



Press Release
For immediate release

20 March 2006

World Water Day celebrated worldwide on 22 March

World Water Day is celebrated every year on the 22 March. The theme 'Water and Culture' of WWD 2006 draws attention to the fact that there are as many ways of viewing, using, and celebrating water as there are cultural traditions across the world.

The theme draws attention to the fact that water is not simply another commodity. It is a source of life, dignity, and equality of opportunity. Water plays a pivotal role for sustainable development, including poverty reduction. The use and abuse of and competition for increasingly precious water resources have intensified dramatically over the past decades, reaching a point where water shortages, water quality degradation and aquatic ecosystem destruction are seriously affecting prospects for economic and social development, political stability, as well as ecosystem integrity.

Given the importance of water to poverty alleviation, human and ecosystem health, the management of the water resources becomes of central importance. Currently, over 1 billion people lack access to water and over 2.4 billion lack access to basic sanitation. Access to clean water is lowest in Africa, while Asia has the largest number of people with no access to basic sanitation.

This water crisis is largely our own making. It has resulted not from the natural limitations of the water supply or lack of financing and appropriate technologies, even though these are important factors, but rather from profound failures in water governance. Consequently, resolving the challenges in this area must be a key priority if we are to achieve sustainable water resources development and management.

The international community pledged at the UN Millennium Declaration of 2000 to halve by 2015 the proportion of people who are unable to reach, or to afford, safe drinking water; and to stop the unsustainable exploitation of water resources, by developing water management strategies at the regional, national and local levels, which promote both equitable access and adequate supplies.

The Lao PDR Government needs to be commended for its committed to provide potable, sustainable and affordable water supply for all by 2015. The development of water supply in the country has been increasingly successful. Water supply enterprises have been rapidly developed across the country in the larger urban centres. The Water Supply Authority (WASA), established in 1999, is being progressively strengthened to undertake its mandate as a national regulator for water



supply sector to ensure that growing demands and needs of people are met and addressed in a sustainable manner. One of the key accomplishments includes the National Water Tariff Policy, approved by the Prime Minister of Lao PDR in 2004. This Tariff Policy will be the major tool for regulation of water supply business by WASA.

UNDP is also supporting the Government of Lao PDR's efforts by emphasize an integrated approach to water resource management through effective water governance. It is spearheading the *Community Dialogue Initiative* to build capacity for water governance by facilitating dialogue among communities and local governments in the Mekong River Basin. Under this Initiative, Lao communities are addressing the challenge of riverbank erosion, which is threatening their livelihoods and security. They also plan to begin a "Fish stocks conservation zoning" project soon. A grass-root research by members of the communities has been planned and will be assisted by USER, a Chiang Mai –based research group. The research will serve their projects as well as their capacity building.

Lessons learned from the community dialogue have shown that there is a need and there are opportunities for better water governance. Effectively addressing and finding solutions for governance concerns at the local level of the Mekong Region requires cooperation between neighboring countries at the people-to-people, community-to-community and community-to-local government levels.

At the community level, governance manifests in the form of different strategies and actions communities have taken to solve environment related problems. It encompasses how decisions and actions are taken to address soil erosion; set- up cross-border community fishing agreements; obtain the knowledge to understand the surrounding environment, what is happening to it, why and what can be done about it.

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Notes for editors: *UNDP is the UN's global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. We are on the ground in 166 countries, working with them on their own solutions to global and national development challenges. As they develop local capacity, they draw on the people of UNDP and our wide range of partners.*