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PRESS RELEASE

Switzerland – Launch of the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) Project

Phnom Penh, 12th February 2015

Switzerland, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Cambodia (SDC) launches the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) Project, a new regional initiative to support land tenure security for family farmers, especially women and ethnic minorities in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam. Following an international tender, SDC has awarded the implementation of the project to the Australia based consultancy firm LEI (Land Equity International), working in collaboration with the French NGO GRET (Professionals for Fair Development). The Government of Switzerland, through SDC, has committed to funding the project for a period of 8 years. The first phase of 4 years will be concluded in 2018 with a total budget of CHF 9.75 million. The German government plans to support the MRLG as well in the near future. Talks are also underway with other interested partners.

Family Farmers (small holders) dependent on agriculture, forestry and fisheries represent the majority of the population in Cambodia (70%), Lao PDR (77%), and Myanmar (70%), and also the majority of the poor. Their livelihoods are under constant threat due to increasing pressures caused by weak governance of tenure and rapid land use changes within the context of globalization. This is now recognised by many governments and hence land governance has become a central focus of development challenges to address in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV). Governments are revising land policies and laws, and in recent years moratoriums on new concessions have been declared by various governments in order to re-evaluate the benefits and risks of the land concession policies, comparing it with other options of agriculture intensification.

In Cambodia in particular, the Royal Government of Cambodia issued a moratorium on Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) in 2012 and has implemented a number of important measures in favour of smallholder farmers, including accelerating the land titling program in areas with conflicts with private companies and established an inter-ministerial committee to review the performance of ELC. The review has resulted in cancellation and reduction of many ELCs. Overall the Royal Government of Cambodia has clearly shown its commitment to implement many other reform initiatives, including establishing a new map of state land under the joint effort from the Ministry of Land Management Urban Planning and Construction (MLMUPC), the Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), and the Ministry of Environment (MOE).

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Cambodia (SDC) appreciates the high interest and commitment expressed by the three ministries toward the MRLG project, during high level consultations conducted in December 2014.

“Switzerland is not a new actor in the global land sector”, says SDC Director of Cooperation in Cambodia Mrs. Rahel Boesch, “Switzerland is a strong promoter of the Voluntary Guidelines on the responsible Governance of Tenure of Land. We believe that the MRLG project will efficiently contribute to support the reform agenda and development goals of the Royal Government of Cambodia, in close collaboration with the three ministries, Ministry of Land Management Urban Planning and Construction (MLMUPC), Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), and Ministry of Environment (MOE)”.

The MRLG project highly appreciates all these efforts and commitment and is looking forward to working with concerned ministries and other stakeholders from academia and research institutes, civil society and the private sector to support the reform agenda, especially toward more secure and equitable access to and control over land and natural resources.

The MRLG project will contribute to improving land governance by (i) providing assistance to the emergence of more favourable policies and practices for securing the rights and access of family farmers to land and natural resources; and (ii) strengthening the effectiveness of concerned stakeholders through learning, alliance building and regional cooperation.

Dr. Kate Rickersey, MRLG Project Team Leader confirms: “The changes occurring in the Cambodian landscape alike in Lao PDR and in Myanmar, are strongly influenced by neighboring countries. But currently no forums exist that are dedicated to address land governance from a regional perspective, at the scale of the GMS (Greater Mekong Subregion) or ASEAN. The lack of concerted regional discussions and agreements prevents Cambodia and the other countries in the region, to improve country level governance of land tenure. To respond to this gap, the MRLG project will develop multi-stakeholder venues to foster regional and cross border dialogues.”

The MRLG project supports strategies such as capacity building, learning and networking opportunities at country level and across borders. The project collaborates with all land and natural resource stakeholders, including national and sub-national government, civil society, academics, private sector and individuals and organisations involved in family farming, enhancing equitable arrangements for all. The project is working with all stakeholders including three ministries, at national and sub national levels, development partners, NGOs, private sector, academia, research institutes, community based organisations, and media. While the project design outlines a general framework and principles for implementation, the priorities and annual work plans are determined by concerned stakeholders at national and regional levels through a participatory and consultative process.

MRLG’s contribution to improving land governance will be through three major components of intervention: (i) learning and alliance building; and two grant facilities, (ii) quick disbursement fund (QDF), and (iii) innovation fund (IF). Today’s event to launch the MRLG project in Cambodia will be followed by a 2-day orientation training of the MRLG project Grant Facility. The training will enable participants to understand the Grant Facility guidelines and eligibility criteria.

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