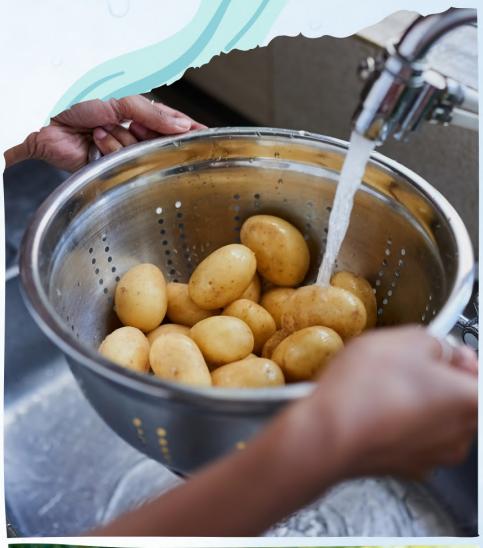
MEKONG INSTITUTE

#WorldFoodDay2023

Turning the tide

Safeguarding clean water for safer food in the GMS



Water is an integral part of the agrifood supply chain and is closely intertwined with food safety and security issues. At least three of the World Health Organization's (WHO) five keys to safer food underline the need for clean water sources. These include having access to safe water for cleaning raw ingredients and kitchen and dining utensils, keeping clean, and using safe water for cooking food.

Without clean water, it is more challenging to practice sanitation and proper hygiene.

It is exceptionally timely and fitting that the global community, led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), is bringing the focus back to water in this year's celebration of **World Food Day**. The theme, **"Water is life, water is food. Leave no one behind."** is an urgent call for governments and other actors to resolutely address longstanding global water problems.

Poor access to clean water increases the risks of food and waterborne illnesses, especially among those who eat raw vegetables. Diarrheal diseases contribute to 70% of global foodborne diseases. In 2016 alone, the WHO recorded 5,761 deaths in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand due to diarrhea caused by unsafe drinking water. Assessments show that proper hygiene practices could have prevented most foodborne diseases, which is only possible with access to safe and clean water.

Data from UN-Water's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 Portal provides insights into the strong association of limited access to clean water sources with the prevalence of foodborne illnesses in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).

The portal shows that less than 60 percent of the population in the GMS uses safely managed drinking water. Less than 60 percent uses a safely managed sanitation service, and less than 50 percent of domestic wastewater is safely treated before being released back into the natural environment.

Increasing water pollution due to industrial activities renders water for irrigation unsuitable for crops and threatens aquatic food source which is the main source of protein for millions of people living in the Mekong River basin alone. In Lao PDR, irrigation from canal water raises concerns over possible bacterial contamination of vegetables. In Myanmar, street food vendors lack access to clean water for rinsing used plates and glasses and washing hands after handling money. Pesticide contamination of agrifood crops also arises from the use and improper disposal of banned and harmful chemicals that seep into soil and water systems. In Sơn La province in Vietnam, drinking water contaminated with herbicides caused the hospitalization of almost 80 people.

In the GMS, **Mekong Institute** (MI) has been building the capacity of stakeholders to produce safe food products through good agricultural, manufacturing, and hygiene practices. The importance of using safe and clean water in every stage of the food supply chain has constantly been underscored at regional food safety capacity-building programs under MI's **Promoting Safe Food for Everyone** or **PROSAFE Project**. Many regulators, food business operators, representatives from the academe, and development workers who participated in PROSAFE training programs echoed their new safe food knowledge to their respective countries, reaching a broader network and creating a more meaningful impact.

The groundswell in the demand for safer food compels relevant government agencies and stakeholders to accelerate the provision of clean and safe water supply to all, leaving no one behind in accessing safe water and food.

This World Food Day, we champion transformative change that would turn the tide and further enable safe food production, supporting healthy life in this region using clean water.

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