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GOVERNMENT TAKES STEPS TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO LAND

Strengthening property rights is a "top priority"

The Government, with support from USAID's Strengthening Property Rights or "Ita Nia Rai" project, is taking crucial preliminary steps towards creating equal opportunities for Timorese women and men to own private property.

Article 54 of the Constitution guarantees all individuals the right to private property. However, in practice, women in Timor-Leste have limited opportunities to obtain land ownership. "Women's lack of land and property rights not only limits their ability to obtain economic revenue from agriculture production and from the land market; it also gives them a lower status in society," said Marjorie Huang, Gender Specialist from the USAID-funded Strengthening Property Rights project.

It is, therefore, a good start that the Strengthening Property Rights project and the Secretariat of State for the Promotion of Equality (SEPI) are jointly convening Timor-Leste's first-ever working group on gender and land rights.

"The goal of the working group is to ensure that statutory laws in Timor-Leste are gender-sensitive and support women's rights to private property as well as men's," said Idelta Maria Rodrigues, the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality. "As a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), it is Timor-Leste's duty to make sure that women have equal opportunities to land and property rights," Secretary Rodrigues added.

The working group, which includes representatives from SEPI, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Agriculture, the National Directorate for Land, Property and Cadastral Services (DNTPSC), UN Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT), UN Development Programme (UNDP) and women's groups like the Caucus: Feto iha Politika and Rede Feto, will hold its first meeting on 19 May 2008.

"Now as a new nation, we are creating a new system for administering land rights that should be fair and include equal opportunities for women" says Antonio Verdial, the Director of the DNTPSC. "In the long run, transparent land administration can create a

For more information, contact:

Breanna Ridsdel

TEL: +670 731 2407

Email: breanna.sprtl@mac.com

Jose Caetano Guterres

TEL: +670 730 4325

Email: jcmataratao@gmail.com



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climate of security for individuals, families and communities to invest in their land for their future,” he added.

The right of women and men to own land is a critical goal for economic and social development in Timor-Leste. Secure land and property rights contribute to economic development and poverty reduction by improving rural access to credit and promoting private sector investment. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill emphasized during his recent visit to Timor-Leste that the “Strengthening Property Rights” program is a top priority for the American people’s support to the people of Timor-Leste.

The Strengthening Property Rights in Timor-Leste project is a five-year USAID-funded project that aims to help the Government of Timor-Leste secure land tenure and property rights in the country. Working with the National Directorate for Land, Property and Cadastral Services and the Ministry of Justice, the program provides technical and policy support to develop a sustainable and transparent property rights system in Timor-Leste.

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Breanna Ridsdel
Jose Caetano Guterres

For more information, contact:

TEL: +670 731 2407
TEL: +670 730 4325

Email: breanna.sprtl@mac.com
Email: jcmataratao@gmail.com