Opening speech: A Regional Dialogue on Freedom of Information (FOI) in the Mekong Countries, by the Swedish Ambassador to Thailand, Mr Staffan Herrström

Dear all representatives here today,

Thank you for inviting me to this opening session of a Regional Dialogue on Freedom of Information in the Mekong Countries. It is an honor for me to take part in this event. And I feel it is important, not least against the background of a deteriorating climate for freedom of expression in many parts of the world.

I have some personal experiences that have illustrated to me in everyday life how crucially important the concept of freedom of information really is. As a former journalist for sure - but even more from another perspective. I have been a civil servant for many years and as such regularly been scrutinized with the right to information as a tool.

Access to information, freedom to information is a right – no doubt about that. It is not a favor by Governments to journalists. It is a right for citizens. International bodies have recognized that freedom of information is a fundamental human right and that effective laws are needed to secure it.

But it also crucial from the point of accountability and democratic governance. Apart from being a right it is also a tool to fight mismanagement, nepotism, corruption, waste with taxpayers’ money – and simply bad decision-making. Or rephrased on a positive note, a tool for a just, equitable and sustainable development.

Let me give you two examples: I spent nine years as Regional Director for Eastern Europe at our development agency, Sida. Every day I knew that the way we managed aid money from Swedish taxpayers could be scrutinized through the files in our archive. We had visits from such journalists quite regularly. One of them was often sitting hours and hours with our documents. And from time to time he published critical news about us, based on the documentation that we had provided him with. I was held accountable.

How is this possible? Because we have the relatively unique principle of public access to information – and here more specifically to official documents. Everyone is entitled to read the documents of public authorities. And this permeates the entire Swedish administrative system. It is protected in our constitution and exceptions can be made only with reference to very specific articles in the law. Actually as much as two of our four fundamental pieces of constitution are related to freedom of speech.

Applied in practice in development cooperation, this means a constitutional obligation to make information available to anyone, visible, such that stakeholders in Sweden and Bangkok, 12 October 2015
in partner countries are able to follow the entire aid chain. Therefore we are very proud of our persistent work when it comes to methodological transparency. Much of this is centered around our Open aid initiative. On the site Openaid.se you can find answers to questions about when, how, to whom and for what purposes Swedish aid has been disbursed. Public documents and public information on aid have been made available online.

Hence, access to information is an essential development tool and a critical element in contributing to transparent economic and social practices, good governance and the fight against corruption. It enables people to have informed opinions and to engage in full and open debates. The right to free and independent information is a condition for active participation in society. Openness and transparency enable people to hold decision-makers accountable. Including people like me.

Against this background it is, I suppose, easier to see the rationale for our engagement here today. We want to be a committed actor in the efforts to develop greater openness and transparency in partner countries and regions. In Southeast Asia, Sweden supports regional organizations that work to promote democracy and human rights, sustainable environment and climate change challenges.

In Cambodia Sweden is currently supporting the Ministry of Information together with UNESCO to draft an Access to Information Law. The drafting process is both inclusive and participatory. Once the Law is passed, it will help Cambodia improve openness, transparency, and accountability of the public authorities for the good of the people.

Many of the current challenges for this region lie in the interface between the environment, human rights and businesses. Economic growth is continuing, while the environment is under huge pressure and human rights remain vulnerable. It is therefore crucial for citizens to have an appropriate access to information, concerning the issues affecting their livelihoods and human rights, that is held by public authorities.

According to SEAPA’s report – the public’s right to freedom of information in Southeast Asia only marginally improved in the last decade with most societies experiencing a tightening of secrecy laws or policies. Countries that do not have laws significantly outnumber those that have. Yet at the civil society level, initiatives to advocate for greater access to information have grown stronger.

Sweden is a strong believer that civil society organizations have a vital role to play in fighting corruption. They provide checks and balances for improving accountability in the public and private sectors and therefore need a comprehensive legal framework guaranteeing public access to information in accordance with international standards. Their role, your role, is also very important in our joint efforts to raise the public awareness on the Right to Know.

We are happy to know that our partnership with UNESCO and SEAPA has contributed to getting this workshop organized.
Our engagement should also be seen within the framework of the feminist foreign policy of the Swedish Government. Which means, not least, contributing to equality by implementing a gender perspective in everything: agenda setting, analysis, decisions and action – mainstreaming this throughout all parts of Sweden’s foreign relations, in diplomacy and trade as well as in development cooperation.

Consequently, men, women, people with any sexual orientation and gender identities should have universal, unconditional, and equal access to information both on-line and off-line without fear of violence, intimidation, silencing or censorship. States should not restrict the space of civil society to debate or challenge their economic, social and political development agenda. It happens too often. In some countries increasingly often. Also for that reason your engagement is simply invaluable. Good luck with your crucial work!

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