

***Enhancing Regional Integration in the Greater Mekong – The opportunity for Asia's first Regional Climate Change Adaptation agreement***

**A Regional Brainstorming Workshop**

**Convened by UNEP, WWF GMPO and SENSEA in Bangkok, 22nd July 2009**

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**Workshop introduction;**

The workshop started at 8:30am with a brief overview of the agenda by Dr. Torkil Jonch Clausen, followed by the self introduction of all 32 workshop participants (see Annex 1).

The welcome was made by Dr. Anders Granlund from SENSEA<sup>1</sup>, who was impressed at the participation, especially when considering that this workshop had been arranged at such short notice. There were many interesting participants, who can provide valuable insights and ideas for this region. It is also important to remember that this workshop is one step in an ongoing process and the gathering today follows on from other meetings including the SENSEA retreat that was held in Kunming, PR China, in January that led to the development of the Regional Climate Change Learning Platform.

**Session 1; Rationale and expectations for the workshop;**

Dr. Young-Woo Park, Regional Director for UNEP, outlined UNEP's programme of work to encourage national governments develop regional instruments to support improvements in environmental performance. Several regional agreements are under development focussed on geographic groupings such as the Framework Convention on Environmental Protection for Sustainable Development in Central Asia, or thematic groups such as the Acid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia (EANET) a network incorporating 13 countries. Previously, UNEP introduced the idea of a regional environmental agreement (REA) at the Greater Mekong Subregion forum, and the ministers participating expressed interest. As a result UNEP prepared two concept papers, although following their submission there has been no further progress. UNEP believes that a comprehensive framework is the way forward for environment and sustainable development, rather than a more narrow agreement based on climate change.

Dr. Christer Holtsberg the Minister from SENSEA welcomed this initiative but reminded everyone that climate change should not be seen as a separate challenge in the area of development to be addressed by specific instruments, but in the overall context of sustainable development. He suggested that climate change should not be considered a driver of environmental degradation but rather a symptom of un-sustainable development. SENSEA had been tasked to support regional collaboration and therefore this workshop today was one small step towards improved understanding of the opportunities and challenges to develop a regional agreement.

Mr. Stuart Chapman the Programme Director for WWF Greater Mekong introduced lessons learned from WWF's global engagement in five different multi-country conservation programmes, with the emphasis on key lessons of how to successfully advocate for and gain

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<sup>1</sup> The *Swedish Environmental Secretariat for Asia (SENSEA)* is a knowledge-based entity within the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) which;

- promotes regional cooperation for an environmentally sustainable development in Southeast Asia
- strengthens cooperation between the region and Sweden for the benefit of the environment in the region
- serves as a platform for regional environmental dialogue on such matters as climate change

political support for a REA. The first key lesson was to get started and the details can be worked out as you proceed, rather than trying to mobilise around a final product, this strengthens local ownership and promotes innovation and adaptation throughout the process. Identifying and mobilising high level supporters are crucial with national governments, but it is also important to identify catalysts from outside. Secondly mobilise around bold understandable targets, targets that are recognised by numerous stakeholders and getting these mapped and visualised to aid understanding is crucial. Develop coalitions, with key stakeholders early on in the process with these alliances strengthened with contingency funding to enable supporting events. The Heart of Borneo (HOB) initiative was presented to highlight these lessons in a regional context. Finally, the advice of the former WWF Director General was “there will always be a host of people who will tell you why your brave initiative won’t work”, but this shouldn’t stop one from trying.

This presentation was briefly followed by Dr. Geoffrey Blate (WWF) who introduced the idea of a climate change adaptation agreement outlining some potential benefits. This began by reporting on the outcomes of a recent workshop, in which WWF worked with over 100 regional participants on adaptation planning for six priority sites. At all of these sites the participants identified the transboundary nature of the problems faced, reiterating the importance of the regional dimension. Considering the remaining biodiversity in the region, the presentation emphasized the potential for ecosystem-based adaptations. It wasn’t too late to secure the multiple ecosystem benefits if these habitats could be protected now, as stressed in a recent World Bank report<sup>2</sup>. Also given current media interest the climate change angle is compelling because it is new, bold, and politically appealing. Finally, climate change adaptation links well with conservation and development; sustainable development or development done well is tantamount to climate change adaptation.

## **Session 2; Formal presentations;**

Presentation 1; Mr. Masa Nagai (UNEP HQ) provided an introductory presentation on REAs. This presentation emphasised the need for regional agreements to consider the relationships between international agreements and national policies, stressing their potential synergies. REAs can promote harmonization of policies from the national to global levels. Local political willingness can be mobilised by clarifying the benefits, especially global to national, while the costs of inaction must be made clear. This presentation was followed by Ms. Wanhua Yang (UNEP Bangkok) who provided some background on the different types of agreements, for example CITES, which is an annex-driven agreement—the details are worked out and then an annex is added and comes into force. This was contrasted with the IPCC process which is protocol-driven, for example the Kyoto protocol. An outline for a generic REA was presented including: preamble, main text, procedures and annexes. Agreements also have to consider the institutional needs such as the governing body, advisory bodies, implementation agencies, and a secretariat. Some other institutions that are often considered in an agreement include; expert groups and technical centers, with task forces developed as required.

Presentation 2; Dr. Peter King from IGES, presented ideas to develop an agreement for the Greater Mekong region based on a study for WWF undertaken in January 2009. The countries of the region have signed up to numerous global agreements and several REAs, although the GMS is unique in the ASEAN region in not having a REA. For this region ASEAN provides a political and institutional framework for regional agreements and a number of key agreements have been signed including the Agreement on the Conservation

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<sup>2</sup> The World Bank; Convenient Solutions to an Inconvenient Truth: Ecosystem-based Approaches to Climate Change, June 2009

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of Nature and Natural Resources (1985) and the ASEAN Biodiversity Centre Agreement (2005). The other existing key regional platform is the Mekong River Commission (MRC) established under the Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin (1995). REAs provide a number of benefits including; raising the profile of the region, supporting ASEAN’s action plans, convincing donors that the GMS is moving away from current informal processes, engaging numerous stakeholders and defining roles for regional environmental management, supporting collaboration and cooperation in priority issues, and facilitating capacity sharing and building to strengthen the region’s environment agencies. Various strategies for an REA were presented along with factors for success and failure. To start the ADB’s GMS economic cooperation program, an informal process was essential so that a rapid start could be made, not constrained by inter-governmental negotiating processes, but over the past 15 years sectoral programmes (like power trade, customs, GMS visa etc.) have moved to more formal agreements while the environment sector has not made the same progress. Finally, it will take time to convince governments to adopt a REA, but it is important to take that first step.

**Session 3; Brief statement by each agency of their thoughts on a REA;**

One representative from each agency was invited to voice their thoughts on a regional agreement. Overall, perspectives varied from supporters, through neutral, to opponents of a legally binding regional agreement. Key questions raised were, why was a regional agreement necessary and if so what should be the scope of the agreement? Some participants also asked how a regional agreement would lead to environmental improvement, as many countries already had effective national legislation covering these areas, with the actual problems related to implementation and enforcement. Despite these numerous questions raised, other participants identified positive opportunities, including; improved coordination and cooperation, establishing a platform to discuss transboundary issues and finally to strengthening management of transboundary and shared resources. One significant opportunity identified was that a REA might be a mechanism to mobilise China in a more constructive regional engagement. The new “going out policy” of the Chinese government was one opportunity through which China could be more actively engaged in the Greater Mekong region, with this formalised through an innovative regional agreement framework.

**Sessions 4 & 5; Group sessions and feedback to plenary**

Two groups were formed to discuss the key issues of why, what and how a regional agreement could be developed.

<b>Why</b>	<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>
1. What is the goal?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Agreement or initiative?</li> <li>- Coordination framework for different agreements, agencies, sectors</li> <li>- Puts the region on the map e.g. Coral Triangle</li> <li>- Recognises regional interdependence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Current approach not working need to find something better</li> <li>- HOB case / biodiversity objective not working/ so used watershed objective to engage gov’ts. In the GMS is multi-faceted what dimensions or arguments would persuade gov’t to adopt sustainable development</li> </ul>
2. What is the added value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China engaged - that would be a huge achievement as China influences the region</li> <li>- Levels the playing field on sensitive issues for the smaller less vocal countries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cost of inaction; in China, recognition that env targets are not being met</li> <li>- If maintain business as usual there won’t be much left in the near future...we won’t even be</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Could add value to an existing policy</li> <li>- Brings in donors to a common platform</li> </ul>	<p>talking about economic growth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If linked to technology transfer then donor confidence is attractive to national gov'ts</li> </ul>
3.What are the gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Benefits to one country will be different to the benefits for another and need to identify these differences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Existing agreements do not cover all of the necessary issues</li> <li>- No adequate coverage of transboundary issues</li> </ul>
<b>What</b>		
4.Background information required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mapping of area, transboundary issues and threats and potential benefits</li> <li>- Countries cannot agree to more than their legal systems require although national governments don't always appreciate this</li> <li>- Pressure to amend national laws can become a disincentive to get national governments involved</li> <li>- The agreement should add value so need to research how the agreement can do this</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mapping for clarification of transboundary issues – countries all have specified their priorities on environment but need to clarify if issues are transboundary. It is not just border issues but also problems shared in common.</li> </ul>
5.What win-win opportunities exist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop regional targets not national targets</li> <li>- Opportunity to focus on a number of regional urgencies</li> <li>- Opportunity to redirect GEF action in the region, reform donor investment across the region</li> <li>- Group existing agreements and respond to these, but also need to respond to global processes, e.g. Copenhagen</li> <li>- To respond to new futures, such as climate change, recognizing that the region still has the natural capacity to adapt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peer-to-peer training for compliance and enforcement where developed countries assist lesser developed countries</li> <li>- GMS countries have gone through 3 rounds of priority setting and they return the same answers each time: biodiversity, forests, climate change, so need to work on these</li> <li>- Policy harmonization / integration of conservation into policies and plans linked with education, information, public awareness and conflict resolution</li> </ul>
<b>How</b>		
6.Who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need to do mapping of potential champions</li> <li>- Ensure national champions are in the right ministry and have the access to get political mobilisation</li> <li>- Existing structures; GMS summit every three years, ASEAN leaders meet every year, also new structures such as ASEAN CC Initiative working group.</li> <li>- Also consider innovative frameworks and opportunities such as private sector CSR interests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ASEAN vs GMS structure</li> </ul>
7.When	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No need to move this to the national level immediately if not ready, can keep the process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Timing - do we want to set a bold ambitious target or take baby steps?</li> </ul>

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	going forward as a regional dialogue	
8. Next steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- UNEP promotes regional cooperation among gov't's, helps governments develop regional agreements, promotes a regional institution on transboundary issues, if there is no existing structure then it needs to be created</li><li>- The EOC's is an incremental process not a transformational approach, nibble away at the edges, try not to change the entire process</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Share the existing study with interested actors</li></ul>

Following the two presentations there was a plenary discussion of the issues covered. Once again questions arose of why a new agreement was necessary; why not try to make existing processes better to improve on the current situation. However, it was agreed that the region needs an alternative to business as usual. None of the participants can ignore that the current performance across the region has been poor and therefore an alternative has to be found. In the last two decades despite considerable improvements in incomes and GDP across the region, all environmental indicators have plummeted.

### **Session 6; Wrap up;**

Stuart Chapman (WWF) stated that hopefully many participants will go away thinking about these ideas, some will oppose and will develop additional arguments on why an agreement is unnecessary, but others will consider how to address the current challenges. One lesson from WWF's other global engagements is that it is important to plunge in without working out all the details. That is what we have done today. We have had a lot of questions on what an agreement would look like, so now we need to answer these questions to clarify options on process and scope for a regional instrument. A coalition of supporters is a genuine possibility after today's meeting, while others who joined us will take no further action. However there is a sense of urgency: dams, climate change and infrastructure are all issues that need to be moved up the political agenda. If a new REA isn't required, then what other instruments can we pursue to resolve the underlying challenges? WWF is convinced that an REA is worth pursuing, and if this agreement were initiated this would succeed in raising the environmental importance/recognition of the region. The process is equally as important as the final outcome. Finally, thanks to everyone, supporters and sceptics alike, as the numerous interventions and questions have equipped us to think about how to move forward—so please watch this space.

Masa Nagai (UNEP) found the plenary session very interesting and very helpful, and compared to where we were when we started this morning we can see some progress and understanding of the work required to clarify what is possible for this region. UNEP will be supporting of these continuing efforts to take the coalition forward. Thanks to all the participants who joined us today.

Christer Holtsberg (SENSA) stated that the workshop had achieved a consensus on the challenges and issues that still need to be resolved. From the morning session it was clear that despite many economic parameters improving, environmental parameters are falling, so the region is going in the wrong direction - this also has consensus among the participants. However, how to move to a more sustainable future is not clear and the possible mechanisms for improvement are diverse. We know that national governments do not have

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an appetite for signing an agreement tomorrow, but in due time it is almost inevitable that we are going to have some form of sub-regional agreement. By emphasising this requirement the opportunity to proceed is growing. We need to respond to the transboundary environmental challenges. Harmonized standards and norms could be one way to proceed, leading not to a full environmental agreement, but a step in the right direction. I hope nobody leaves this meeting saying we shouldn't proceed, but we agree that the next steps are unclear. We all have our own positions, but none of these are better than others. Thanks to the meeting today we are all wiser, more enlightened, and aware of the opportunities and shortfalls on the way forward.

### **Annex 1; Workshop participants and groups**

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