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Climate Action and Green Economy with Children and Youth in the Mekong Region

The Mekong countries are already among the most vulnerable globally to the impacts of climate change, with their threats to economic progress now further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Climate change is expected to result in about US\$34 billion worth of losses annually by 2050 across the Lower Mekong River Basin countries, with US\$16 billion of it due to decreased economic productivity¹ alone, partly as a result of the many climate-sensitive sectors present in these countries². At the same time, the investment in environmentally sustainable growth strategies have a high potential to positively impact economic growth and other development objectives in the region³.

Young people are among the most vulnerable to these impacts but also hold the key to accelerating action towards greener economies that can tackle the challenges of climate change. In 2019, the youth unemployment rate across three Mekong countries, Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam, was at 4.1% on average but as a result of the impacts of COVID-19, it is estimated that in 2020, it may have increased to as high as 16.1%⁴. Climate change will be an even

“  There is strength in numbers. Young people learn that if they work together and express their opinion, they have the power to change. We need to encourage young children to make the difference for our environment, and they need to be heard by the government and other people. There is hope that we can change. ”
– Thai youth leader



¹ USAID Mekong ARCC, 2014, Climate Change in the Lower Mekong Basin, An Analysis of Economic Values at Risk
² USAID 2014 'Climate Change in the Lower Mekong Basin'
³ GGGI 2014, Unleashing Green Growth in the Mekong Delta
⁴ International Labour Organization, Bangkok (Thailand), and Asian Development Bank, Manila (Philippines), 2020. Tackling the COVID-19 youth employment crisis in Asia and the Pacific.

more significant challenge to tackle, and the impacts of it on young people and the economy may be worse than that of COVID-19, unless action is taken to engage them now in the solutions.



Youth have only been given limited opportunity to influence policies or education.

– Thai youth leader



While everyone is affected, young people may face the most profound impacts of climate and environmental challenges on their lives, livelihoods and economic opportunities as the climate crisis worsens. Children and young people below 24 years of age are currently estimated to make up more than 40% of the population in the Lower Mekong countries⁵ but they will be 100% of the workforce of the future⁶. Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam have shown their commitment to climate action through their international and national policies – with Cambodia and Viet Nam having produced national green growth plans and Thailand integrating its green growth approach through its Bio-Circular-Green Economy model. The engagement of children and young

people in the development, implementation and monitoring of such green economy strategies and plans is crucial for inclusive participation and success in the long-term.

To build stronger participation of young people in green economy policy conversations and climate actions across the region, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) commissioned a three-country study in Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam in early 2020⁷ on advancing inclusive green economy through empowerment and participation of young people in the Greater Mekong region. Some of the findings in the report indicate that governments are not adequately engaging with young people, to tap the huge potential of children and youth to fight the impact of climate change and achieve greener economies. Beyond simply being the victims of the climate crisis, children and youth can contribute as agents of change in tackling the challenges from climate change and accelerating the transition to greener economies.

The research and consultations were held with more than 250 participants in total, including adolescents and youth aged 15–24 through 24 focus group discussions across both urban and rural areas, 3 validation workshops, as well as with key stakeholders from government, green businesses and civil society across the three countries. The key findings from the work confirmed and identified some recommendations through which youth participation in a green economy can be further strengthened in the countries studied, with also lessons applicable for the region as a whole.



⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019. World Population Prospects 2019: Data Booklet

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Due to the sudden COVID-19 lockdown conditions, the study was revised to a smaller sample reached through online channels by Rapid Asia, who was commissioned to do the research.

The views of the youth

Young people, especially those coming from the most marginalized and vulnerable communities, need to be involved in decision-making processes related to greening the economy, especially since these may have direct implications for their future careers. Yet, the study and field consultations with young respondents showed that there was little engagement on these topics and limited participation mechanisms to contribute to these processes, or if they were, they were not made as aware of them necessarily.

At the same time, focus groups discussions with young girls and boys revealed that there was hesitation in sharing their opinions with government representatives on climate and environmental topics due to fear of potential repercussions. Based on observations expressed during the study, it is likely that creating safe spaces for youth to speak up and participate in policy processes will be crucial, together with interventions to increase political literacy and advocacy capacity among the youth.

The lack of adequate youth participation mechanisms as well as perceived fear of repercussions must be addressed for increasing the participation of young people in green economy strategy development and implementation in the region.



“

We do not know these organizations because the organizations don't reach out to us often or hardly ever organized activities in our area, only in the city. There are many schools (outside of the city), maybe they do not come all the way to us. They probably came once in a while, not consistent. ”

– Thai youth participants in rural areas in focus group discussions

“

We are afraid that we would be opposed by some people if we tell our opinions. ”

– Vietnamese youth in focus group discussions

The views of key adult stakeholders consulted

Government representatives reached, including from ministries of education and environment, acknowledged the gaps that existed in the engagement of young people in strategies on climate change, green growth, labour and youth development, which are often also seen as independent of one another. Many stated there had not been an active effort to involve youth in the processes, primarily as they were not seen as experts who can contribute in a meaningful way. Beyond the lack of meaningful participation mechanisms, adequate capacity and knowledge by youth to engage on policies and processes relating to green growth and climate change was identified as a challenge.

Private sector participants consulted believed youth should be supported more, especially in training and capacity building on green issues both within and outside the education system as well as increased participation in policy formulation. In making green development a priority, financial investment and incentives are needed in green industries, green start-ups and green skills-building for youth.

The onus is upon adults, both governments and non-government, to create sustainable and accessible channels that can help youth gain knowledge on green issues they are interested in and share their opinions and concerns.

“

I can feel that young people care about environmental issues, but they don't have a chance to accumulate knowledge. ”

– Viet Nam private sector stakeholder

It is necessary for both adult and youth stakeholders to be aware of why young people need to be engaged in green economy policy processes. The youth of today will be probably affected most by these policies, but are rarely recognised by policy-makers. Long-term interventions that challenge social norms, such as those impacting girls' and women's rights to participation and also restrictions on voices of youth, would likely encourage their greater participation as partners with government and civil society. This might help governments better coordinate its sectors to create policy and action plans for youth and their transition towards green economies and green jobs.

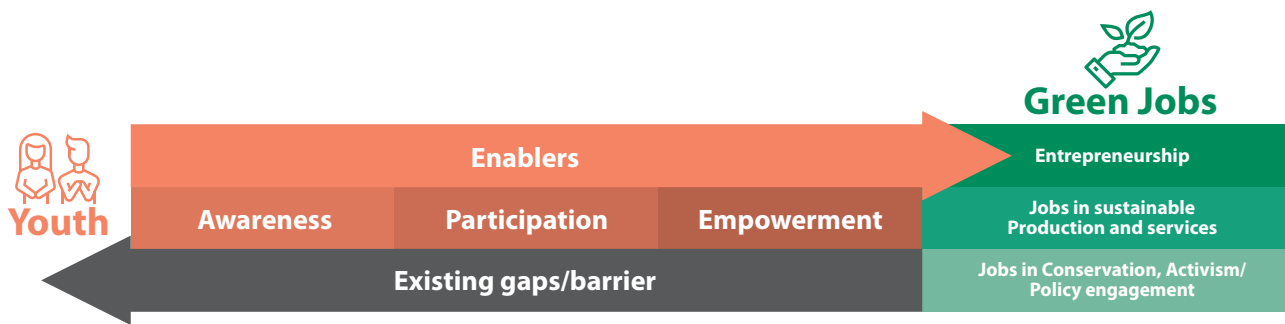
Recommendations

The report on the study concludes with an array of ideas for “greening” young people’s empowerment as partners with government, the private sector and civil society so they can contribute towards making the future environment they will inherit as healthy as possible. The following is a set of targeted recommendations that emerged from the study:

How youth can be part of the green transition:

- **Through activism, advocacy and policy engagement:** Youth have the potential to contribute to national discourses on climate change and green economy through campaigns, advocacy and other forms of public engagement. They can voice their opinions in global and national forums and contribute to shaping climate policies, including the Nationally Determined Contributions, UNFCCC climate summits and other climate-related policies at the local, national, regional and global levels.
- **Through prioritizing careers and engagement with green jobs and community- and youth-led initiatives:** Youth can seek out green jobs and jobs that prioritize environmental sustainability in their products and services, including the renewable energy sector. Youths can also use these opportunities to build on their skills and knowledge in addressing climate and environmental challenges.
- **Through green entrepreneurship:** Youth can explore the path of entrepreneurship and create businesses of their own that would contribute to sustainable production and consumption. For young girls, this can be a big opportunity as pathways to financial independence for them remain limited. Youths are partners in the green transition and can reach out to existing support networks and established stakeholders who may provide, financial, technical and mentorship support as they build their green enterprises.





Governments

- **Education:** The ministries of education could incorporate the concepts of green schools, and green education system into the national education with transparent budget allocation. Incorporate green skills into the secondary school curriculum and discuss green jobs as potential career options with real-world examples of how it can provide financial security.
- **Labour:** The ministries of labour could incorporate green skills and soft skills into the technical and vocational education and training system and strategies. These programmes could be made more inclusive by mainstreaming gender considerations, including additional opportunities for girls. The environmental-related skills training will need to reflect the labour market needs, including future needs, which thus requires greater partnership between the government and the private sector.
- **Accessible platforms:** Provide platforms for youths to voice their opinions and share their concerns to government at local and national levels to make young women and men’s concerns visible in national decisions, including in the planning of development actions and allocation of resources. Social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, maybe used at the national level for youth engagement and feedback. At the local level, a forum or a community meeting that youth can participate and get their voice heard could be organized.
- **Recognizing the value of youth perspectives:** Recognize and acknowledge the role of young people in transitioning to a green economy. Youth need an open legal policy framework which allows them to freely express themselves in a transparent and open platform and encourages young people to be proactive to participate and engage in policy-making, adaption, mitigation and nature-based solutions. The participation of vulnerable groups also needs to be taken into consideration in policy-making processes such as pregnant women, children, the underprivileged and those with disabilities.
- **Finance and technical support:** Encourage greening of existing start-ups and offer more scholarships for students pursuing education and jobs in green industries, especially for students coming from marginalized and minority backgrounds, young girls, and those with different abilities. The government could provide funding opportunities and technical support to local initiatives engaging youth in climate actions.

International organizations, the United Nations and civil society groups

- **Partnerships and empowerment of local Civil Society Organizations (CSO):** Connect with local CSOs to leverage existing environmental organization networks. Build CSO's capacities to better advocate for climate action and contribute to building local resources to drive programmes, focusing on the strengthening of youth networks, utilizing existing resources efficiently and mobilizing girls and boys to participate in green economy-related initiatives.
- **Increase awareness and attractiveness of green jobs:** Consider how to build awareness and a greater understanding of the 'green jobs' concept and as a potential career path. Relatively few youth understand what the term means based on the study—leverage on UNESCO and UNICEF's expertise in advocacy and communication, in partnership with other relevant stakeholders and organizations with expertise in the area, create greater awareness and engagement on green jobs. Consolidate as many country-specific examples of green jobs as possible and communicate in a broader context across several different target groups, especially to the most marginalized and minority groups.
- **Green youth leaders:** Green youth workshops could be set up, and young champions for green jobs selected to promote green youth role models at the national and regional level. Encourage and invest in the preparation of youth leaders to take on more responsibility and actively recruit more youth to join the movement and to build youth-to-youth networks. Train existing and upcoming youth leaders on relevant skills, such as network building, fundraising, and advocacy. The training programmes need to be widely available both on and offline to ensure they reach all girls and boys and not just select youth representatives.

Schools, general and technical and vocational education and training

- **Formal and informal integration:** Incorporate climate change and sustainability in the curriculum for both schools and vocational training programmes as well as provide training of trainers for teachers, so they have a better understanding of environmental issues, climate change and green skills to impart relevant skills and knowledge to the youth.
- **Career support:** Discuss green jobs as potential career options in career counselling with real-world examples of how it can provide financial security, and set up a mentoring programme to help connect students with green industries or entrepreneurs from green businesses.
- **Green skills training:** Provide short courses for skill development and conduct training for practical skills needed for green and other jobs. In addition to including subjects on environmental sciences and climate change; school should respond more to the labour market's demand and provide more training programmes for both students and people who are not in the education system.
- **Mentorships with green leaders:** Set up a mentoring programme to help connect students with green industries or entrepreneurs from green businesses. The mentor programme would enable youth to learn from people with experience in the field.

Private sector

- **Green skills and knowledge training for youth:** Provide internships and training programmes on green skills, soft skills and entrepreneurship targeted to girls and boys. Engage with the educational institutions and the government to develop joint training and joint projects with schools, universities and vocational schools in green areas. The current generation of youth look for independence, challenges and opportunity to express their ideas. Entrepreneurship can offer such an opportunity. Being part of training programmes and internships can give them the experience and skills needed to inspire them to take their own initiatives. Such programmes may need financial support to be effective but could encourage youth to develop start-ups.
- **Seek out business sponsors to support youth programmes:** Youth programmes could be promoted under a corporate social responsibility banner to be more attractive. The format of the sponsorship is flexible, and examples could include supporting school career fairs or sharing knowledge on how to make companies greener. Apart from good branding, this would also present an opportunity for companies to source talent.
- **Promote environmental values in the workplace:** Findings from this study suggested that youth believe that they can participate in making a difference not only by joining environmental movements but also making small changes in their daily life and workplace. Environmental considerations should be integrated into all types of jobs. By making workplaces more sustainable and environment-friendly, companies can save energy, cost and resources as well as contribute to climate change solutions.



“Greening the Mekong: Action for a Greener Economy with Children and Youth” is a study to better understand the opportunities and barriers for young people to integrate sustainability into their current and future economic activity. Awareness of sustainability issues has grown over the past decade, but does not always result changes to the way we live and work. This series of policy briefs examines current levels of awareness and support mechanisms in Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam, and explores opportunities to empower youth to play more active roles as agents of change for a greener planet.

The full report and policy briefs can be accessed at:



- UNESCO website: <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/report-greening-mekong-action-greener-economy-children-and-youth>
- UNICEF website: <https://www.unicef.org/eap/research-reports>

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