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Strengthening the National Assembly of Lao PDR (00040003)

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Minutes of the Annual Review Meeting 15th February 2008

1. Introduction

UNDP is supporting the National Assembly of Lao PDR to strengthen legislative, representative and oversight capacities, upgrade the human resource base, and rationalize the procedure relating to citizens' complaints. Support is provided through a project co-funded by UNDP and the European Union entitled 'Strengthening the National Assembly of the Lao PDR', which began in October 2004. The Project, due to be completed by the end of 2007, has been extended at the request of the National Assembly Cabinet until June 2008. The extension is intended to enable completion of planned activities while also providing time to finalize a further phase of international development assistance to begin in July 2008.

The annual review meeting is an important tool for monitoring project performance. It provides a forum for stakeholders to review the activities and results of project implementation over the previous 12 month period and to review the work plan and budget for the following year.

An Annual Review Meeting (ARM)¹ was held on the morning of 15 February 2008, 08:30–11:30 at Novotel Hotel¹ in Vientiane Capital. The meeting was presided over by Hon. Mr. Thongteun Xayasene, Member of the NA Standing Committee & Chief of the NA Cabinet.

In view of the number of Government and International stakeholders involved in Project activities, the National Assembly and UNDP were pleased to invite representatives of several government departments, embassies, UN agencies and international finance institutions. (A full list of participants is included as an Annex to this report.)

2. Agenda

- Objective of the Meeting and Introduction of Chairs Persons by the Organizing Committee
- Opening Remarks by representatives of the National Assembly, UNDP and the European Commission
- Presentation of project implementation during 2007
- Presentation of the project Work Plan for 2008
- Presentation on the proposed UN Joint Programme of Support 2007-2012.
- Closing Remarks by representative of the National Assembly
- Ceremony to endorse Official English Translations of Lao Laws

¹ Previously called a 'Tri-Partite Review Meeting'.

3. Summary of Proceedings

Opening remarks were made by Hon. Mr. Thongteun for the National Assembly, by Mr. Stéphane Vigié for UNDP and by Ms Josephine Kalinauckas for the European Commission. The substantive sessions comprised: a presentation of activities completed in 2007; a presentation of activities planned for the coming year; and a presentation of progress in developing a UN Joint Programme of support to the National Assembly for the period 2007-2011. Presentations were followed by comments and questions from invited guests. The meeting was brought to a close by Hon. Mr. Thongteun Xayasene. At the end of the morning, a short ceremony was held to mark the official endorsement by the National Assembly of English language translations of Lao Laws commissioned by the Project with funding by UNDP and the Embassy of Singapore.

Opening remarks on behalf of the National Assembly

By Hon. Mr. Thongteun Xayasene, Member of the National Assembly, Member of the Standing Committee & Chief of the NA Cabinet

Hon Mr. Thongteun Xayasene opened the meeting and welcomed the participants. In his opening remarks he noted that the project has been successful in terms of delivering planned activities and working towards stated objectives, as noted by the Project's Mid-term Review conducted in 2006 and the EU Monitoring Mission conducted in late 2007. Mr. Thongteun expressed appreciation to UNDP, the EU and other international organizations that have provided financial and technical assistance to the National Assembly in recent years. Noting that the current project is coming to an end in June 2008, Mr. Thongteun said he looked forward to further international cooperation through a Joint Programme currently being formulated with the assistance of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Opening remarks on behalf of UNDP

By Mr. Stéphane Vigié, UNDP Deputy Resident Representative (Programmes)

Speaking on behalf of UNDP, Mr. Stéphane Vigié congratulated the National Assembly and the Project team for the good progress over the past year. He also noted several challenges and lessons learnt including a need to further boost the capacity of parliamentary Committees in view of the complexity and diversity of issues coming before the National Assembly. Mr. Vigié suggested the possibility of establishing sub-committees on important issues (for example hydropower and mining, environment, education and health), urged the introduction of additional oversight mechanisms (public hearings, private hearings, fact-finding missions and enquiries, accessing expert external advice), and encouraged the National Assembly to carefully consider the recommendation to integrate ombudsman-like functions into the petitions and complaints mechanisms. Mr. Vigié reiterated UNDP's commitment to continue support to the National Assembly beyond the end of the current project.

Opening remarks on behalf of the European Commission Delegation

By Ms Josephine Kalinauckas, First Secretary and Head of Cooperation

Ms Josephine Kalinauckas congratulated the National Assembly on progress made during 2007. She noted in particular ongoing efforts to strengthen the representative function of the Legislature, the increasing numbers of women and younger members. In this regard she highlighted the gender training modules recently developed by the Project and urged the continuation of gender mainstreaming through project activities. Ms Kalinauckas also noted the successful production of Official English Translations of Lao Laws, which promotes international investment and lends significant support to the rule of law. However, she also urged the Project to take steps to ensure

legislation is more widely available across the country in Lao language, particularly in more remote districts and villages. Recognizing that institutional capacity building is a long term process, and the positive achievements made so far, Ms Kalinauckas gave assurance that the European Commission is willing and keen to continue support to the National Assembly during the period 2008-2012. In this regard, Ms Kalinauckas reiterated that the design of the new project should fully and accurately reflect the needs of the National Assembly members, its committees and support staff.

Presentation of activities implemented during 2007

By Ms. Sousada Phoummasak, National Project Director

Ms Sousada Phoummasak gave a detailed presentation of activities conducted by the Project during 2007. Her presentation is attached as an Annex. She noted that the Project had succeeded in implementing most activities laid out in the ambitious annual work plan, while also organizing and facilitating a number of additional activities not foreseen in the annual work plan set at the start of the year. Notable in this regard was the assistance provided to the National Assembly to develop a strategy for institutional development to the year 2020, and assistance to the team led by the Inter-Parliamentary Union tasked with formulating a new programme of support to the National Assembly for the period 2008-2012. Ms Sousada emphasized that collaboration between the project and a number of national and international partners has helped secure significant additional resources and technical expertise for the National Assembly at little or no additional cost

Turning to challenges and lessons learnt, Ms Sousada noted that the rhythm of legislative activity provides limited time for the Project to work with NA Members - most Members are based in their constituencies and come to Vientiane only twice each year to attend full Plenary Sessions. In response, in 2008 the project will pilot a one-week 'inter-session' capacity building workshop in March. This workshop will bring Members from across the country to Vientiane at a time when the pace of legislative activity is slower. Ms Sousada also noted that Project Steering Committee (PSC) Meetings were held less frequently than planned during 2007 because of the busy schedules of those involved, which impacted on coordination and planning of project activities. She expressed hope that PSC meetings would be held punctually at the end of each quarterly during 2008.

Presentation of the 2008 Work Plan

By Ms. Sousada Phoummasak, National Project Director

Ms Sousada Phoummasak described activities in the Project's 2008 Annual Work Plan for the final 6-months of implementation (January – June 2008). In addition to these activities, the project team will continue to assist the National Assembly, Inter-Parliamentary Union, UNDP and other UN agencies to finalize arrangements for the UN Joint Programme of assistance to the National Assembly for the period 2008-2011. Her full presentation is attached as an Annex, and summarized below.

Outcome 1: Enhanced lawmaking skills and improved procedures in legislative functions

- Outputs: Increased capacity in legislative drafting, appraisal and analysis; Citizens and international community have access to Lao laws.
- Activities
- Workshop for Members and staff on law drafting techniques
 - Workshop with Law Committee to review proposed laws prior to the NA session in June.
 - English translation of laws adopted in 2007 and publication
 - A series of legal sector meetings to explore re-establishing an official Gazette
 - A Law dissemination seminar with university students
 - Paper proposing methods to improve legislation drafting process and strengthen coordination between the NA and the government

Outcome 2: Strengthened Committee system with clear guidelines and increased capacity of members of the oversight functions

Outputs: Committee members' awareness improved regarding their duties and responsibilities; Increased awareness on sectoral issues relevant to Committee work.

- Activities
- Develop handbook and conduct training on the functions of the Committees, including legislative and oversight duties.
 - Parliamentary enquiry by NA Committee on the education sector
 - Inter-session capacity building workshop on thematic issues (topics TBD)

Outcome 3: More effective representation of constituents

Outputs: Strengthened mechanisms for regular and positive interaction with constituents; Increased gender awareness.

- Activities
- Gender training for NA Members and Staff, including gender analysis of budgets.
 - Student visits to the National Assembly during session
 - Visits by NA Members to local schools in 6 provinces
 - Media coverage of NA activities (TV, Radio, and Newspapers)
 - Disseminate laws adopted in 2007

Outcome 4: Strengthened human resources in the National Assembly secretariat

Outputs: Staff-members have improved professional skills; Information Centre at NA is better resourced; Content and design of NA website upgraded; HR development strategy initiated; Staff-members have improved English language skills.

- Activities
- Internship for NA web-manager
 - English training for NA Staff
 - Three NA Staff undertake Masters (Public Administration) in Australia.
 - Translation of materials/experience from recently democratised parliaments
 - Launch of new NA website with more information on current NA activities
 - Workshop to launch HRD plan for NA Staff

Outcome 5: Complaints Procedure at NA rationalized

Outputs: Ombudsman functions incorporated into Complaints and Petition Department.

- Activities
- Paper on upgrading Petitions Department to a Committee with ombudsman-like functions

Presentation on the development of the UN Joint Programme (2007-2011)

By Mr. Viseth Svengsuksa, Vice-Chief of the NA Cabinet

Mr Viseth Svengsuksa highlighted the positive results of international development cooperation with the National Assembly since the first UNDP supported project in 1996. He noted, in particular, more substantive legislative review, greater activity by Committees, and better representation of constituents' interests. He observed also the improved gender balance among elected Members, greater public awareness about the role of the National Assembly, and closer coordination with the Executive. He noted, however, that further institutional strengthening is required to enable the National Assembly to fulfill its constitutional mandate.

Outlining the process of developing the proposed Joint-Programme, Mr Viseth emphasized that it is based on the National Assembly's own strategic priorities for institutional strengthening developed during 2007. The Joint Programme approach aims to ensure international assistance is coordinated and coherent, with no gaps in support and no duplication of effort.

The draft programme document has been prepared under the leadership of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in consultation with the National Assembly and a number of international partners. They include: the European Commission; several UN agencies (UNODC, UNDP, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNFPA); the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank; the Embassy of Germany and the Embassy of Singapore.

The National Assembly looks forward to seeing the Joint Programme start in July this year, as soon as the current UNDP/EU project has concluded. Avoiding a gap between the two will ensure no loss of momentum. To achieve this, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has been invited to conduct a second formulation mission at the end of the month (February). Mr. Viseth ended by expressing his appreciation, on behalf of the National Assembly, to the international organizations that have already committed to supporting the Joint Programme with funds and technical assistance.

Closing Remarks on behalf of the National Assembly

By Hon. Mr. Thongteun Xayasene

In his closing remarks, Hon. Mr. Thongteun Xayasene, reiterated the pivotal role of the National Assembly in the achievement of a Rule of Law State. He emphasized that developing institutional capacity enabling within the National Assembly to enable it to fully master its constitutional mandate will be a long-term process. He expressed appreciation to the international organizations that have already committed support to the National Assembly through the Joint Programme 2008-2012. Referring to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effective and the localized Vientiane Declaration by the same name, Mr. Thongteun said he warmly appreciated the effort to coordinate and harmonize donor assistance, and to ensure programme goals are consistent with national development priorities.

Mr. Thontheun thanked all participants. He extended special thanks to the main project partners - UNDP and the European Union - and to the other international organizations providing support to the National Assembly in recent years: the World Bank, the Embassies of Germany and Singapore, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

4. Summary of main discussion points

National Assembly Hotline

Ms Josephine Kalinauckas, First Secretary and Head of Cooperation Section, European Commission, congratulated the National Assembly and the Project team for the clear progress over the past year. She expressed an interest to find out more about the National Assembly hotline described by Ms Sousada in her presentation, specifically how public concerns received by hotline staff are transmitted to Members and whether there is any data available on the number and type of calls.

Mr. Viseth Svengsuksa, Vice-Chief of the NA Cabinet, responded - he was tasked with managing the hotline during the last session in December 2007. He explained the hotline receives comments, suggestions, questions and complaints from citizens by telephone, fax, email and letters. The contact number, email and postal address are advertised widely in newspapers, radio and TV. At the end of each day a report summarizing the issues raised by members of the public is compiled and sent to Members of the National Assembly, relevant Government Line Ministries and the local media. During the three week National Assembly session in December 2007, the hotline received over 350

individual calls. No analysis of the frequency of different issues has been undertaken, but this could be possible in the future.

Inter-session workshop

Mr. Matthias Meier, UNDP Governance Specialist, asked about topics chosen for the forthcoming 'inter-session' capacity building workshop scheduled in March. Ms Sousada explained that a decision would soon be made in consultation with UN agencies.

Dissemination of Laws

Hon Mr. Douangdi Outhachak, Chair of Social Cultural Affairs Committee commended the Project's support to the National Assembly in disseminating laws in Lao and English on CD-ROM and through the NA website. However, he noted that many parts of the country – particularly rural areas – do not have access to computers or the internet. To ensure access to the law, he called for international donor assistance to fund printing a full set of Lao laws for all 10,000 villages across the country.

Finalizing the Joint Programme

Mr. Stéphane Vigie, UNDP DRR, observed that for the Joint Programme to be a success, and for it to begin on July 1st as planned, the leadership of the National Assembly will need to continue to collaborate closely with the IPU formulation team to finalize the programme document and to develop a detailed work plan for the first year. He urged parties concerned to exercise national ownership and to ensure the design of the programme fully reflects the needs and interests of the National Assembly.

Mr. Cayetano Casado, World Bank Research Analyst, informed the meeting that the WB is currently undertaking a capacity needs assessment with the National Assembly Economics, Planning and Finance. The results will be used to design capacity building activities with the aim of ensuring the Committee is able to monitor the Government's rapid financial sector reform programme. He emphasized that the World Bank remains very interested in participating in the forthcoming Joint Programme and looks forward to discussing the possibility further over the coming weeks.

Mr. Tabongphet Phouthavong, UNICEF Advocacy & Communications officer, expressed his appreciation for community mobilization work by National Assembly Members on child rights and mother & child health. He referred particularly to the national measles vaccination campaign in late 2007, which successfully reached more than 90 percent of targeted children and young women. UNICEF is committed to continuing support to the National Assembly for community mobilization, public information campaigns and advocacy during the coming year. UNICEF wholeheartedly supports improved coordination among UN and other agencies working with the parliament.

Note-taker: Jethro Stern, Associate Project Manager / Advisor

Minutes approved by: 27/02/08



Ms Sousada Phoummasak
National Project Director
National Assembly



Mr. Stéphane Vigie
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ANNEXES:

Annex 1: List of participants

Annex 2: Presentation of 2007 Project Activities (Power Point)

Annex 3: Presentation of 2008 Annual Work Plan (Power Point)