

# IRBM PROJECT NEWSLETTER

EDITION 5 | OCT-DEC 2024



GEF/UNDP/ASEAN Project on Reducing Pollution and Preserving Environmental Flows in the East Asian Seas through the Implementation of Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) in ASEAN Countries

## Steering the Flow







Photo by PEMSEA/JCastillo

## State of River Basin Reporting: Understanding River Health for Informed Management

Rivers are essential lifelines, providing resources and sustaining vibrant ecosystems. However, they face increasing pressure from development, pollution, and climate change. A monitoring and reporting system that facilitates a clear understanding of the condition of river basins to support their effective management is imperative.

One of the major outcomes of the Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) Project is to improve the understanding of the governance, socioeconomic, ecological conditions, gaps and needs of the priority river basins and adjacent coastal areas.

To achieve this outcome, the IRBM Project is developing and implementing an indicator-based State of River Basin (SORB) reporting system that serves as a monitoring, evaluation and reporting mechanism that allows systematic gathering and analyzing information for informed planning and decision-making in river basins covered by the project.

It includes a set of 32 core indicators that were selected based on extensive literature review; baseline investigations in the priority river basins; and from the conduct of regional, national and local consultation workshops. Moreover, the

selection of the 32 core indicators considered their applicability in the East Asian Region and complementarity with the indicators of relevant international and regional agreements and action plans, including the Sustainable Development Goals.

Designed for use by river basin managers, coastal managers, local planners, and community stakeholders, the SORB reporting system helps establish baseline conditions before IRBM and/or Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) program implementation as well as assesses the progress, achievements, and challenges of ongoing IRBM/IWRM programs, identifying changing conditions in governance, socioeconomic factors (including gender disparities), and emerging environmental issues. Recommendations are offered to improve IRBM/IWRM programs, ensuring they respond to community needs, pay attention to gender equality, and address unsustainable trends.

Engaging stakeholders in the process of developing and validating the SORB report is one of the key features of the reporting system. As an essential tool for IRBM/IWRM, the SORB reporting system provides stakeholders with a framework and process for organizing and presenting multifaceted information in a format that can be easily understood by the stakeholders. More importantly, through the series of consultations, it provides a platform where the stakeholders' perspectives, including those of women, are considered in crafting appropriate management interventions, hence fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for sustaining the health of the river basin.

The IRBM Project will explore ways to expand the application of the SORB reporting system in the 10 ASEAN Member States and in the East Asian Region at large.



This diagram illustrates how the SORB reporting system facilitates a comprehensive assessment of a river basin's status. It integrates information on biophysical characteristics, socioeconomic conditions, demographics, governance and management systems, pollutant loading, and the water-energy-food-ecosystem (WEFE) nexus.





The SORB Guidebook was launched with the participation and support of the GEF, UNDP, the ASEAN Secretariat, the AWGWRM, participating ASEAN Member States, local governments from the IRBM Project's priority river basins, and other partners. (Photo by PEMSEA/Oomengan)

## IRBM Project Launches State of River Basin Guidebook at 2024 EAS Congress

The Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) Project marked a milestone with the launch of the *State of River Basin (SORB) Guidebook* at the 2024 East Asian Seas (EAS) Congress on November 6, 2024. This guidebook is designed to support sustainable water management across seven priority river basins in six ASEAN Member States (AMS) by providing clear guidelines for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting on the health of rivers and their connected coastal areas.

The SORB Guidebook helps local governments and river basin organizations generate a comprehensive SORB report that establishes a baseline, tracks progress, and offers recommendations for improving river basin management programs.

Dr. Akiko Yamamoto, Regional Team Leader of the Environment Team for Asia and the Pacific at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Bangkok Regional Hub, emphasized the importance of the SORB reporting system in her welcome

message. She highlighted its role in implementing the Source-to-Sea management framework and pledged UNDP's support for disseminating best practices and encouraging its wider application.

*"The SORB Guidebook provides the necessary steps in implementing the Source-to-Sea management framework. UNDP, through its Water and Ocean Governance Programme and its extensive network of partners, will facilitate the dissemination of best practices in implementing the SORB reporting system and encourage its application in other related programs, particularly in collaboration with GEF International Waters."*

**Dr. Akiko Yamamoto**

Regional Team Leader  
Environment Team for Asia  
and Pacific, United Nations  
Development Programme (UNDP)



Dr. Oudomsack Philavong, Chair of the ASEAN Working Group on Water Resources Management (AWGWRM) and Director General of the Department of Water Resources in Lao PDR, also stressed the significance of the SORB reporting system. He noted its value in consolidating and analyzing data to guide improvements in existing management programs and develop new interventions for protecting water resources.

*“Consolidating and analyzing available social, economic, and environmental data within a river basin provides a comprehensive assessment of its current status and challenges. This valuable information will guide us in improving existing management programs or developing new interventions to protect and sustain our water resources.”*

**Dr. Oudomsack Philavong**  
Chair, ASEAN Working Group on Water Resources Management (AWGWRM) and Director General of the Department of Water Resources, Lao PDR



During the launch, status and process of SORB report preparations in Kampong Bay River Basin in Cambodia, Nam Tha River Basin in Lao PDR, and Imus Ylang-Ylang Rio Grande Rivers and Pasac-Guagua Watershed in the Philippines, including challenges and early lessons learned were presented.

The SORB reporting system underscores the importance of regional partnerships in advancing water governance, particularly in East Asia, which is home to five major transboundary river systems supporting millions of people, including indigenous

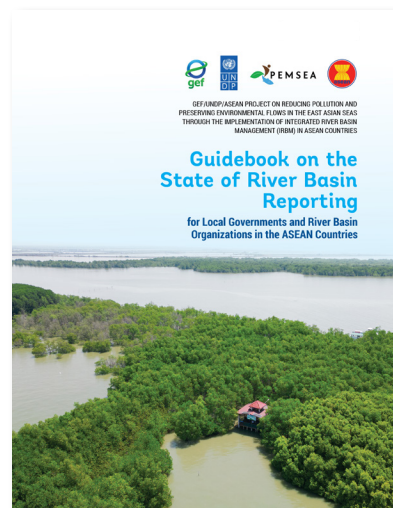
communities. The IRBM Project aims to contribute to the region’s commitment to sustainable development and environmental stewardship through this innovative tool.



Ms. Nancy Bernas, Regional Project Manager of the IRBM Project, discussed the background of the SORB reporting system. (Photo by PEMSEA/OOmengan)



Vietnamese participants asked questions during the open forum of the launch. (Photo by PEMSEA/OOmengan)



[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE GUIDEBOOK](#)





The workshop saw the participation from stakeholders representing seven priority river basins across six ASEAN Member States: Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. (Photo by PEMSEA/OOmengan)

## IRBM Project Strengthens Stakeholder Engagement at EAS Congress

The IRBM Project recognizes the importance of stakeholder inclusion and participation in ensuring the successful implementation of the project. While the project operates across six AMS (i.e., Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines and Viet Nam), each country presents unique challenges and opportunities. Thus, developing country-specific Stakeholder Engagement Plans (SEPs) is crucial for fostering trust, enhancing buy-in, and increasing the project’s impact and sustainability.

To achieve this goal, the IRBM Project successfully conducted a Stakeholder Engagement Workshop at the East Asian Seas (EAS) Congress in Xiamen, China, on November 7, 2024. This day-long workshop aimed to enhance collaboration and communication among project stakeholders.

The workshop focused on identifying key influencers, supporters, and potential challenges for effective engagement. Participants also updated the regional

Stakeholder Engagement Plan with country-specific sections and provided guidance for developing basin-level SEPs.

National partners and local government representatives from seven river basins across six AMS convened to share insights and develop collaborative strategies. Through focused group discussions, participants identified key sensitivities and concerns, leading to the development of actionable strategies for country-specific stakeholder engagement.

Mr. Chris Tapnio, Social and Environmental Safeguards and Stakeholder Engagement Specialist for the IRBM Project, guided participants in using the interest-influence grid to identify and prioritize key stakeholders. A key highlight of the discussions was the need for customized SEPs for each country, enabling stakeholders to support a process that reflects their local realities and promotes transparency and accountability.



Mr. Chris Tapnio, Social and Environmental Safeguards and Stakeholder Engagement Specialist, facilitated the workshop. (Photo by PEMSEA/OOmengan)



Malaysian participants actively engaged in the workshop. (Photo by PEMSEA/OOmengan)

The workshop also emphasized the importance of inclusive decision-making and the need for ongoing communication and collaboration throughout the project implementation phase. Key outcomes included actionable recommendations for engaging stakeholders based on their placement on the interest-influence grid. Insights and feedback gathered from the workshop will be used to strengthen the IRBM Project's stakeholder engagement activities in the coming months.

## National University of Laos Joins PEMSEA Network of Learning Centers

The National University of Laos (NUL) was inducted as a member of the PEMSEA Network of Learning Centers (PNLC) during its General Assembly at the East Asian Seas Congress in Xiamen, China, on November 8, 2024.

NUL's inclusion in the PNLC is significant due to its expertise in various aspects of river basin and water resources management. This expertise will be invaluable in providing technical, scientific and knowledge sharing support to the IRBM Project implementation in Nam Tha River Basin in Lao PDR and in other river basins across East Asia.

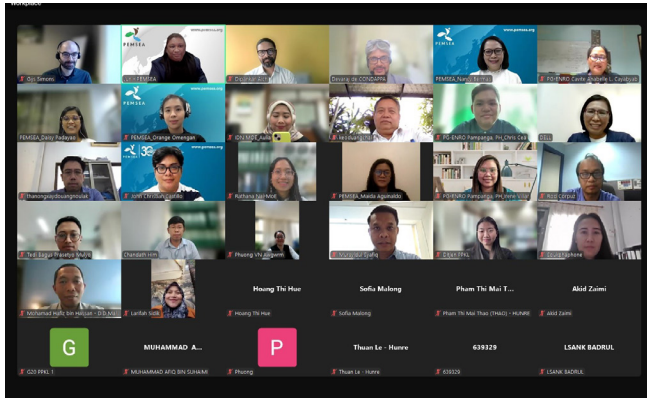
As a PNLC member, NUL gains access to a range of benefits, including capacity development programs, shared tools, and methodologies. This collaboration will further enhance NUL's capabilities in promoting sustainable water management practices in the region.

The PNLC now comprises 25 universities and research institutes from nine countries in East Asia, solidifying its role as a vital platform for knowledge exchange and capacity building in integrated coastal and river basin management



Dr. Keouduangchai Keokhamphui (third from left) signed the PNLC Charter on behalf of NUL during the network's General Assembly. (Photo by PEMSEA/EASC2024)

## IRBM Project Launches the Assessment of Water Resource Management Conflicts and the Implications on the WEF Nexus



Stakeholders from ASEAN Member States, along with the IRBM Regional Project Management Unit and FutureWater, participated in the online kick-off meeting.

The IRBM Project held an online meeting on December 3, 2024, to launch a study examining how conflicts on water use affect the interdependence of water, energy, food security and ecosystems (WEFE) at the basin level. The study, in collaboration with FutureWater, will identify mutually beneficial responses and provide an informed and transparent framework for determining the proper trade-offs in addressing the WEFE challenges.

Representatives from the six AMS participated in the meeting to discuss the study's scope, methodology, and timeline, and to agree on communication and coordination arrangements.

A key deliverable of the study is a toolkit to guide policymakers and river basin organizations in identifying vulnerable areas and issues that could impact local communities, particularly women and other vulnerable groups, and the ecosystem services they rely on.

Following the kickoff meeting, relevant data, information and reports from the six AMS and the priority river basins will be shared with FutureWater to initiate the assessment of the WEFE security nexus.

This study represents a crucial step towards understanding and addressing the complex interplay between water use conflicts and WEFE security in ASEAN river basins. Results of the WEFE assessment will be incorporated in the State of River Basin reports of the project's priority river basins.

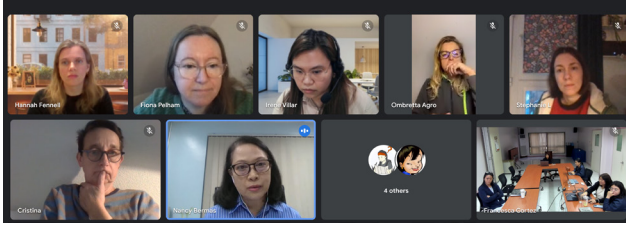
## IRBM Project Joins The Pavilion for People's Discussion on Women and Oceans at the 2025 World Economic Forum

The IRBM Project and its partners participated in a virtual roundtable discussion on the role of women in ocean conservation, hosted by The Pavilion for People at the World Economic Forum on January 3, 2025. The event brought together diverse voices from academia, science, early career ocean professionals, and women representatives from national and local governments, non government, development and community organizations.

The Pavilion for People provides a platform for inclusive dialogue, ensuring that perspectives from those not physically present at the World Economic Forum can be included. This particular discussion focused on the importance of incorporating diverse voices, especially women's, in conversations about the ocean in high-level conferences.

This one-hour informal platform offered an effective space for women to share their perspectives and offer input to the WEF, addressing concerns about the misrepresentation of women in mainstream discussions on ocean-related issues.





Women representatives from organizations across the globe working on ocean conservation participated in The Pavilion for People's roundtable discussion.

The discussion featured contributions from the IRBM Project partners, including Ms. Irene Villar of Pampanga's Provincial Government Environment and Natural Resources Office in the Philippines and Ms. Sengphasouk Xayavong from the Department of Water Resources, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment in Lao PDR. The conversation centered on key themes such as localized communication strategies for water conservation, immersive experiences for policymakers, and fostering more inclusive representation.

Participants emphasized the importance of immersive, on-the-ground experiences for WEF policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of conservation realities and the interconnectedness of water systems. Ms. Nancy Bermas, Regional Project Manager of the IRBM Project, mentioned the need for WEF to recognize the contribution of women in advancing ocean governance and management at the regional, national and local

levels. She highlighted PEMSEA's extensive experience—spanning over 30 years—in addressing ocean and coastal governance in East Asia through the implementation of area-based management approaches and the evolving practices in transboundary water governance through the Source-to-Sea framework.

Ms. Xayavong, citing Mekong River, which traverses Lao PDR, a land-locked country, and drains into the South China Sea stressed the significance of understanding how upstream government policies and conservation frameworks directly affect downstream communities. Meanwhile, Ms. Irene Villar emphasized the need for accessible language and communication platforms that resonate with local communities to ensure better engagement.

Overall, participants called for greater inclusivity of women and community representation in decision-making processes. They advocated for amplifying community voices, as these individuals are most directly impacted by ocean issues yet often the least represented in forums like the WEF.

This pilot platform amplified the perspectives of women and project implementers in global ocean conservation discourse. The gathered insights will be shared with the WEF to help shape more effective and inclusive policies for ocean health.

## Upcoming Events



**IRBM Project Launch in Viet Nam**  
21 February 2025 | Da Nang, Viet Nam



**Our Ocean Conference**  
28-30 April 2025 | Busan, RO Korea



**24<sup>th</sup> Annual Large Marine Ecosystems Consultative Meeting**  
14-16 May 2025 | Athens, Greece



**3<sup>rd</sup> Regional Steering Committee Meeting of IRBM Project**  
(TBD) | Indonesia



**United Nations Ocean Conference**  
9-13 June 2025 | Nice, France



**Learn more about the IRBM Project!**



For inquiries on the Project, please contact us at [info@pemsea.org](mailto:info@pemsea.org)  
[www.pemsea.org](http://www.pemsea.org)

Follow us



### About the Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) Project

Supported by the [Global Environment Facility](#), the IRBM Project aims to set-up functional management mechanisms in priority riverbasins of six ASEAN countries to reduce pollution and sustain freshwater environmental flows as well as adapt to climate change vulnerabilities. The Project is being implemented by [UNDP](#) and executed by [PEMSEA](#) in collaboration with [ASEAN](#).