

Opening Address
H.E. Mr. PRAK Sokhonn, Deputy Prime Minister
Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
At the Consultation Meeting with Foreign Non-governmental Organizations
Phnom Penh, 29 January 2019 at 9 am

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I am pleased to join Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen from the concerned ministries, agencies and foreign NGOs at the opening of this important meeting. I highly appreciate your kind presence and active participation.

Although this is our inaugural meeting since the promulgation of the Law on Associations and Non-governmental Organizations (LANGO) on 12 August 2015, we have been carrying our tradition of good partnership and cooperation ever since. I am confident that today's consultation will contribute to enhancing and strengthening the cooperation between the Royal Government of Cambodia and foreign NGOs to reach a new height so that we can truly serve and protect the best interests of Cambodia and her people. This forum will also provide us an opportunity to jointly determine the challenges and identify appropriate solutions in order to effectively strengthen the enforcement of our laws and regulations for the sake of rule of law.

On behalf of the Royal Government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFAIC), let me take this opportunity to thank all foreign NGOs who are generous and determined with their goodwill to support the process of building and developing Cambodia in all circumstances without any conditions from the start of our difficult past to the present time where total peace, independence, national unity, and democratic process have been achieved with overall progress in all fronts.

The Royal Government would not have achieved these remarkable outcomes without the contributions of the concerned stakeholders namely the private sector, development partners, and civil society. Both local and foreign NGOs have played important roles in contributing to service deliveries and support key interventions related to socio-economic sectors in the local and remote areas of Cambodia. The Royal Government is committed to continuing our close cooperation and readily welcome any partnership with foreign NGOs who operate with goodwill and base on the principles of upholding the best interest of our people.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen!

The Law on Associations and Non-governmental Organizations was enacted to protect the freedom and rights to form associations and NGOs in the Kingdom of Cambodia. The Law aims to defend the legal rights and interests of our people and those of the general public, and to enhance the partnership and cooperation between associations and NGOs with public authorities, so that we could together develop our society and bring about progress in all fields as stipulated in articles 1 and 2 of the Law. It opens a new chapter of our partnership which will base on principles of mutual respect, country ownership and national sovereignty in the context of a nation which has endeavored to build and foster its rule of law, national strengths and prosperity for her people. At the same, the Law also provides a clear framework and legal foundation for all concerned stakeholders to easily operate and ensure their compliance. Full adherence to the Law will ensure efficiency, effectiveness, confidence and long-term sustainability of our partnership in contributing to the development of Cambodia to achieve its goal of high income country by 2050. The Royal Government always upholds the principle of inclusive development and appreciates the participation and contribution of all stakeholders, which is part of our democratic process. As a sovereign country and the only body legally and duly elected and entrusted by the august voters to lead the country, the Royal Government's only wish is for all of us to jointly make sure that such participation and contribution is carried out in a manner that mutually respects each other's mandate and within the confine of our respective operational rights and responsibilities.

I would like to emphasize that the Law on Associations and Non-governmental Organizations clearly defines the responsibilities of Ministry of Interior and MFAIC in registering associations and NGOs. Local associations/NGOs shall be registered at Ministry of Interior and foreign associations/NGOs at MFAIC in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The MOU between MFAIC and foreign NGOs is valid for 3 years and can be renewed. After the enactment of the Law, MFAIC has revised the old MOU template such that it conforms to the requirements of the Law. We have introduced the implementation of the new MOU template since January 2016 and thus far registered 65 new foreign NGOs. As of December 2018, we have 386 foreign NGOs with valid MOUs. They are from various countries across Asia, America, Europe and Australia operating in sectors such as education, health, social affairs, agriculture, vocational training, community development, environment and mine action.

The Royal Government is fully aware and understands the concerns of some development partners and civil society organizations with regard to the rights and freedom to operate at the local level in the context of the new Law. It is true that the process of developing and strengthening rule of law, sovereignty and national ownership will result in the change of context and norm as well as operational patterns, while our stakeholders have been used to the old way and thus found it difficult or unfavorable to adapt. But in my view, only a clearly defined legal basis and regulatory framework are our firm pillars that can support our cooperation in the long-term with harmony and success. This Law was not enacted to restrict any NGOs, but this Law requires that all NGOs to operate with transparency, accountability, integrity, and responsibility under the laws.

Excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen!

I call on all concerned ministries and agencies who are partners of foreign NGOs to continue their cooperation, facilitation, and coordination with those who have valid MOUs with MFAIC. I also urge all foreign NGOs to operate in accordance with the legal framework and in compliance with the regulatory requirements that are in force. Moreover, please avoid at all cost, activities which could be associated or linked to money laundering, financing of terrorism and weapon of mass destruction as stipulated by the Asia Pacific Group on Money Laundering, so that you could avoid falling into their grey list, which will cause negative effects on the financial system, flows of investment and political sentiment in Cambodia. All foreign NGOs should carry out their financial transactions only through legal banking system with those that are legally licensed by the National Bank of Cambodia.

To conclude, I would like to commend Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen and our officials in charge dealing with foreign NGOs for their dedications and hard work and for organizing today's meeting. I wish you all the four gems of Buddha's blessing: longevity, nobility, health and strength, and I now declare the consultation meeting with foreign NGOs open.

Thank you!