in capacity building activities (fellowships, training, mentoring, etc.) on research, policy engagement or communications.	Early- and mid-level professionals apply learnings on research, policy engagement or communications that they obtained from the program in their project activities.	Early- and mid-level contribute to the influencing of policy processes

Currently 16 Fellows have been identified and are now being funded. The Fellows represent a good gender balance with 10 women and 6 men. While each of the Lower Mekong basin countries is represented, there are 7 Fellows from Viet Nam and only one from Laos. The host organisations for the Fellows are largely from the core group of MTT partners, with 6 Fellows hosted at SEI. One Fellow from Viet Nam is hosted by My Village in Cambodia, contributing to the implementation of the RR project by supporting development of written research projects. This is also a good example of Fellows gaining practical experience about regional issues beyond their own country, by being directly engaged in research activities.

The Fellows are involved in a range of different activities, from research to media and communications, and certainly in the case of some who have been supported in Batch 1, have already made important contributions to scoping studies and furthering understanding of core themes within the program, particularly in relation to GEDSI mainstreaming. In doing so, the Fellows are making important contributions to a key area of importance for the MTT program.

The Fellows in Batch 1 have all been assigned to specific MTT program Components. In contrast, the role of the Fellows from Batch 2 goes beyond the MTT program, with 5 of the 8 Fellows providing support to the host organisation that ranges from development of master's programs, developing research proposals on the WEC nexus, and developing communications materials. At this stage in implementation of the program it is not possible to provide an assessment of the relative effectiveness of full-time versus part-time Fellowships.

The program is targeting younger, early career professionals successfully. The majority of the Fellows have recently graduated – five have completed doctorate degrees, three have completed master's degrees, and two have completed bachelor's programs. The Fellowship program appears to provide a valuable bridge from structured degree programs into professional environment. Three of the Fellows are early or mid-career academics at universities in the region, and two have come from working in practice (one from the Lao Women's Union, and one from NGOs in Cambodia). Fellows are hosted by different host organizations, across 4 Mekong countries. Different levels and areas of contributions from the fellows are expected by MTT program, and host organizations. The MTT program also provide flexible working arrangement, including working full time and part time, working physically at the host organizations and/or working remotely for a period of time. This flexibility allows fellows, specially those who have family responsibilities (taking care of other family members), to be able to pursue the fellowship. MTT Fellowship Program policy is reinforced to ensure equal and accessible to full potential of the fellowship grant. No significant learning and opportunity accessibility among fellows are recorded.

All the Fellows interviewed during the MTE have expressed appreciation of the support that they have received, and the exposure to new networks that the MTT program has provided. The main advantage of the program for individual Fellows appears to be the opportunity to advance their own individual career pathways. Doing so may of course lead to impacts at the scale of change that is articulated in the EOPO, but this level of impact is likely beyond the timeframe of the program. An additional benefit of the Fellows program is illustrated by the experience of the SUMERNET Young Professionals scheme that now constitutes an important network of alumni, with many of whom working in positions of influence within government agencies, civil society and academia.

GENERATING RESEARCH EVIDENCE AND BUILDING CAPACITY – FLAGSHIP STUDIES AND RAPID RESPONSE GRANTS

The MTT program rests on the notion that policy should be based on evidence, and that KBPIOs should have a role in generating such evidence based on good research practices. Component 2 supports the main budget allocation of the MTT program (with 43% of total program budget), providing sub-grants to Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects. It is largely through these projects that the capacity of KBPIOs will be

built, high quality research evidence will be generated and research outputs created, with expectations of each research project making its own direct contribution to policy and planning processes. As discussed above, to some degree the Fellowship program is designed to provide some of the supporting research, for example by providing input to the GEDSI strategy that will be applied in the FS and RR projects. Additionally, Components 1 and 3 are designed to create the mechanisms for networking and dialogue, that create the space for deliberation on research evidence.

The MTT MEL Plan's Theory of Change presents a direct relationship between Component 2 and Objective 2. The summary of Component 2 talks of *'enhancing climate resilience of water and energy systems through policy research and collaboration among PIOs'* that will contribute to strengthening *'the role and capabilities of national and regional KBPIOs in inclusive knowledge co-production processes by engaging with stakeholders across sectors, locations and countries on water, climate and energy issues and their interlinkages'*. It is in this summary explanation of Component 2 that the terminology and emphasis shifts, with the target being structured as climate resilience, and the mechanism by which such climate resilience will be achieved, are identified as being based on 'water and energy systems'. Only reading this objective, the intention of the program appears to focus on climate resilience (rather than the WEC). It is worth noting, that this summary explanation of Component 2 includes new terminologies that also have associated bodies of theory; 'resilience' and 'systems'. In reviewing the framing of the WEC nexus as discussed above, it would also be beneficial to attempt to align different related concepts and terminologies.

MTT Program is now supporting 4 Flagship Studies and 7 Rapid Response projects, that have been identified through a thorough process of open application and peer review of proposals. The MTE interviewed each of these projects and conducted fieldwork with three projects – 2 Flagship Studies and 1 Rapid Response study.

The design of Component 2 around a competitive call for sub-grants rather than targeting familiar established organisations allows for new organisations with less experience, and perhaps less capacity, to participate in the program. There was a rigorous process of selection that was somewhat time-consuming involving close co-ordination between the MTT Secretariat, DFAT, Program Steering Committee (PSC) and advisors but that has succeeded in supporting both established and less experienced organisations. In fulfilling its commitment to capacity building, the MTT Secretariat provided support to all project teams whose proposals showed potential but required refinement.

There have been significant delays in the process of approving these projects, and in the sub-grantee organisations conforming to the contractual requirements that would allow for the flow of funds from MTT program. The whole process of issuing the call, reviewing proposals, getting approval and clearance on recommended proposals and providing additional support to potential sub-grantees involved close collaboration between the MTT Program and DFAT, but inevitably has led to some delays. While 6 of the sub-grantees completed the contractual arrangements by the end of May 2024, most of the kick-off meetings for the projects were being held between July and September 2024. The project led by Mae Jo University had not actually completed the sub-grant contract or received any program funding at the time of MTE fieldwork (31 August 2024). These delays illustrate some of the complexities of running a program of sub-grants across the countries of the Mekong region, particularly when the intention of the program is to open opportunities for KBPIOs that might not have such experience of engaging with international donors and organisations.

There has been something of a learning curve for both the MTT program and the recipient organisations. Creating these opportunities for organisations and researchers with less experience is much appreciated by the sub-grantees and illustrates an important success in capacity building for the MTT Program that is in line with objectives and EOPO. All the FS sub-grantees – Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC), Asian

Institute of Technology (AIT) and SEI - are established international and regional organisations with successful track records of research, and to some degree, of engaging in policy-oriented spaces. In contrast, the Rapid Response projects have clearly created opportunities for organisations that do not have such experience of engaging in international research collaborations (eg My Village International, Vinh University, ITC and UEH), and thus, create opportunities for MTT program to build capacity. The need for capacity building support in project management and administration across the community of sub-grant recipients is demonstrated by the challenges that all have faced in completing the contractual arrangements for their projects. All FS and RR projects acknowledged the support that they have received from the MTT Secretariat, recognising that the reasons for the delays lie within their own organisations as well as with the MTT program.

Given the MTT programmatic focus on building capacity there are clearly arguments to support the targeting of smaller organisations that might not have had the opportunity to participate in an internationally funded regional program. In interviews, all such grantees appreciated the opportunities that have been made available under the program – for example in terms of technical capacity, building capacities in application of GEDSI principles, as well as in managing the contractual and administrative aspects of such engagement. Targeting such organisations is a clear fit with the strategic remit of the MTT program and allows for a broadening of the regional alliance. While more established organisations that have a track record of engagement in such programs and research-policy interfaces, have benefited from receiving support under the better resourced Flagship Studies, the MTT program is clearly also building technical capacities within these organisations, particularly in terms of GEDSI and policy influence. It is worth noting that the disciplinary focus of these FS projects tends to be oriented more towards the natural and physical rather than social sciences – and there are clearly opportunities for strengthening the interdisciplinarity of such organisations, as well as their capacities in strengthening local stakeholder participation and policy influence.

The MTT Program has been successful in supporting FS and RR projects that cover a wide range of research issues, each of which has its own merits. The projects are summarised in the tables below:

Flagship Studies

Lead organisation(s)	Core research theme	Timeline
Asian Institute of Technology and Vietnam National University	Shared transboundary groundwater resources between Cambodia and Viet Nam in the Mekong delta in context of climate change, applying a GEDSI lens and Nature based solutions	1/7/2024-31/8/2025
Asian Institute of Technology (and 7 partners)	Impacts of Sea Level Rise on coastal communities, and vulnerable people	23/2/2024-31/7/2025
Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC) and RMIT-Viet Nam	Urban Heat in large cities – Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City	1/3/2024-31/3/2025
SEI (Thailand Environment Institute, National University of Laos and Mahasarakham University)	Opportunities and solutions in managing water storage to reduce transboundary water-related disaster risks and to address multiple water demands (in Thailand and Lao PDR).	1/2/2024-31/7/2025

Rapid Response Studies

Lead organisation(s)	Core research theme	Timeline
----------------------	---------------------	----------

Can Tho University and Viet Nam Women's Union	Training Viet Nam Women's Union and Women's Union members in WEC- largely focusing on water and climate	1/8/2024-31/7/2025
AIT and National University of Laos (NUOL)	Climate and water availability/use scenarios for rural livelihoods (largely rice farmers) in Savannakhet, Lao PDR	1/7/2024-30/6/2025
Institute of Technology, Cambodia	Off-grid groundwater treatment for remote communities in Cambodia	1/7/2024-30/6/2025
My Village International, Cambodia	Assessing fishing communities' resilience in the face of climate change, Stung Treng, Cambodia	1/3/2024-28/2/2025
Mae Jo University, Thailand	Community fisheries management - adapting rules and regulations in response to observed impacts of climate change in Lao PDR	1/9/2024-31/8/2025
Vinh University, Viet Nam	Equitable sharing of water resources for ethnic minority communities living downstream of small hydropower projects through collaboration among the community, businesses, and the state in Vietnam	1/5/2024-30/4/2025
University of Economics (UEH), Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam	Gender sensitising the operation of existing water infrastructure, and the design of future infrastructure	15/5/2024-30/4/2025

All the FS and RR projects are addressing issues that are of importance for the Mekong region, and some aspects of the WEC nexus, clearly demonstrating the potential to deliver research evidence of relevance and impact. All the projects address water governance issues, and to some extent climate change – although the ADPC project on urban heat is something of an outlier, addressing an issue that is highly relevant for the Mekong region but not necessarily a clear fit with the MTT WEC focus. Nonetheless this project does enjoy strong support from the relevant city governments. The energy dimension of the nexus is a central research priority in SEI's Flagship Study, and in the studies being led by Vinh University and the University of Economics (UEH). However, the influence of hydropower is certainly a central concern in the project led by My Village but tactfully downplayed in the way that the project is presented.

As this list of sub-grantees illustrates, the FS and RR projects are being led by KBPIOs that are universities, except for the Flagship Studies led by ADPC and SEI, and the Rapid Response project led by My Village. There is a strong disciplinary bias in the orientation of the FS and RR project leads, dominated by researchers with natural science and engineering backgrounds. While the teams and partners involve a number of additional disciplines, future engagement may require more targeted efforts to attract social scientists, including specialists in policy, GEDSI (and climate vulnerability) and knowledge co-production might be beneficial.

KNOWLEDGE CO-PRODUCTION PROCESSES

The program makes a clear commitment to knowledge co-production. This broad approach is summarised under **Objective 2**:

The program intends to strengthen the role and capabilities of national and regional KBPIOs in ***inclusive knowledge co-production processes** by engaging with stakeholders across sectors, locations and countries on water, climate and energy issues and their interlinkages.*

With the following 2 indicators:

Number of policy-oriented knowledge products developed by national and regional KBPIOs to inform policy processes

Knowledge co-production processes are cross-sectoral and/or cross-border

While it is not stated explicitly, the logical flow of the Theory of Change suggests that knowledge co-production is a necessary mechanism for ensuring policy influence. Objective 2 points to the role of KBPIOs in knowledge co-production processes with ‘stakeholders’ as a mechanism for bridging research, policy and practice. Knowledge co-production can thus be seen as a core principle of good practice, and a strategic mechanism for ensuring influence. It is also recognised in the Objective that the capacity in knowledge co-production requires strengthening.

The second indicator for Objective 2 states that such knowledge co-production processes should also be ‘*cross-sectoral and/or cross border*’. Two FS projects are cross-border. All the projects are to some degree, cross-sectoral. This might not be the most appropriate indicator for what the program is achieving, or for how the strengthened ‘roles and capabilities’ it refers to, might contribute to the robustness and inclusiveness of the research-policy interfaces that are stated in the EOPO. However, as discussed above, the indicator for knowledge co-production could be adapted to assess the extent to which knowledge co-production could address GEDSI commitments as a mechanism for ensuring representation of marginalised, vulnerable and at-risk communities in conducting research.

Demonstrating how projects support knowledge co-production processes was a requirement of the open call. All the FS and RR projects make some reference to knowledge co-production in their proposals and during the MTE interviews. At times, the FS and RR projects appear to be referring to co-production within the project research teams across relevant disciplines, and in other cases, to sharing information and providing feedback to representatives of policy arenas. One Flagship Study described the process of knowledge co-production with local communities as being around three steps – i) informing communities of the purpose of the research project, ii) developing a questionnaire survey for communities and key informants, and iii) sharing findings to the community for their feedback. If knowledge co-production can be seen as covering a broad spectrum, in line with the way that participation is understood, such a process can be regarded as being at the end of consultation rather than at the scale of ownership or empowerment, in which the role of communities (and other actors) is invited and shaped by the project itself, rather than claimed (or demanded) by project beneficiaries and government partners.

The projects led by SEI, Vinh University and Mae Jo University are examples of core stakeholders, such as potential beneficiaries or policy target groups of research projects, being involved in setting research agendas or in conducting data gathering or analysis, as might be expected in co-production processes. Such high degrees of participation in research processes do require time and effort in building relations and clarifying roles, that would be beyond what can be expected in 12-month projects, except where these relationships are already well-established. However, Mae Jo University working in partnership with the Northern Agriculture and Forestry Research Centre (NAFC) in Lao PDR, is attempting to build a collaboration with local villages in the assessment of community fisheries management options; an approach that is strongly advocated for by NAFC. Creating opportunities for sharing such examples of good practice across the program would be beneficial.

The current interpretation of knowledge production is largely concerned with the production of research. Thai civil society partners in the SEI SOS FS project, pointed out that one of the challenges they face is that

there are no public mechanisms for deliberation on different information sources and data sets and their interpretation. A broader definition of knowledge co-production could expand to the ways in which data and evidence are publicly assessed, evaluated and negotiated so that they create an accepted knowledge. Such a definition would potentially provide a clearer sense of research-policy interfaces being ‘robust’ and ‘inclusive’, opening the role of KBPIOs to brokering and convening, as is expected in Components 1 and 3.

Developing a strategy at the program level of what constitute ‘knowledge co-production processes’ would provide valuable guidance on the different approaches that might be applied and their relative merits – structured around the degrees of meaningful participation and ownership of research processes.

GENDER EQUALITY, DISABILITY, SOCIAL INCLUSION (GEDSI)

The commitment to Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) is a core principle underpinning the MTT program. Considerable effort has been devoted to developing a strategy for integrating DFAT’s GEDSI analysis¹ in different elements of the MTT program, especially targeting the FS and RR projects, and also the program’s support for policy dialogues (under Component 1 and Component 3).

Developing a coherent strategy to apply GEDSI principles has been an important focus of the MTT program. The GEDSI advisors, with support from Fellows, have made significant advances in developing a strategic approach, and in providing initial training to the FS and RR projects, and advice across the other program components. Feedback from these projects has been very positive, and there is a clear sense that they are learning to operate in this space and demonstrating commitment to addressing GEDSI effectively. Each of the FS and RR projects has been required to appoint a GEDSI focal point. For some projects, the GEDSI focus resonates well with policy actors. In Viet Nam and in Lao PDR, the participation of the national women’s unions is an important mechanism by which the projects can advance national government policy commitments associated with GEDSI principles and apply them to issues related to the WEC nexus.

Issues related to GEDSI principles are discussed in slightly different ways in the program documents. The EOPO talks specifically of policy processes being responsive to *‘the needs of vulnerable groups’*, while the long-term goal applies the language of *‘marginalized, vulnerable and at-risk communities’*.

There is some complementarity between these terminologies, but they should not be seen as interchangeable, particularly in the context of climate change. Climate vulnerability and risk is certainly influenced by but not solely attributable to gender, disability or social exclusion. There is a rich literature and experience from practice that address the range of factors that shape climate vulnerability at individual, household and community scales – with vulnerability structured as a function of exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity, and often anchored in concepts of assets, capabilities and rights. The MTT Program is making significant progress in building capacity to apply principles of gender and disability – dimensions of vulnerability that area often overlooked, thereby allowing for more nuanced disaggregation of vulnerable and at-risk communities. However, the indicators at EOPO level do not provide sufficient clarity on what is meant by vulnerability, and how vulnerability can be disaggregated according to GEDSI principles, or of how policy might be responsive to the needs of such vulnerable groups.

The MTT call to ‘do no harm’ and MTT Program aims to address the negative impacts related to the WEC nexus, and the exclusion of marginalised peoples in policy processes. These are important and relevant priorities for the program. The history of water and energy infrastructure in the region illustrates that local communities, and the most marginalised within them, have often been negatively impacted while receiving few of the benefits, and with limited space to represent their own interests. Many of the projects talk about local communities. However, discussions in terms of ‘communities’ can mask the complex lines of

¹ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/gender-equality-disability-social-inclusion-analysis-good-practice-note.pdf>

differentiation within and between households, and the factors that might contribute to marginalisation, vulnerability and risk. Adding a GEDSI lens also allows for greater understanding of the specific impacts experienced within communities and households according to dimensions of gender and disability, that have also been neglected. There are thus clear gaps in policy processes that the MTT Program is positioned to address.

The GEDSI framing is relatively new to all the FS and RR. There is a degree of familiarity with gender and social inclusion concepts and issues, but the focus on disability is new for all parties. While there is no baseline for an assessment, in interviews conducted under this MTE, all FS and RR projects have stated that they have learned a great deal from the MTT support around GEDSI, and are appreciative of the technical support and guidance that the program has provided. The extent to which the FS and RR projects are able to apply GEDSI principles will need to be monitored and supported with appropriate technical assistance.

Unsurprisingly there is some diversity in the ways in which GEDSI is being applied. For some projects the gender dimension is expressed more in terms of team diversity and equity. However, in nearly all projects the leadership is male (only 2 projects have a strong gender diversity in leadership). The gender balance in the Fellows program is much more positive. For other projects, the commitments to gender and disability are addressed through ensuring more representative and effective participation in project events – workshops, dialogues, focus group discussions – and creating separate spaces for men and women in these events.

Gender is a central focus of 3 RR projects. Equitable sharing (Vinh University) – GS4Infra (UEH) projects specifically target women in access and distribution of water, and associated benefits, Can Tho University's project (building resilience and adaptive capacity of VN Women's Union to deal with WEC) works directly with the Viet Nam Women's Union, as trainers and trainers of trainers who will further target women. ReTREAT has an established gender focal point with a personal and professional commitment to disability and includes post-graduate students from the Gender and Development Master's program as researchers within the project team. Similarly, the SEI SOS project in Thailand has made links with grassroots organisations active at the provincial level in advocating for disability issues, and with strong links to provincial policy actors. The partnership with the Lao Women's Union provides a mechanism to address gender equality – and similar institutional partnerships have been developed under the Mae Jo University community fisheries resilience project.

Ethnicity is addressed as an element of social exclusion and poverty. My Village's project focuses on poorer (ethnic minority) communities in Stung Treng who have been excluded from decision-making processes, addressing impacts of water-energy infrastructure. Vinh University's project focuses specifically on ethnic minorities who have been impacted by existing water infrastructure.

The GEDSI advisors have pointed out that there are risks associated with not addressing GEDSI considerations effectively in the FS and RR projects, in that the policy recommendations that emerge from these projects might not be sufficiently sensitive to the needs of vulnerable people, and that such omissions will be difficult to correct later. This is an important consideration given the relative unfamiliarity with GEDSI in the FS and RR project teams and the tight timeframes of the projects. It might therefore be necessary to consider a GEDSI proofing of any policy recommendations that might be developed by the FS and RR projects to ensure at the very least that such recommendations do not create negative impacts, and ideally, generate positive tangible outcomes. Doing so would require a further analysis of all policy recommendations that emerge from the FS/RR projects, with additional expertise being provided by the MTT GEDSI technical advisors.

As discussed above, the role of such groups within the research and policy processes potentially ranges from being the objects of research enquiry, being invited to participate in consultation and dialogue

processes to being active researchers able to represent their own evidence and interest in policy processes. It is worth recognising that grassroots organisations mobilising on issues of disability have operated under the motif – “nothing about us, without us”. This is an important framing that MTT Program could also adopt, and apply specifically in the area of knowledge co-production, exploring the potential for disability groups (and other marginalised stakeholders) can take more meaningful roles in the process of conducting, analysing and representing research.

Addressing GEDSI has been identified by all actors in the MTT program as being a steep learning curve. There are clear signs of progress particularly in terms of raising awareness, and it is important for the program to capture this learning. At this stage in project implementation the key learning has been in terms of general awareness of GEDSI principles and their application, and in the refinement of FS/RR project strategies. However, it is too early to demonstrate the positive GEDSI impacts of such projects. At the program level, the possibility of consolidating learning emerging from the FS and RR projects, and the individual research activities of the Fellows needs to be prioritised, as a way of contributing to future interventions beyond the project, that would guide strategic approaches to ensuring that policy is responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups.

POLICY INTERFACES: THE ROLE OF FLAGSHIP STUDIES AND RAPID RESPONSE PROJECTS

The main mechanisms for addressing policy considerations are through the research evidence that is generated by the FS and RR projects (under Component 2 and to some degree, Component 4), and through Component 1’s focus on building a regional alliance and network of KBPIOs able to engage in policy processes, and Component 3’s commitment to promoting engagement that goes beyond (more familiar) dialogue processes.

The experience emerging already from the FS and RR projects provides some useful insights. In the call for proposals, each of the FS and RR projects is required to demonstrate a clear focus on policy processes. While the EOPO talks specifically of national and regional policy, in each of the FS and RR projects the focus is more organised around sub-national policy or decision-making processes.

In a limited number of cases, projects are responding to clear policy gaps identified by government agencies themselves, usually at the local level. Vinh University’s research project is a response to provincial concerns regarding the need to address impacts on local communities. UEH’s research project draws on specific policy commitments around climate change, and the management of water infrastructure to meet gender and equity priorities. Mae Jo University’s project (in partnership with the Northern Agriculture and Forestry Centre) is a response to requests from village leadership for support and is in line with national policy commitments. Some research teams see themselves as helping to set a policy agenda – drawing on international areas of interest such as nature-based solutions, urban heat, sea level rise. For the Institute of Technology Cambodia (ITC)’s project on solar powered groundwater in remote areas of Cambodia, the project is seen as a proof-of-concept initiative regarding specific technologies that might meet the needs of specific aspects of vulnerability and poverty. Other projects are addressing emerging local-level issues that might not be recognised in policy circles yet, for example in Mae Jo University’s project addressing emerging concerns about the observed impacts of climate change on community fisheries management regimes, and the need for adaptive responses to these changes. As an NGO with a commitment to indigenous people’s rights, My Village’s role is to raise concerns that are not addressed adequately in policy and clearly fit with GEDSI commitments.

Several projects have established mechanisms for engagement of government representatives in management committees and steering groups. To some degree these arrangements address the challenges associated with knowledge co-production discussed above. Such arrangements are well established in Viet Nam and Lao PDR. The RR project on equitable sharing of water resources for ethnic communities led by Vinh University, responds to local policy concerns and the Provincial People’s Committee has been involved

in the project design, and established the Project Management Board with the Vice Chair of the Provincial People's Committee and Vice Chairs of District Committees, and part of the project is about identifying the causes of current problems around equitable water access and distribution, and identifying mechanisms to engage with government. Other projects have strong links to (sub-national) government agencies with a research remit, for example, in the fishery community resilience project in Laos, and with local tiers of government, such as Commune Councils in Cambodia. SEI's SOS Flagship project in Thailand engages with a range of different government agencies, and Sub-District Administration Organisations (Or Bor Tor). SEI's FS project and UEH's RR project both are attempting to engage with private sector actors, recognising their role in shaping policy and practice. Other ambitions are more modest and framed as being about 'interacting' with government agencies. The quality of such engagement and its potential impact has been difficult to assess in the MTE.

The range of approaches being employed in the FS and RR projects can be seen as being on a spectrum, ranging from interacting, to engaging and influencing – with much of the effort currently towards the lower end of the spectrum. The projects themselves do not currently have mechanisms for assessing the quality or impact of these approaches, although such assessment would generate important lessons for the wider program. The project teams recognise that there is considerable uncertainty regarding the extent to which such current actions might lead to tangible impact in policy and practice. Policy influence can be serendipitous and SEI's SOS project has already gained some traction with the Mekong River Commission Secretariat's picking up on the issues surrounding water storage. Where projects have identified policy uptake pathways, they can be long-term and not necessarily focused on the priorities of the MTT program. For example, ReTREAT aims to produce 3 peer review papers that will feed into the global IPCC process (rather than national or regional arenas); a process that takes several years and is itself not directly linked to implementation.

The various strategies for influencing policy can be summarised as:

- Generate evidence and present in the public domain – working papers, multi-media formats
- Generating credible scientific research evidence – through the publication of peer review papers
- Translating research evidence for non-academic policy audiences – through the production of policy briefs
- Capacity building and training – targeting local implementers
- Presenting research findings for feedback – in workshops
- Policy dialogues – to create space for different stakeholders to share

Developing a more rigorous, systematic typology of strategies against which effectiveness could be assessed, would be a useful product from the MTT program, that could guide future intervention strategies for KBPIOs and contribute to capacity building objectives across the program.

The major concern moving forward is that the potential for the FS and RR projects to deliver tangible impact in policy and practice within the lifespan of the projects themselves would appear to be limited. The projects recognise that they themselves may be stronger in research than policy engagement. For example, one project team leader discussed successes of previous projects (outside the current MTT program) in delivering modelling outputs, but frustration at the lack of uptake by the involved government departments. Some projects are looking to NGO experience in applying research evidence for advocacy and lobbying. For other projects, policy impact is something of a long-shot beyond the scope and expertise of the projects themselves – and often illustrating a lack of deep knowledge of the relevant policy landscape or of specific strategies to engage with policy. Moreover, the tight timeframes of the FS and RR projects (and in some cases, very ambitious nature of the projects) creates the risk that the major focus of their effort will be in producing the research-related products that are required of them (peer review papers, working

papers, policy briefs), and that the focus on influence might be further compromised. Even in cases where there appear to be good links with representatives of government, the FS and RR projects recognise that the level of influence on policy processes, especially at the national level, is largely out of their control, and in some cases, that such a focus on policy engagement is entirely new. In some ways the WEC nexus framing might actually be contributing to this complexity, as there are no obvious policy entry points that correspond directly with the nexus.

Despite these concerns, each of the FS and RR projects addresses issues of importance and has the potential to generate lessons for how to engage in and influence policy – even if impact might be beyond the scope of the current project timeframes.

The rather limited scope of policy engagement strategies demonstrated by the FS and RR projects, and a tendency to rely on some form of public event (workshop or dialogue) therefore raises some questions for Component 1 and Component 3, in terms of creating appropriate interfaces and the commitment to going beyond dialogues. In the MTT Theory of Change, Component 1 (and Component 4) contributes to Objective 3, while Component 3 contributes to Objective 1.

While the Theory of Change suggests that Component 2, contributes to Objective 2, the key mechanisms for leveraging the findings of the FS and RR projects would appear to be more appropriately addressed in Components 1 and 3.

Component 1 builds on established 20 years' experience of SEI in the Mekong region in convening multi-stakeholder events under the SUMERNET program, and in doing so, creating space for formal structured engagement of different stakeholders, and more informal networking and information sharing. SEI clearly has high-level convening power, able to bring together high-level government representatives from the region, as well as other private sector and civil society actors.

MTT program has already organised significant regional events, in partnership with SUMERNET. The First Mekong Environmental Resilience Week (MERW) including MTT Policy Forum and Climate Roundtable organised in 2023 in which the MTT program participated, attracted high-level engagement, and was identified by DFAT as having created the space for meaningful policy discussions. This has resulted in follow up dialogues and fruitful cooperation between DFAT and Thailand's Department of Climate Change and Environment. The Second MERW including the MTT Policy Forum is also to be held in October 2024, with a national policy forum in Viet Nam scheduled in November 2024.

Under Component 1, a literature review has been completed that has shaped the strategy for a network and alliance. The alliance builds on the extensive network of SUMERNET and adds new organisations with specific expertise related to the WEC nexus and GEDSI. The strategy highlights the need for regional ownership for sustainability, and that it would provide functions of annual meetings to exchange knowledge and experience; capacity building events; providing grants and supporting applications. So far, the alliance has attracted expressions of interest from 38 organisations, the vast majority of whom are academic institutes (universities and university departments). Given the above discussions on the nature of KBPIOs, it is worth considering targeted efforts to attract membership from organisations that have a stronger remit for influencing policy. Similarly, given the concerns regarding the traction and long-term effectiveness of framing these interventions around the WEC nexus, it is worth considering alternative framings (such as Climate and Environment or Climate and Water) that might create space for greater impact. It should be noted that there are already other networks and alliances in the region, and in deciding the precise framing of the network and alliance, it will be important to carve out a niche that fills a gap in these existing initiatives, and that also has traction at national and regional policy scales.

In the language of Component 3 commitment to move beyond dialogues, is a clear recognition of the limitations of current dialogue practices and the need for innovation. This is a challenge that goes beyond the MTT program with dialogues widely applied around the world in research and development projects, as a mechanism to open space for debate and deliberation and deliver impacts. The MTT program is in a strong position to generate the learning that would have wider value. However, at this stage in the program, Component 3 is less advanced, partly due to changes in personnel, but also as a reflection of the progress in the FS and RR projects. There is no clear program strategy on what would constitute moving beyond dialogues.

Greater integration between Components 1 and 3, could create the mechanisms for creating leverage from the research evidence from Component 2 FS and RR studies, facilitating cross-program learning and both building a long-term alliance while creating new mechanisms for policy engagement 'beyond dialogues'. This has not been the focus of the program so far. It is strongly recommended that the exchange between and across the three MTT components now becomes a major focus of program implementation.

The FS and RR projects are addressing important areas of research. One of the main risks that the MTE has identified is that the FS and RR projects will struggle to deliver the expected level of policy influence within the timeframe of the projects. For the MTT program, the projects need to be greater than the sum of their parts, and this in turn requires more proactive intervention to distil and synthesise lessons from the projects, and mechanisms for raising these insights to the national and regional level. Such efforts are beyond the capacity of (most of) the FS and RR projects. One suggestion that has emerged from Thai civil society partners under the SEI SOS Flagship Study project would be for dialogue events to be a platform for deliberation on different sets of data and information, allowing for public analysis and reflection. In this way, the (beyond) dialogue platforms might be less solely dependent on the research evidence generated from the FS and RR projects and allow for other actors to participate more effectively. Clearly, the public space for such deliberation of evidence is currently limited in the Mekong region.

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Component 5 deals with all areas of program management – administration, finance and MEL. The MTT Program is complex and ambitious, covering a wide range of technical and policy issues, and encompassing a broad group of partner organisations. The ability of the MTT Program to put in place appropriate management systems and the ability to navigate unanticipated delays, are obvious successes of the program. That such systems are in place and operating effectively is itself a major achievement and lays the foundations for longer-term interventions.

All MTT program Components are largely on schedule in terms of implementation. Despite early delays there is reasonable degree of confidence that core activities will be completed. The ability of the MTT Secretariat to adapt to these challenges should be commended. The MTT program has been something of a learning experience for all concerned in understanding and navigating the administrative and contractual requirements of the program. The partnership between DFAT and SEI is new, but confidence in SEI's capacity to manage the program effectively is perhaps demonstrated by the granting of an additional AUD \$1 million in 2024.

Feedback on levels of support from the MTT Secretariat have been supportive, with project partners readily acknowledging that some of the administrative, financial and contractual delays are not solely the responsibility of the program. Local universities have national and institutional regulations that they need to follow, and in many cases, limited experience participating in such international projects funded by international donors. That the program has managed to involve such organisations indicates some success in building capacity and moving beyond a more familiar grouping of partners and grantees.

The MTT Program has established a detailed MEL Framework (in cooperation with DFAT) that provides an effective and appropriate tool for monitoring progress and capturing lessons emerging from the program. This includes use of Most Significant Change (MSC) methods as ways of capturing more qualitative achievements and lessons that also allow for guiding the strategic direction of the program. The MEL framework and Theory of Change (ToC) have already been discussed in some detail in the preceding sections of this report. The mid-term point of the program provides an opportunity for revisiting some key elements of the ToC. There are two priority areas to consider. First, the EOPO indicators, and progress markers need to be revisited, emphasising the programmatic targeting of research-policy interfaces rather than policy outcomes. Fundamentally, this is a problem of their appropriateness as a means of assessing success in achieving the core outcome, rather than the performance of the program itself.

Reconciling the inconsistencies between EOPO targets of interfaces versus policy influence will help clarify the intended program outcome in a way that is realistic and achievable. The MTT program is operating in a complex, and often poorly understood, policy environment in which program partners all recognise that the potential for research evidence to deliver policy impact is constrained. Program partners are operating in very specific contexts and attempting to navigate challenging policy landscapes. The strategies to deliver such impact are in many ways experimental; their success is not guaranteed but nonetheless, the program is generating considerable insight into how to engage in research-policy landscapes.

Rather than focusing on such unrealistic aspirations, the MTT program could build on its considerable strengths and successes, and the potentially rich sources of information and learning emerging from across the four main program components. Drawing on Rondinelli's (1992) well-cited work that presents development projects as policy experiments, MTT program is already operating as a learning experiment that will develop the foundations to shape a more long-term engagement to support evidence-based policy processes that draw on the considerable expertise of regional KBPIOs.

Such an emphasis on learning would however require greater proactive engagement of the MTT Secretariat, Component Leads and Advisors, including the MEL and GEDSI advisors. The key priorities of such support will be in providing technical assistance where needed to the FS and RR projects and working across the Components to facilitate cross-fertilisation and distilling lessons, linking Component 2 more closely to Components 3 and Component 1, and in doing so, creating the platform for a long-term program (or programs) that would inform and guide KBPIOs on how to exert effective policy influence.

VALUE FOR MONEY

The MTT Program Secretariat has submitted regular progress and expenditure reports to DFAT. In addition, the program was audited by PWC in June 2023. Financial records also show efficient budget management, with expenses aligned with the proposed budget.

During the first quarter of 2024, DFAT conducted the Annual Performance Assessment of the MTT Programme during programme implementation from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023. The findings suggested that "SEI is responsive to all DFAT requirements for the signed Grant Agreement for the MTT program. Reports are submitted on time, and the progress of activities is communicated and regularly discussed with Bangkok Post (Senior Programme Manager). Monthly meetings between DFAT and SEI discuss achievements and key priorities under this activity."

In mid 2024, MTT attracted additional AUD 1 million investment from DFAT to enhance program's visibility and impacts including onsite visits, GEDSI's capacity building and support to the grantees, but without an extension of the deadline. According to MTT grant agreement with DFAT, it is possible for the MTT to request a one-year no-cost extension if necessary. The program will consider in the future if they need to

request for an extension considering the progress of the program including the implementation of granted projects.

A summary of budget allocation and expenditures according to the 5 Components covering the period of 17 June 2022 until 31 August 2024, has been provided by SEI and is presented in the table below.

Budget and Expenditure Rates by Component

Component	Total Budget	Expenditure	Balance	Expenditure rate %	% total allocation
Component 1	390 128.85	111 811.41	278 317.44	29	0.07
Component 2	184 9291.92	586 490.05	1 262 801.87	32	0.35
Component 3	459 289.00	199 642.22	259 646.78	43	0.09
Component 4	114 6845.00	232 378.46	914 466.54	20	0.21
Component 5	1 504 445.23	516 280.96	988 164.27	34	0.28
TOTAL	5 350 000.00	1 646 603.10	2 703 396.90	31	

With only 14 months of program implementation remaining, the expenditure rates appear to be quite low, reflecting the initial delays in the early stages of the program. Across the program, the overall expenditure rate stands at 31%. The expenditure rate for Component 1 is low but appears on-track as most of the main activities will be completed in the coming 14 months. The expenditure rate for Component 3 is the highest of all the program components having organised the annual policy forum and other key events. Component 2 is the main focus of activity and allocated 32% of the total program budget. While the expenditure rate for Component 2 is slightly higher than for the program as a whole, this reflects the initial first payments for the FS and RR projects. There are concerns regarding the ability of the projects to complete on time and to complete expenditures. The expenditure rate for Component 4 is low, but a new batch of Fellows is to be announced in the coming month.

VIII. Evaluation Principles Table

The key insights from the Mid-Term Evaluation are presented in this summary table against the evaluation principles as outlined in the MTE Evaluation Plan.

Evaluation Principles Table for MTT MTE Final Report

Effectiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong performance toward managing operational challenges, including risk management and other relevant safeguarding measures e.g. Fraud risk awareness, ethic reviews. • The program is making important contributions towards building an alliance and network of KBPIOs and Fellows, and partners, that has the potential to generate knowledge and capacity, that in turn might have the potential to influence policy processes. Establishing public platforms for debate and deliberation of research evidence is in itself an important contribution. The upcoming quarter will provide evidence of capacity enhancement and networking at the level of policy arenas • Clear progress to strengthening research and policy interfaces, particularly in Component 1 and some of the sub-grantee projects. The dialogue and networking events that have

<p>been held so far are widely considered successful by program and partners, including the Australian Embassy and DFAT.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The strategy for a regional alliance and network is relevant and appropriate and has already attracted expressions of interest from over 30 organisations. • Strong evidence of individual capacity building within sub-grantee organisations and among Fellows, who are also contributing to strengthening the host organisation capacity. • Concerns that the current framing of the EOPO indicators is not in line with the core objective in the EOPO statement, and that these indicators do not capture the potential impact of the program. • EOPO is not well known by FS/RR sub-grantees and fellows, who are (understandably) more focused on their own projects and potential influence at sub-national level, rather than program focus on national and regional levels
<p>Efficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The MTT Secretariat established a thorough mechanism for managing FS and RR proposals. • The MTT Secretariat has provided support to sub-grantees that is recognised and appreciated by sub-grantees. • Despite delays in finalising sub-grant contracts, 4 FS and 7 RR projects are now being implemented, covering a strong diversity of research themes and issues, and involving all the program target countries. • GEDSI training and advice has been provided that is being applied in projects. • 16 fellowship grants have been awarded to early-mid career professionals through match making processes (as of 9/9/2024), providing the opportunity for capacity building and networking opportunity for the fellows and host institutes collectively. • Delays in sub-grant approval mean that projects are only just beginning implementation. As such, expenditure rates are behind schedule – and there are concerns that the reduced and limited timeframes of the FS/RR projects means that all planned activities might not be completed, with associated project underspends. The need for providing no-cost extensions to these projects (and for the whole MTT program) should be considered.
<p>Accountability & Ethics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good MTT management systems and structures. Procedures followed. • Rigorous process for FS/RR proposal review and approval. Strong administrative support to FS/RR projects. Research activities under the program have been processed through SUMERNET or other relevant ethics review process. • Rigorous process for match making for the fellows and host institutes put in place and followed. • Good level of technical support particularly in terms of GEDSI mainstreaming within FS/RR projects. • Good preparation of supporting documents and strategies. All documents are stored systematically and readily available. • Professional financial management system including the delivery and approval of audit and financial reports. • Delivery of the program's planned activities and outputs including regular reporting and meetings with donor, program steering committee and other concerned parties as expected. • Activities are largely on-track despite early delays, however expenditure rates for the whole program are at 38%, and for component 2 at 43%, with only 14 months of program implementation remaining • The MTT program applies the 'do no harm' principle for the stakeholder engagement as specified in the GEDSI strategy and guidance note.

Relevance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The MTT program covers a series of strategic areas that are highly relevant to the Mekong region – the role of independent think tanks in generating research-based evidence for policy purposes; a focus on the complexities and interactions of water-energy-climate change; issues of marginalisation, vulnerability and risk as well as Gender Equity, Disability and Social Inclusion; knowledge co-production as a means to strengthen research-policy linkages; supporting regional alliances and multi-stakeholder dialogues. • The wide range of issues being addressed in the FS and RR projects are highly relevant. Emerging policy-related issues are being addressed in the FS/RR projects. Each of the FS/RR projects addresses issues of relevance for the region, including those that do not align directly with WEC nexus, such as urban heat, sea level rise, groundwater management, and neglected issues, such as fisheries co-management. • However, while projects are addressing some elements of the WEC nexus – there are questions as to the strategic value of anchoring KBPIO support on the WEC nexus. Nearly all projects are addressing issues related to water and climate change and incorporating concerns for GEDSI. • The broad KBPIO framing has allowed support to and participation from a wide range of organisations and potentially, allows for providing capacity building support for greater policy impact focus. • Strong evidence of improved understanding of GEDSI issues, that is being applied in FS/RR projects. • FS and RR projects do address issues related to marginalised, vulnerable and at-risk communities. While the focus on GEDSI is appropriate and relevant it is not always aligned with concepts of climate vulnerability and risk. Climate change creates new fault lines of vulnerability – understanding and addressing these complex dimensions and intersectionalities of vulnerability are gaps in global literature and practice that the MTT program can help fill. • While nearly all projects make some reference to knowledge co-production, the extent to which project beneficiaries and (boundary) partners have meaningful engagement in and ownership of knowledge production processes for some projects are still limited at this stage of project implementation. • Several projects demonstrate a good engagement with policy actors, including projects that are driven by policy demand, while for others the connections are limited, and largely aiming for some level of ‘interaction’. Projects recognise that policy impact (particularly at the national and regional level) is largely aspirational and beyond the control of the projects themselves. • The MTT Program is generating lessons and insights on how to influence policy that would allow for a more strategic, informed approach to policy influence. Capturing and applying these lessons will require more proactive support from the MTT Secretariat, Component Leads and Advisors with the potential for linking the FS/RR projects to national and regional policy arenas being led by Components 1 and 3. • The MTT Program cooperates closely with SUMERNET for knowledge exchange and sharing, capacity building and joint activities, benefiting to the grantees of both programs and cost-sharing and thus additional value of money. • The MTT program strengthens relationship with KBPIOs in the region, and with other relevant networks/alliances to enhance a sense of regional ownership and home-grown. More than 30 KBPIOs have formally joined as the MTT alliance members. The MTT has been recognized as the program that is part of SUMERNET network. The MTT Alliance members can benefit from being part of SUMERNET also.

Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The MTT Program impact statements at Goal and EOPO level are ambitious. EOPO statement and indicators are not consistent – and EOPO indicators need to be adjusted to reflect the focus policy interfaces being robust and inclusive. • Several FS and RR projects are largely targeting sub-national policy and practice with few projects are working on the national and regional levels. While this certainly might constitute an appropriate strategy that would ultimately lead to policy impact at the national and regional level, such impact remains beyond the scope of several projects themselves. Any such impact might be difficult to attribute directly to the MTT Program. • The main strategies for policy impact within several FS and RR projects are through consultation and feedback with boundary partners, and through policy briefs, working papers, peer review papers and workshops. • Whether the evidence generated by the FS and RR projects will be responsive to the needs of socially marginalised and at-risk communities cannot be demonstrated at this stage. Strong attention should be paid to incorporate such needs adequately, so future policy recommendations will appropriately target at reducing existing inequalities and not create new inequalities. • The main mechanisms for supporting KBPIOs to engage in policy arenas beyond the project boundary partners will be under Components 1 and 3. Component 1 has developed a strategy for building a regional alliance and network that is already attracting expressions of interest from over 30 organisations. Plans for Component 3 to move ‘beyond dialogues’ are being developed with significant events planned for the final quarter of 2024. Future media-research collaboration is being planned to enhance capacity and visibility of the projects to the public. • FS and RR projects are understandably focused on the priorities of completing their own individual projects. More emphasis on learning across the 4 main components will provide more opportunity for cross project learning. Need for additional support and more proactive role from the MTT Secretariat, Program Steering Committee and all components across the program. • Fellows are all positive of the value of their support, and gaining valuable professional skills and experience, with many of the Fellows making important contributions to the MTT program, supporting scoping studies and providing support to host organisations. It will be difficult to assess the extent to which individual capacity that the MTT program has built under the Fellowship program is translated into institutional capacity strengthening.
Sustainability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The value of the MTT Program and the need for some kind of long-term engagement is readily acknowledged by sub-grantees and program partners. All interviewed have pointed out that building capacity of KBPIOs to be able to influence policy processes, and creating space for such engagement require long-term commitments, beyond the timeframe of the program. There are concerns that should the initiative come to an end in October 2025, that the current momentum might be lost, and the possibility of future engagement undermined. • The MTT Program builds on and adds value to the SEI-led SUMERNET program, and the extensive network of partners across the region that SUMERNET has established. There is clear enthusiasm from sub-grantees and boundary partners for continued engagement in these networks, but as should be expected at this stage, there is no evidence of financial contributions from partners yet. However, there has been ongoing effort by the MTT Secretariat in cooperation with SUMERNET and key partners to develop joint program

proposal titled “SUMERNET PLUS” to continue to support MTT program objectives as part of SUMERNET’s family networks. This program proposal is being reviewed by DFAT and Sida currently.

- While the direct impact of much of the MTT program will be difficult to evaluate, it is widely acknowledged (by MTT Secretariat, Component Leads, FS/RR projects, boundary partners and also DFAT/Australian Embassy) that creating space for public deliberation is in itself an important contribution to evidence-based policy arenas.

IX. Risks and Opportunities Over the Next Year

In this final section, the main risks and opportunities and areas of concern that have been discussed in the preceding sections, are summarised in the table below, and expanded on in the subsequent bullet points.

The discussion of risks is not intended to suggest that these are likely to materialise but is intended to raise the potentially serious implications for the program and the need to take pre-emptive action. As such, the discussion of risk presented below privileges potential impact over probability.

Given the pivotal role of the FS and RR projects, much of the program level success rests on their completion. It is essential that they are completed successfully, according to their timelines and budgets, and that they can demonstrate addressing knowledge co-production and GEDSI priorities, and a reasonable degree of engagement in policy process. All of the sub-grantees have reaffirmed their own confidence in being able to do so. However, the delays and reduced timeframes for these projects will inevitably put pressure on the sub-grantees. In addition to providing support to the individual projects to complete on time, strengthening the linkages across the Components will allow the lessons from FS and RR projects to be greater than the sum of their parts.

Risk Narrative	Degree of Risk	Considerations
Current EOPO indicators will not be achieved	High	EOPO statement still holds, but the indicators (and progress markers) should be revised to better reflect the program actual focus on robust and inclusive research-policy interfaces (rather than policies), and that they are responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups in line with GEDSI commitments.
FS and RR projects will not complete in time, and not deliver the intended research evidence	Low	All FS and RR projects stated that they are confident that they will complete the projects as expected. However, there have been verbal enquiries during the MTE whether extensions might be possible. Given that the bulk of the research evidence to engage in policy processes beyond the specific projects is expected to emerge from these projects, it is important for the MTT Secretariat to be proactive in monitoring progress and provide technical assistance.
FS and RR projects will not deliver impact on policy processes	Medium	While such levels of impact might be limited at the scale of the individual projects, the potential to build on these under Component 1 and Component 3 need to be addressed, with additional technical support from the MTT

		Secretariat, Component Leads/Co-Leads and Advisors.
Limited application of GEDSI strategy in FS and RR	Medium	Further in-field GEDSI support to project implementation cycles, including identify gaps that can be addressed beyond the projects
Failure to meet needs of poor, marginalised and at-risk communities in FS/RR projects might undermine these target groups in the future	Medium	Policy recommendations emerging from FS and RR projects need to be screened to assess distributional impacts, risks and benefits.
Knowledge co-production processes are not applied effectively in FS and RR projects	Medium	While there are important differences in approach across the projects, there is a need to develop strategic guidance on co-production a scale (ladder) of co-production to guide program partners.
Combined benefits and lessons learned from FS and RR are not captured	Medium	Strengthen the coordination and learning dimensions across FS, RR projects, Fellows and components.
WEC nexus framing will not endure	Medium	Given shifts in MAP in phase 2, it is important to assess the extent to which the framing around the WEC nexus is creating appropriate entry points for policy influence, or of long-term donor support.

X. Final Recommendations

Drawing on the above discussions, and the summary of risks associated with the remaining MTT program implementation, this section highlights some key recommendations for consideration.

1. **The EOPO indicators do not reflect the core focus on policy interfaces and need to be restructured.** The phrasing of the EOPO across the program creates some ambiguity as to whether the focus is on policy interfaces or policy outcomes. Not being able to deliver impact at the national or regional policy level is not unexpected – it is extremely challenging, particularly in the current political context, and the limited timeframe of the program. However, the focus on research-policy interfaces being robust and inclusive that is expressed in the EOPO statement is relevant and appropriate.

Recommendation: The EOPO indicators should be restructured to represent the commitment to these interfaces being robust and inclusive, and responsive to GEDSI principles. Doing so requires clear explanations of what is meant by policy interfaces, and in what ways such interfaces might be considered robust and inclusive. Similarly, what is meant by vulnerable groups and how policies might be responsive to their needs requires clarification with an additional indicator that applies GEDSI principles.

2. The MTT Program has been successful in building a coalition of diverse KBPIO partners across the countries of the Mekong region. If the primary focus of the program is on building their capacity to engage in research-policy interfaces so that these are robust and inclusive, and represent the needs of marginalised, vulnerable and at-risk communities, it is essential the program is framed in such a way as to allow for viable policy entry points, and that they have the necessary technical and managerial capacities.

Recommendation: The MTT program should plan future activities to continually enhance the necessary capacities for the KBPIOs to engage in research-policy interfaces more effectively beyond considering the experience of the alliance members and lessons from project implementation.

3. The framing of the MTT program around the Water-Energy-Climate (WEC) nexus has been a core organising principle for the program in responding to the DFAT MAP-WEC's call, but the long-term traction for this framing might require re-evaluation. The primary concern is that the current framing might constrain the ability of the program to influence policy, and to structure research projects.

Recommendation: Beyond the current program, the MTT program and partners should consider alternative framings that might prove to be more effective, for example, focusing on climate change and water, and perhaps placing centre stage commitments to issues of equity (see point 4 below). The value of the nexus approach might more readily be addressed in a framing around systems and complexity (and perhaps, resilience) as such terminologies are already being applied within the program.

4. The strong coalition of core implementing partners, and the growing membership of the network and alliance provide an important platform for long-term support to evidence-based policy making in the region. The events that have been convened so far have been widely regarded as being highly positive and complement SEI's track record under the SUMERNET program. The ability to convene such public dialogue and put research evidence in the public domain are in themselves important contributions to evidence-based policy. The MTT Program's commitment to going 'beyond dialogues' speaks to the challenges of ensuring such public engagement leads to tangible (and attributable) change in policy, and the need for new models for such dialogue and deliberation that are appropriate to the circumstances of the Mekong region.

Recommendation: In the remaining period of the program, it will be important for the MTT to have a clear strategy for implementing such events, while allowing for some degree of experimentation in appropriate approaches and formats, drawing on the experience of the FS and RR projects, and the capacity among the MTT Fellows.

5. The MTT Program has been successful in providing sub-grants to 4 Flagship Studies and 7 Rapid Response projects that are addressing policy issues that are relevant and have potential for impact. The FS and RR projects are central to the MTT Program's overall strategy. The MTT program needs to provide more proactive guidance across the program, but particularly to the Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects. While most if not all these projects can be expected to complete on time and generate important research evidence and influence, the pressure is likely to be on completing required project products – papers and briefs – that may lead to less impact in terms of intended outcomes.

Recommendation: In order to capture and synthesise learning within and across these projects, the MTT program team (from the Secretariat, Component Leads, Technical Advisors) needs to provide more support to their implementation. Given the central role of the FS and RR projects in the MTT Program strategy, there is a significant risk in leaving such learning to the final stages of the program – and even if this can be achieved, it is unlikely to contribute to the higher-level programmatic outcome and objectives. This also will require more direct engagement from the GEDSI technical advisors. It is recognised that such a shift has cost implications that the MTT program will need to address considering available resources.

6. The MTT Program has made very significant contributions to understanding the linkages between the WEC nexus and GEDSI and has clearly built capacity of partner organisations that is much appreciated. However, partial and incomplete implementation of appropriate GEDSI strategies might further undermine long-term commitments to GEDSI or exacerbate existing inequalities.

Recommendation: The GEDSI strategy should further consider how research processes can support more meaningful engagement and ownership according to gender and disability, and intersectionalities

of poverty, marginalisation and vulnerability. Policy recommendations emerging from the FS and RR projects should be GEDSI-proofed as an integral part of disseminating lessons and findings. Addressing these challenges will require additional technical support from GEDSI advisors.

7. Knowledge co-production is also fundamental to the overall strategy of the MTT Program as a mechanism for ensuring buy-in from policy actors as well as representation from marginalised groups. The experience of applying such approaches varies among program partners. The need for additional support has already been recognised in Component 2.

Recommendation: MTT Program Component 2 in cooperation with Component 3 should include developing strategic guidance and building capacity on knowledge co-production processes to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of vulnerable, marginalised and at-risk peoples. In addition to the core WEC nexus framing, the MTT Program has commitments to GEDSI, and knowledge co-production. The ways in which these commitments are inter-related could guide more effective alignment within the FS and RR projects.

8. The MTT Program is generating lessons on policy influence and has a commitment in Component 3 to move beyond dialogues. Current strategies to influence and engage in policy processes in FS and RR projects are somewhat limited in scope. The application of principles of knowledge co-production should be refined to allow for demand-led policy engagement (responding to the identified needs of government and citizens), brokering and setting policy priorities and agendas.

Recommendation: Components 3 and Component 1 are in a strong position to provide additional support across the Flagship Studies and Rapid Response projects under Component 2 to develop policy-oriented strategies, and to strengthen their effectiveness. In addition, Component 3 should pursue more comprehensive assessment of national and policy landscapes to identify appropriate entry points and framings, while steering dialogue activities towards specific policy areas.

9. The delays in the program are recognised by the MTT Secretariat, SEI and DFAT and can be seen as indication of the complexity of the program. Addressing these challenges can also be seen as a significant achievement of the MTT Secretariat that puts the program in a strong position for future engagement. All budget allocated to FS and RR projects have been committed and contracted. Nonetheless, actual expenditure rates are still below what would be expected at this stage in the program.

Recommendation: The MTT Secretariat should continue to monitor progress carefully and assess the need for a no-cost extension beyond the current end of program date of October 2025.

10. The MTT Program has established a strong network and alliance of partner organisations across the Mekong region and established the management structures and processes for leading and coordinating such an ambitious program. The MTT program has established momentum and is now creating a regional platform for alliances across KBPIOs and state boundary partners. Losing such momentum at this stage risks undermining progress achieved to date and constraining the potential of future interventions.

Recommendation: Decisions on future funding should be made well in advance of the planned closure of the MTT program. Given the ambitions of the MTT program and the widely identified challenges associated with strengthening evidence-based policy processes in the Mekong region, future funding should consider the potential for long-term engagement.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Terms of Reference

APPENDIX 2: Evaluation Plan

APPENDIX 3: Schedule of Activities

APPENDIX 4 -References

Delfau, K., S. Khoza, C. McDougall and B. Lebel. 2023. Enhancing quality and outcomes through effectively engaging with GEDSI. Working Draft MMT Program

Krisasudthacheewa, C., et al. 2023. Review of Existing Networks/Programs: Understanding Governance Structures, Best Practice and Operational Challenges for Enhancing Water, Energy, and Climate Networks/Programs in the Mekong Region. MTT Program Review. (Not published publicly)

Lebel et al., 2023. A Scoping Study of Knowledge-based Policy Influence Organisations that Address Water, Energy and Climate Nexus Issues in the Mekong Region. MTT Program Internal Scoping Study (Not published publicly)

Thorat, S., Dixit, A. and Verma, S. eds., 2018. *Strengthening Policy Research: Role of Think Tank Initiative in South Asia*. Sage Publications Pvt. Limited.

Wellstead, A.M. and Howlett, M., 2022. (Re) Thinking think tanks in the age of policy labs: The rise of knowledge-based policy influence organisations. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 81(1), pp.224-232.