

Strategic Collaborative Fund (SCF) Phase 2 - SEI

Theme: Freshwater Ecosystems - Practical actions in protecting and restoring freshwater ecosystems for sustainable use and climate change adaptation.

Project: Towards mainstreaming ecosystem services in national policies for sustainable management of freshwater ecosystems in South and Southeast Asia (MESSEA)

- ❖ Geographical Scope: India, Thailand, and Vietnam
- ❖ PI: Asst. Prof. Ho Huu Loc
- ❖ Co-PI. Prof. Sangam Shrestha
- ❖ Partners:
 - WWF, Thailand
 - IIT-Bombay, India
 - An Giang University, Vietnam
 - Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population, Vietnam
 - Nextblue, the Netherlands

The overarching research theme of project MESSEA is Freshwater ecosystems which are amongst the systems with the fastest rate of decline. Nations and communities are lagging in the race to preserve life-sustaining ecosystems against multiple threats. This alarming fact is particularly relevant for the Asia-Pacific for several reasons. Roughly half of the World's population live in the Asia-Pacific, and no less than 70% of the region's population are in one way or another dependent on nature and ecosystem services. Groundwater overexploitation in agriculture, water quality degradation due to excessive use of fertilizers, deforestation, exploitation of rivers through sand mining in developing countries are severely damaging freshwater ecosystems depriving the communities of different ecosystem services.

Across the Asia-Pacific, much valuable experience, insights, and good practices for freshwater ecosystem conservation and management are accumulating quickly. Local communities, researchers, development agencies, and governments continuously shape and reshape strategies, institutional arrangements, and physical measures to protect and benefit the various ecosystem services in sustainable manners. These insights and experience are highly relevant to the mission of the Asian Institute of Technology being the development of highly qualified and committed professionals who will play a leading role in the sustainable development of the region and its integration into the global economy.”

All of these have only been made even more difficult as long as climate change is concerned. Therefore, protecting and restoring freshwater ecosystems for sustainable use and climate change adaptation should not and cannot be addressed with singular approaches. Unfortunately, much of the current good

practices and insights are not properly utilized at scale – due to the organization-based, or in a larger sense, country-based nature, the fragmentation in methods for documentation, and the lack of a pan-regional platform for knowledge dissemination. The potential of unlocking and coordinated sharing of such insights and practices are henceforth significant. Several yet-to-be-connected knowledge networks, local implementation projects, and ongoing dialogues with communities and national government exist.

As such, the strategic collaborative events organized within project MESSEA will contribute significantly to several key issues, focusing on freshwater ecosystems. First and foremost, the event brings together and facilitates dialogues leading to coordination and collaboration across domains and nations on protecting and sustainably utilizing freshwater ecosystems. Secondly, the event and discussion will result in an inventory of good practices, principles for implementation, and upscaling freshwater ecosystem management. Lastly, mainstreaming of these practices and principles into government plans and policy agendas will be achieved through a dedicated forum and digital media campaign. The specific objectives of the proposal, henceforth, include the followings:

- i. First, to establish a new collaborative network between three targeted countries: India, Thailand, and Vietnam. The network will include representatives from government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private sectors, academic institutions, and other development partners to effectively substantiate the dialogues.
- ii. Second, to share lessons on best practices (success stories) and feasible courses of action in freshwater ecosystem conservation and management for sustainable consumption, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation.
- iii. Third, to identify entry points in filling the gaps in mainstreaming biodiversity and freshwater ecosystem services into development policies. The focus will be paid to possibilities of upscaling the policies into national and regional levels.
- iv. Finally, to communicate the importance of ecosystem services and biodiversity for the full enjoyment of human rights. The proposed events are expected to meaningfully contribute to gender equality and social equity in managing and restoring freshwater ecosystems. The communications will be done via scientific and social media venues, including video clips, blog posts, and social media campaigns. Project MESSEA, therefore, has strongly made a case for a modern research project where the communication must not stop at traditional communication platforms, rather must reach out to the end beneficiaries of the outcomes.