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Project Brief

“Listening to voices on the margins: lessons from the COVID-19 crisis for improving access to clean water for drinking and hygiene in the Mekong Region” **(VOICES)**

Rationale & Justification

Limited access to clean water for drinking and personal hygiene (e.g. handwashing) puts people at greater risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19. As of mid-June 2020, the direct effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on human health in the 5 Mekong Region countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam) have been comparatively modest compared to many other regions of the world. What will happen in the latter half of 2020 and further into the future is difficult to forecast, and risks for people without good water access remains a concern.

The indirect effects of restrictions on the movement and activities of people within and across borders, necessary to reduce the likelihood of infections spreading more widely, have already had significant impacts on employment, livelihoods and incomes. Although some concerns were expressed early on for at risk groups in Myanmar, it is unclear what impact that the disruptions to systems of provision, reduced income and restricted mobility as a result of responses to the COVID-19 outbreak had on vulnerable and marginalized people’s access to clean water for drinking and hygiene.

In response to the socio-economic impacts of the response measures to the COVID-19 outbreak, governments eventually issued direct financial assistance to those who lodged claims and met certain criteria, while more ad hoc, organizations and the public at large donated food and other essential supplies. It is unclear how well these formal and informal safety nets served people on the margins of society that were already water insecure or were made insecure by the outbreak.

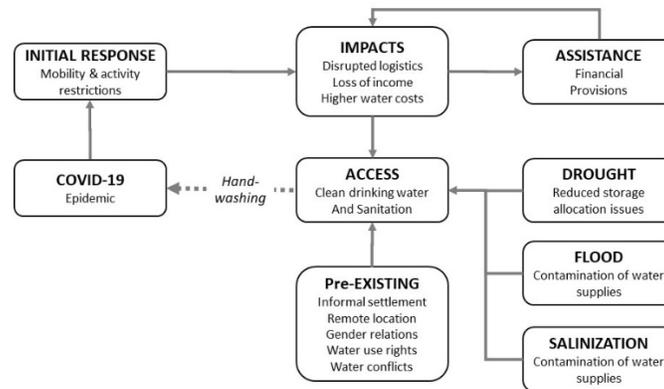
In the first couple of months of 2020, concurrent with the COVID-19 outbreak, some parts of the Mekong Region were also suffering from drought. It is unclear if the COVID-19 outbreak exacerbated in any way the water insecurities arising from climate and resource conditions at the end of dry season in 2020, or if the impacts on wellbeing and insecurities were largely independent from each other. As the wet season of 2020 unfolds the question may also arise regarding flooding as this can, through contamination, effect access to clean water.

The COVID-19 outbreak has been a disruptive crisis, in the sense of its impacts on systems of provision. What lessons can we learn from the COVID-19 crisis for reducing water insecurities in the Mekong Region, in the event of other disruptive crises, for instance disruption of clean water supplies or source arising from climate-related disasters?

Project Description

The disruptive COVID-19 outbreak is a critical opportunity to help improve access to clean drinking water and hygiene for all. In this project, we listen to some of the most vulnerable and marginalized people in five countries in the Mekong Region (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam) to find more effective ways of meeting their needs and reducing their risks. The project is coordinated by the Unit for Social and Environmental Research (USER) at Chiang Mai University and will run for 1 year from 1 October 2020 to 30 September 2021. It is funded by SUMERNET 4 All under the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI Asia)

Figure 1. Schematic summary of some of the key relationships postulated as being potentially of importance to access to clean water for drinking and hygiene.



Project's Goal

To identify effective ways to improve access to clean water for drinking and hygiene of vulnerable people on the margins, by listening closely to their stories of responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak, and comparing their perspectives with current practices and policy ideas in the Mekong Region.

Project's Objectives

1. To document the stories of how marginalized and vulnerable women and men responded to the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on their access to clean water for drinking and hygiene, and their views on how such water insecurities could be reduced.
2. To document and analyse the views of development experts and policy actors on how to address the impacts of disruptive crises like the COVID-19 outbreak on access to clean water for drinking and hygiene.
3. To identify the key similarities and differences in perspective among marginalized and vulnerable people and experts or policy actors, and based on this draw lessons for communities, civil society, business, and governments on ways to improve access to clean water for drinking and hygiene.

Theory of Change

Although our ultimate goal is to improve access to clean water for drinking and hygiene of vulnerable people, including in periods where logistics and mobility may be disrupted, including pandemic outbreaks, our focus in this short project is on increasing awareness of challenges and potential solutions. To this end our theory of change is based on outcomes directly derived from the three specific objectives and the special role we anticipate for the district level health offices as our boundary partners.

Figure 2. Theory of change diagram for the project.

