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PRESS RELEASE

Government working group to provide recommendations on property rights for women

17 July 2008, Balide, Dili, Timor-Leste. The Gender Land Law working group met this week to further the Government's efforts to address gender equality in the forthcoming legislation on land and property. The focus of the workshop, which was held on July 16 at Memorial Hall in Dili, was the issue of women's rights to matrimonial property – that is, property, including land, that is acquired before, during and after marriage.

"The majority of women in Timor-Leste enter marriage with few assets, and have few opportunities to acquire personal assets during their marriage," commented Mrs. Idelta Maria, the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality. According to Secretary Maria, in Timorese culture when women are married, whether in patrimonial or matrimonial communities, generally they do not have the right to own land. "Because of this, developing a mechanism to strengthen land rights is critical to increasing women's rights within the family and in particular the rights of women when it comes to the division of assets because of death, separation or divorce", she added.

Strengthening women's rights to land is a key goal for increasing women's access to land and reducing rural poverty, especially for vulnerable women and their families. To this end, participants in the working group are developing concrete recommendations on how a regime on marital property can be adapted to the context of Timor-Leste and how this regime is managed. Participants also discussed key issues such as joint titling of land between husbands and wives.

Timor-Leste is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and has committed to developing mechanisms to promote equality in access and control of land and property, including access to credit and capital. This is in line with the country's constitution, which in Article 54 states that all Timorese citizens have the right to private property.

In December 2008, the working group intends to submit its recommendations to the Ministry of Justice, the Council of Ministers and the National Parliament for consideration in legal frameworks regulating property rights. Working group members include government representatives from the Secretariat of State for the Promotion of Equality (SEPI), the Ministry of Justice, the National Directorate for Land, Property and Cadastral Services (DNTPSC), the Ministry of Agriculture, and local government representatives from Dili, representatives from civil society and international organizations including Fokupers, Rede Feto (the women's network), the Justice Sector Monitoring Program (JSMP), the Hak Association, Belun, Advocats Sans Frontieres (ASF), the United Nations Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Strengthening Property Rights in Timor-Leste (known locally as the "Ita Nia Rai" or "Our Land" program) is a five-year program funded by USAID and implemented by ARD Inc. and ACDI/VOCA. Both implementing organizations have worldwide experience in developing land systems in post-conflict countries and in conflict prevention for community stabilization. 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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