

Access to Justice Survey Workshop

Opening Remarks – Mr. Dirk Wagener UNDP Assistant Resident Representative and Head of Governance Unit

Vientiane, 22 June 2009

Your Excellency Mr Ket Kiettisak – Vice Minister of Justice

Mr Phoumy Sioudomphanh – President of Lao Bar Association

Government and development partner representatives,

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman,

It gives me great pleasure to join you here today for the first *Access to Justice Survey* workshop here in Laos. I am very pleased that UNDP has been asked to support the Lao Bar Association and the Ministry of Justice in this initiative, which intends to improve people's access to justice, especially of vulnerable and disadvantaged such as the poor, women, children, people with disabilities and also minorities.

Access to Justice is a basic human right as well as an indispensable means to combat poverty and to prevent or resolve conflicts. It is the ability of people to seek and obtain a remedy for their grievances through formal or informal institutions and mechanisms of justice. It is also about ensuring that judicial outcomes are just and equitable.

UNDP support to access to justice is at the centre of our global mandate to eradicate poverty and to advance human development. There are indeed strong linkages between democratic governance, poverty reduction and access to justice: Democratic governance is undermined where the access to justice of all citizens is not guaranteed. Access to Justice has also a direct

impact on poverty reduction since being deprived from access to justice means being deprived of choices, opportunities, access to resources and a voice in decision making.

Therefore, support to access to justice is also at the centre of our national support to advance the Government's Strategic Plan on Governance and its 'Rule of Law' pillar which seeks – among others focus areas - to strengthen people's access to justice. Strengthened governance and transforming the Lao PDR to a state governed by the 'Rule of Law' have been recognized by the Government as being crucial to implement the current NSEDP as well as to achieve the MDGs by 2015.

Existing programmes implemented by the Government of the Lao PDR and supported by various development partners already strengthen the legal sector and people's access to justice in the Lao PDR. Together with the EC, The Asia Foundation and AusAID, UNDP supports the Lao Bar Association in enhancing Access to Justice. Access to justice is being promoted through public legal education and legal aid services. In Vientiane capital and some provinces, poor and disadvantaged citizens are provided with free legal aid delivered through a network of legal aid clinics. I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation here for the lawyers who provide their services free of charge for this worthy initiative; you provide people with choices and opportunities they would never have without the services you are providing to them.

Nevertheless, to date we have very limited data on what people actually think and how they perceive their possibilities to access justice. To improve access to justice and to meet people's needs, we must first gather information on their perceptions and obstacles. With this information, we can build on initiatives that work, and add others which are specifically geared to address the needs identified. With the A2J survey we can provide government with evidence based insights on how to improve crucial legal services to its citizens.

In particular, it is hoped that the survey results, together with those from the *Customary Law and Practices Survey* which is also in preparation, will be used to guide the implementation of

the Legal Sector Master Plan and existing programmes such as the UNDP-supported *Lao Bar Association Access to Justice Project*.

As explained by his Excellency Mr Ket and Mr. Phoumy - whom I would like congratulate for their leadership - the purpose of today's meeting is to hear the proposal on how the Access to Justice Survey shall be carried out in Laos PDR. The A2J survey design team - which has been closely working with the MoJ, the LBA and other stakeholders - will today explain the planned survey implementation methodology.

The team has spent the last fortnight meeting key stakeholders in the legal sector in Laos and they have also met communities, including those that are poor and disadvantaged, to better understand some of their key priorities and challenges in this area.

I am also pleased to see in attendance many of our key counterparts from the Government, colleagues from UN Agencies, development partners and other stakeholders who work in this important area. We are very much looking forward to your inputs today and to working more closely with you in the future to improve access to justice in Laos.

Khob Chai Lei Lei!

[Ends]