

2012 Round Table Implementation Meeting Statement

November 23 – Vientiane, Laos

Excellencies and Partners in Development,

We can say that the past year has been groundbreaking in more ways than one for the Lao PDR, further confirming advances made in the development of the country. From graduating to lower middle income status and WTO membership, to *Visit Laos Year* and hosting 4 key international high level forums, we, over 75 members of the iNGO Network, wish to take this opportunity to both acknowledge and congratulate our government partners and the Lao leadership for these achievements.

We also wish to take this opportunity to express our gratitude for the support and facilitation provided by our government partners, in particular the Institute of Foreign Affairs and Mass Organizations throughout our preparations and organization together with our Lao NPA partners of the recent 9th Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF9), reported as the biggest and most successful civil society event to date in Laos and in AEPF history. For this we would also like to thank the development partners and donors who contributed to assuring that success. The AEPF not only contributed to important dialogue and recommendations for sustainable development reflected in *'the AEPF9 Final Declaration'* document, it also significantly contributed to raising Laos' socio-political profile at regional and international levels.

The AEPF is a 'People's' forum. The National Growth & Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) states: ***Conditions must be enhanced in such a way as to enable people to organise themselves and to improve their livelihoods according to their own initiatives and visions of the future.*** (NGPES pge.17)

In preparation for the AEPF, our Lao NPA partners initiated a participatory and multi-stakeholder consultation process, which they implemented in close cooperation with Mass Organization partners across all 17 provinces to collect 'People's Visions' for a more sustainable future. Farmers, women, elders, youth, people with disabilities and living with diseases, Monks, public and civil servants shared their experiences and recommendations resulting in the *'Lao Vision Statement'*, covering 4 key pillars integral to more sustainable development and achieving 'growth with equity' goals as prescribed in the 7th NSEDP. Those 4 pillars are: economic, social, environmental and governance pillars.

While we recognize the significant progress made in *Economic Growth*, we also recognize that gaps remain in achieving *Poverty Eradication*, preventing full realization of Growth with Equity goals.

With these in mind, we INGO partners in development wish to share following recommendations in our commitment to strengthen the implementation of the NGPES, the 7th NSEDP and the 9th Party Congress. We particularly wish to endorse and support the various policy reforms and related programmatic initiatives underway, specifically in the governance sector, by focusing on the cross-cutting theme of:

Meaningful People's Participation

Inspired by key paragraphs from the NGPES and the key 4 pillars of the Lao Vision Statement, the following recommendations reflect the realities faced at community level as we experience them in the development projects we implement across Laos, covering all key sectors: agriculture and food security; access to essential services and natural resources management; and rural livelihoods and infrastructure development.

Economic Pillar:

Rural development is central to the Government's poverty eradication efforts as rural poverty is of prime concern and a community-based approach to its eradication is essential. Improvements in governance are directly linked to poverty reduction for limited public resources must be used effectively and efficiently in reaching out to help the poor. Importantly, in the transition to a more market-based economy, the system of decision-making must be more community-based, transparent and accountable. (NGPES pge.6)

In a transition period amid rapid changes, there is a risk that already vulnerable groups are further marginalized and that inequalities in growth continue due preventable circumstances including weak local level governance, limited community level capacity to make informed decisions and unsecure ownership of existing assets. To ensure the poorer don't become poorer, while the rich become richer, we recommend the following:

- Community based initiatives and organizations are supported and prioritized in combination with needs-based skills development and vocational training in the areas of income generation, small scale infrastructure and community managed facilities, with special emphasis on women, young people and ethnic groups, and pro-poor allowances afforded for the poorest of the poor as a means and incentive to bridge gaps and ensure more inclusive opportunities for poor people to lift themselves out of poverty.
- 'Fair trade' and Corporate Social Responsibility minimum criteria are integrated into Lao policies and strategies, and that mechanisms are further strengthened for smallholder farmers and vulnerable groups to make informed decisions when negotiating investment, market and trade opportunities, so as to ensure more governance in the market chain between all stakeholders at different levels and mitigate increasing indebtedness among already vulnerable groups.
- Redirecting focus to mobilize small-medium enterprises, so that Lao entrepreneurship and small businesses can be valued and optimized in recognition of the direct and almost immediate measurable benefits these impart on local economies, enhanced local services provision and self-sustaining community development, mitigating the greater risks often associated with larger FDI projects and related reliance on foreign investment with unintended debt implications.

Additional recommendations from small holder farmers organizations can be found in '*the Farmer's Statement*' presented during a Farmers Conference organized earlier this year with the Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC).

Social Pillar:

By being more community-based, the Government expects that public services will be more responsive to community needs. The redefinition of central-local relations is an important initiative. (NGPES pge.6)

We would like to highlight that there are a number of initiatives underway and policies in place which, if more coherently implemented, would more effectively and efficiently help to bridge current gaps, some critical, in access to essential and social services:

- Politburo Resolution 03, PM Order 16 can be optimized by integrating into the planned pilot, opportunities for modeling decentralized community-driven planning, decision making and implementation where good practices and lessons learnt in community ownership and potential for community-led development can be comprehensively case studied for Villages to be better equipped and enabled to act as Development Units. The AEPF9 provincial consultations co-facilitated by NPAs and MOs with support from iNGOs can serve as a concrete case study.
- Articles 48 and 49 of the 2009 Non-Profit Association (NPA) decree if expedited can assure that civil society associations fulfill their mandate as partners in development and community-based service delivery providers as stipulated in PM Decree 115. Key recommendations and commitments by Lao Civil Society to Aid and Development Effectiveness have been shared in the '*CSO Statement on Aid and Development Effectiveness*'.
- All key sectorial policies, plans, budgets and strategies could be reviewed at more decentralized levels, with special attention paid to gender, education and health in close cooperation with related Ministries, Sector Working Groups, and Civil Society. This could follow the example of the recent National Assembly hosted *MDG and HIV and AIDS Conference* in Pakse, Champasak: (with Parliamentarians Government and Development Partners and Civil Society) and the pre-RTIM preparatory meeting hosted in Phonsavan, Xieng Khouang. We also support the Ministry of Education and Sports' engagement with civil society, not only through the Education Sector Working Group, but also through specific initiatives to encourage dialogue with Civil Society on critical education issues. We recommend these efforts can be further strengthened by consulting directly the most affected groups in particular youth as the future generation, poorer families, ethnic communities, people with disabilities and women. As part of pre-AEPF9 consultations, Laos' future generation prepared a '*Lao Child & Young People's Vision Statement*' where their hopes and vision of their future are highlighted.

Environmental Pillar:

The Environment Strategy aims “to sustainably utilise natural resources and protect and conserve the environment to ensure the sustainable development of the country while reducing poverty and enhancing the quality of life and health of the Lao people.” (The 2003-2020 Environment Strategy)

To achieve this goal, the NGPES outlines 3 key interventions which we fully support and recommend are prioritized:

- **Improve the management of natural resources** Strengthen participation, in particular the voices of women and the poor, in the preparation and implementation of national and local plans, policies and strategies. (NGPES pge.117)
 - In the field of Disaster Management, iNGOs are working very closely with one another and within the Disaster Management Structure of the Government, from central to district level, ensuring increased participation of communities in the different disaster management plans. The INGOs are expecting that through the implementation of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), there will be more opportunities for meaningful participation of Civil Society Organizations like NPAs, Farmers Associations and Community-Based Organizations to take both more effective preventive and efficient responsive measures in managing and safeguarding their livelihood dependent natural resources.
- **Improve the institutional framework and its capacity** Develop a sound legislative and legal framework for property rights, water resources, forestry, land management and bio-diversity.(NGPES p.118)
 - Civil Society has been cooperating closely with MONRE and the National Assembly to support the drafting of the new National Land Policy. Recommendations made highlight the critical gaps in secure access and ownership of land which are directly related to land disputes as reported by the NA itself. Key proposed improvements included that users of land that is eligible for titling but is not yet titled, be given the same tenure rights as that of titled land holders; and that for land not pre-allocated for public purposes, communities should have the right to accept or refuse land concessions. We are encouraged by the NA's commitment to assure that ultimately NRM related policies and laws safeguard people's secure access and ownership of these basic resources, mitigating related food insecurity and ultimately assuring national food sovereignty.
- **Improve the environmental management in industrial and construction sectors** Promote the development of environmentally friendly private sector products such as clean technology, energy efficient technology and eco-tourism (NGPES p.118)
 - We recommend weighing all options for rural electrification (including off-grid which can be cost effective, satisfy the needs in rural areas, are more eco-friendly and empower communities with new forms of not only saving money but generating income). To achieve this, we suggest that a comprehensive energy planning process is facilitated including Demand Side Management (DSM) realistic demand forecast and externalities to identify and prioritize proposed projects. Several civil society organizations have experiences and expertise to share in this area and would welcome a formal mechanism for more coordinated exchange on this.

Based on multi-stakeholder consultations, a comprehensive overview of land and NRM related challenges and opportunities is provided in *'the Land Issues Working Group 2012 RTIM Statement'*.

Governance Pillar:

For the past decade, the Government has embarked on wide-ranging public administration reforms, designed to create an effective, efficient and low-cost public administration, together with the requisite institutional and legal framework. (NGPES pge.6)

Governance and rule of law are key for both sound development and credibility in the public domain. We welcome significant strides made in public and policy reforms, including the development of the Legal Sector Master Plan (LSMP), the Strategic Plan on Governance and the National Assembly Strategic Five Year Plan. Each of these begin to address gaps in accountability, access to justice and reliable recourse mechanisms, and enhanced people's participation in decision making and oversight processes. We feel following opportunities exist to further strengthen the impact of these reforms:

- More timely and consistent inclusion and meaningful participation of civil society organizations in the Sector and Sub-Sector Working Groups. As part of the RT mechanism, through these groups, and because of our experience and knowledge of grass-roots realities, civil society organizations can be vital in providing insights into challenges and opportunities from the field level. The Education Sector Working Group is already benefitting from more multi-stakeholder engagement.

- More cooperation between civil society and the National Assembly. Civil society can bridge the many gaps preventing National Assembly members from fulfilling their role more effectively and having stronger links with their constituents. With civil society working in all development/ MDG relevant sectors and covering all 17 provinces, civil society can easily bridge information, human resources and access gaps limiting more community-based interactions between the NA and citizens.
- More transparent and accountable reporting and access to information are imperative for making sound decisions and responsible choices. We encourage greater cooperation with and support to capacity building of media, in addition to facilitating broader access to reliable information at community level.

Finally, we applaud commitments made to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) and more recently, the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation. Each of these commitments acknowledge the importance of civil society in effective development, along with the need for Governments and development partners to support and encourage Civil Society Organisations. Civil society can help accelerate many of the Lao Government's development goals and we look forward to greater integration of these commitments into the implementation of the Vientiane Declaration and Country Action Plan (VDCAP).

We thank you for your time and consideration, and look forward to jointly and pro-actively moving forward to a more sustainable future for Laos where 'Growth with Equity' through enhanced People's participation is realized.

Respectfully,

The iNGO Network members