Good Morning! Participants, Journalists and Media Representatives from Lao, Representatives from the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Ministry of Education, and the Lao National Commission for UNESCO

On behalf of Sheldon Shaeffer, Director of the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, and myself, as the UIS Regional Advisor for Asia and the Pacific and the Head of AIMS programme, I have the honour to present a keynote message on this occasion of the opening session of this workshop. The Director sends his regrets for not being able to join you here today, along with his best regards and thanks to all of you for coming together for this important workshop.

I am also here with you today with personal conviction and passion for the topic of this workshop. I believe that the media and the journalists have a key role to play in the development of your societies and the education of your readers. And that you, as journalists, play a critical role in promoting public discourse on education as a key to human development.

I wouldn’t be surprised if not all of you are familiar with EFA because admittedly, educational issues are not covered much in the media although it is everywhere around us and has impact on all our lives.

In my travels around the world, I have observed that the most common topics covered by the media seem to be the big four subjects -- politics, finance, crime and entertainment news. Occasionally, educational issues are covered, mostly in connection with the big four headline grabbers, often simply as reprints of the government news release and text of the Ministers speech. Original news and feature stories on education are often not given much attention in the newsroom under the mistaken notion that the subject does not otherwise interest the readers.

You may yourself have experienced frustration when your education stories often end up in the obscure section of the inside pages of your newspaper. However, don’t be discouraged. Major newspapers in the world, such as the New York Times, the London Times, Le Monde, the Financial Times, etc. have special sections and weekly supplements devoted to education and training, as there are, in fact, many readers and advertisers.

The reasons are many, after all, education in one way or another, plays a critical role in the civic, social and the economic well-being and overall development of a country. The education sector directly and indirectly affects the entire society. It is certainly one of the biggest sectors, as it is a large employer of teachers and administrators and it is of great interest to every family with children of all ages throughout the whole country.

As the education sector accounts for a sizable percentage of the annual public sector budget, it is very relevant to issues of good governance and concerns of the taxpayer. It circulates considerable amount of money throughout the country, through teacher salary spending, school construction, equipment, facilities, food and other procurement. Families also spend considerable amount of their income on school uniforms, fees, books, stationery, transport, etc. Correspondingly, many suppliers and services derive considerable income from the education sector.

Whether it is provided by the government, local communities, private business, or religious order, education embodies visions of the kind of society that the policymakers of the sponsoring organizations want to realize for their constituency and target groups, especially for our children and youth. For each of us, as a learner or a parent and for our own professional career, we seek in education and training special knowledge and skills as the means for realizing our dreams, which may be attaining upward social mobility and material and intellectual improvement.
Everywhere there is a school or a community learning centre, whether it is for the urban elite or for the rural poor, it is a centre of hope for a better tomorrow. Whether a parent or a teacher in a rural village, a farmer, a worker, a provincial administrator, a city planner, or a national development planner in the capital city, indeed everyone considers education and training as a means for advancement of the individual, the community and the nation. As taxpayers, we are concerned over how much and how taxes are spent. Public health and education are almost universally considered as good investment, as these sectors are believed to enhance our quality of life.

In broader terms, education is essential for human and national development. It is needed to create a skilled workforce, to promote economic growth, to protect and preserve cultures and the environment, to foster civic participation and personal development. Its benefits encompasses the human, social, cultural, political and economics aspects of life.

Education was considered so important that it was recognized as a basic human right in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Recognizing that education must be provided to all children, representatives from 155 countries and 160 governmental, non-governmental and UN agencies met in Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990 for the World Conference on Education for All (EFA): Meeting Basic Learning Needs. They adopted the Jomtien Framework for Action, which reaffirmed the notion of education as a fundamental human right and spelled out targets and strategies to meet the basic learning needs of all youth, children and adults by 2000.

EFA is about ensuring that every child, youth and adult has access to good quality education. It takes the approach that learning starts at birth (or even before) and should be continuous throughout an individual's life.

The Jomtien targets, however, were not achieved as promised by the year 2000. As a follow-up, more than 1,100 participants from 164 countries, UN and development agencies, NGOs and education stakeholders met in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000 for the World Education Forum. During the forum, the international community set the six EFA goals to be met by 2015 through the Dakar Framework for Action. Notably, the Dakar Framework placed the main responsibility for achieving the EFA goals on countries and encouraged transparent and democratic processes, involving stakeholders, especially peoples' representatives, community leaders, parents, learners, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society.

Therefore, global development themes, such as the Millennium Development Goals and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Programs, prioritize the achievement of universal primary education and gender equality by 2015, as essential means for producing the necessary human resources for the development agenda.

Each year, UNESCO releases a report of progress towards the six goals of Education for All endorsed by countries at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. The latest report, released late last year, reports the following figures, which I hope provides you with an overview of the situation in the region:

- 77 million children globally are out of primary school, 9.298 million of whom live in East Asia. While the number of out-of-school children fell in other regions, it has risen in East Asia from 6.4 million in 1999. We know from the data that most out-of-school children come from the rural areas, belong to poorer households and have mothers who have no education.

  The Philippines, Myanmar and Viet Nam are among the 28 developing countries worldwide with over 500,000 out-of-school children. Lao PDR had 119,000 school-age children out of school in 2004.

  Unless serious attention is made to ensure all children have access to education of good quality, it is clear that the crisis of out-of-school children will continue to magnify. Some 738 million children - 11% of the total world population - are in the 0-5 age group and their number is expected to reach 776 million by 2020.

But EFA commits to education for all ages – from the smallest children to the oldest learner.

- 124 million children are enrolled in pre-primary education globally with developed countries having a 77% gross enrolment rate (GER). In East Asia, the average number of young children enrolled in pre-primary education is 40%. Among countries in East Asia, Malaysia has the highest GER of 108%, with Lao PDR and Cambodia having the lowest at 8% and 9%, respectively, highlighting the considerable gap between countries in the region.

To be able to go to school and learn, a child must be healthy.
However, worldwide, about 86 of every 1,000 children born in recent years will not reach age 5. In East Asia, 44 children for every 1,000 live births will not reach the age of 5. Lao PDR along with Cambodia and Myanmar have the highest under-5 mortality rates in Southeast Asia, with over 100 children for every 1,000 newborns not reaching the age of 5.

Another challenge is the millions of adults around the world, who do not have the basic skills to read, write and count numbers.

- One in five adults – 781 million globally – lack basic literacy skills. East Asia alone has 124 million people aged 15 and above who lack basic reading, writing and numeracy skills, 71% of whom are women, indicating a substantial imbalance in literacy skills between the sexes.

- In Lao PDR, adult literacy is only 69% (based on country estimates), meaning 31% of the 15 and over population cannot read and write. There are also more literate males, 77%, compared to females, 61%. Youth literacy rate, covering the 14-24 age group, is 78%, 83% for males, 75% females, respectively.

All of these numbers can be overwhelming and mind-numbing. Your role as journalists reporting on education is to make sense of these numbers and to play an active role in your countries to use these figures as part of the larger story to ensure the rights to education are upheld. **Essentially, for these numbers to have meaning, you will have to give them a face, a story, and a life.**

Time is short and is running out. Many countries are in danger of not meeting the goals of EFA and the MDGs by 2015.

We in UNESCO urge and support countries in this region to do the following:

1. Act on **ALL** six EFA goals of early childhood, universal primary education, life skills, literacy, gender, and quality education
2. Act with urgency
3. Emphasize equity and inclusion – ensure that all children and learners, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, language, income or social status, have the opportunity to learn
4. Increase public spending and focus it on specific targets
5. Increase aid to basic education and allocate it where most needed

We at UNESCO Bangkok and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics Regional Office are also assisting countries in undertaking a review of their national progress in meeting the EFA goals. This exercise called the EFA Mid-Decade Assessment or EFA MDA will also yield insightful results that countries can use in planning reforms needed to ensure that Education for All is achieved. National reports in relation to the EFA MDA will also be a good source of stories for all of you.

As media practitioners, you are responsible for upholding the right to education. You play a critical role for monitoring and reporting on issues related to education, and for providing an objective perspective on the realities in the education sector in your country.

I look forward to the sharing of experiences, lessons and ideas the next two days, as we develop stories and issues on education and seek means to better use the numbers and figures to support our stories.

I would like to close with a word of thanks to my own team at UNESCO Bangkok, who has worked tirelessly to bring this workshop to reality, including the background research for this speech, draft manual and exercises, especially Leotes Lugo, Anuje Sirikit (Pina), Apiradee (Ann), and Diah Yulianti who is not here. To our hosts here in Vientiane, – the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Ministry of Education, and the Lao National Commission – and our partners in this workshop: the Lao Journalists Association and the Lao in Foreign Press in particular Khun Thonglor Duangsavanh, for their expert support in organising this workshop.

Finally, I also would like to thank you, the participants for your commitment to education. I look forward to the fruits of your work throughout the two days here and most especially to reading your education-related in the coming days.

Thank you and best wishes for a fruitful workshop.