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Mekong Governments, Civil Society Reach Agreement on Environmental Impact Assessment Agenda



By **MPE, Prachatai**

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In a ground-breaking agreement, government officials and civil society representatives from across the Mekong region established a working group to develop a regional public participation guideline for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) this week in Hanoi, Vietnam.

The Mekong Regional Technical Working Group for EIA brings together governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), and will expand to cover private sector and EIA experts to improve regional cooperation for effective EIA policy and practices. The group aims to reduce the social and environmental impacts of regional infrastructure projects, particularly as the upcoming Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) Economic Community further hastens trans-boundary investments.

“This could set an excellent platform and process helping to increase cooperation and dialogue among different stakeholders in social and environmental safeguards,” said Dr. Mai Thanh Dung, Deputy Director of Vietnam Environment Administration, MoNRE.

CSO and government representatives agreed to establish the working group at the event “Impact Assessment and the ASEAN Economic Community: A Way Forward for Regional Collaboration,” held in Hanoi May 12 and 13. The workshop was convened by United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported Mekong Partnership for the Environment (MPE), in collaboration with Vietnam’s Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE) and Asian Environmental Compliance and Enforcement Network (AECEN).

Participants and organizers have collaborated since December 2014 to advance regional EIA work. The establishment of the working group furthers these efforts, toward what participants envision as a regional public participation guideline for EIA to be adopted throughout ASEAN. The guideline is expected to include clear procedures and mechanisms for public participation in development project planning.

“Infrastructure investment decisions in this region are often made without the input of many of the most affected stakeholders,” said USAID Vietnam Mission Director Joakim Parker. “Public participation protocols in EIA processes can help address this trend.”

Over 50 representatives from EIA departments and related ministries, CSOs, and academia from Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam participated in the workshop. The group agreed on an action plan to map their way forward, and will kick off their work by drafting regional guidelines on public participation.

“It is timely to be participating in this regional workshop, along with representatives from Lao PDR’s Department of Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (DESIA) to ensure that our work in Lao PDR is aligned with the regional initiative,” said Dr. Margaret Jones Williams, Environmental Unit Manager, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Laos. “Through the Poverty Environment Initiative (we are) supporting Lao PDR in reviewing EIA Guidelines including the public involvement component.”

This is the first formal process teaming regional government and civil society representatives to improve EIAs as a way to address the trans-boundary impacts of investments and development in the Mekong region – and at the ASEAN level.

There is growing awareness in the region that EIA is an important tool. The working group provides an opportunity for practical experience-sharing across the region to inform EIA reforms happening in the region, such as in Burma and Cambodia where they are currently developing new EIA policies.

Mekong Partnership for the Environment is a four-year, USAID-funded project implemented by the non-governmental organization Pact. MPE supports constructive engagement among governments, business and civil society to promote socially and environmentally responsible development in the Mekong region.

AECEN is a network of environmental agencies from across Asia. Members work together to promote improved compliance with environmental legal requirements in Asia through a regional exchange of innovative policies and practices.

*Image: Regional EIA experts discuss formation of working group. Photo credit: AECEN
The above story is based on a press release issued by Pact/Mekong Partnership for the Environment, which supports The Mekong Eye. Other coverage:*

Mekong nations set up group for environmental impact assessments –The Nation

Government officials and civil society representatives from across the Mekong region have agreed to establish a working group to develop a regional public participation guideline for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The Mekong Regional Technical Working Group for EIA brings together governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), and will expand to cover private sector and EIA experts to improve regional cooperation for effective EIA policy and practices

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