

Conference on Communication for Empowerment

Communications for Empowerment in the Lao Context Achieving the MDGs and empowering ethnic people

**Opening Remarks by: Ms. Sonam Yangchen Rana
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Your Excellency Dr. Bosengkham Vongdara, Vice Minister for Information and Culture;

Your Excellency Mr. Bouangeun Saphouvong, Vice Minister for Information and Culture;

*Distinguished guests and participants from the country and the region;
Ladies and gentlemen,*

It is with great pleasure that I open this conference on 'Communication for Empowerment of Lao PDR's Ethnic People'. This morning I am happy to see government counterparts from both central and provincial level, colleagues from the UN System, experts and practitioners from the region and from many parts of Laos. I am also very pleased by the participation of other development partners. I would like to join the Vice Minister Dr. Bosengkham Vongdara in extending a warm welcome to you all.

In the year 2000, the world committed to meeting the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Achieving the MDGs in the Lao PDR requires

providing universal basic education and health services and reducing extreme poverty and hunger by half.

At first appearance these issues may seem a matter of service delivery. But achieving the MDGs in Laos depends, crucially, on access to information. How can a mother vaccinate her child against common diseases unless she knows when and where the vaccine is available? How can isolated villagers get a fair price for their rice unless they know the selling price in their district markets? How can people in remote areas know about the latest relevant government initiatives if they don't know of their existence?

H.E. Mr. Mounkeo Orabourn, Minister of Information and Culture, recently reaffirmed the government's commitment to expanding the information and culture networks in remote areas at the annual Information Culture Conference. We are here today to discuss how we can best assist the government to fulfil this commitment.

We are here today to consider these issues under the framework of 'Communications for Empowerment'. This regional UNDP initiative assists the Lao government to strengthen people's access to information and communication facilities. 'Communications for Empowerment' is, however, more than simply providing access to information. It provides the means for people to both access information and to feed back into the development process. It is about giving marginalised people a voice so that they can actively participate in their own development. Through empowerment, people can become active citizens contributing to their own development and the development of their country.

'Communications for Empowerment' is a strategic approach based on how communications can assist local people to accelerate development. This is how we can say that communications and information are central to achieving the MDGs.

The study on 'Communications for Empowerment' in Laos which will be presented later today focussed on three districts : Khoun, in Xieng Khouang province, Nga in Oudomxai province and Dakcheung in Sekong province. I am pleased that representatives from each of these districts are here with us today.

This local focus is vital in the empowerment of local people. Laos, as a very diverse country, provides special challenges for communications. The country's proud ethnic diversity brings linguistic diversity, and every district has its own individual profile of voices and cultures. Information and communications media which aim to reach the poorest and people in the most remote areas in order to achieve the behaviour changes that can lead to achieving the MDGs need, therefore, to be locally based.

Communications for empowerment need not be technologically complex or expensive. As an example, a village notice board providing regular updates on market prices can give farmers a stronger bargaining position with traders, shifting the balance of power to those who lack it the most.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, Lao PDR has an extensive national and provincial network of mass media and communication providers in both the public and private sectors. These providers fulfill a crucial role in providing information to the multi-ethnic people across the country. Without these services it would certainly be a harder, if not impossible, task to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

UNDP is very proud to support one communications intervention, Khoun Community Radio for Development. This reflects our commitment to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people in society – including women and ethnic people in remote areas. Khoun Community Radio provides information to local people in their own languages and in a locally-appropriate form. People in the community have a voice through producing their own stories based on what is important to them. Through local ownership of the station, government and the community work together towards the development of Khoun District.

We are beginning to appreciate the impact that initiatives such as Khoun Community Radio can provide. We have heard recently that following radio broadcasts on health issues such as childhood diseases and maternal mortality there is a significant uptake in the demand for vaccinations and pre-natal check-ups. These indicators suggest that the radio is making great strides towards assisting the local achievement of many of the MDGs. They also indicate the potential of such communications initiatives for greater achievements across the country.

Further still, many development projects in the areas of agriculture, education, mine action and water and sanitation are starting to appreciate the potential and effectiveness of two-way information channels to make their own development efforts more effective.

We have convened this conference so that we can all share our experiences and aspirations. I look forward to hearing and discussing the findings and recommendations of the recent 'Communications for Empowerment' study. I also look forward to receiving feedback from the meeting participants from their own experiences. We still have a considerable amount to learn, but these information gathering and sharing initiatives are a significant start.

I am looking forward to a lively discussion and count on your contributions to review and nurture future development initiatives in Lao PDR. On behalf of UNDP I wish you all a productive and useful time of sharing and learning.

Thank you

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Notes:

For more information please contact Janet Pontin at the UNDP Public Information Office
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