

VIETNAM CONSULTATIVE GROUP MEETING

HANOI, DECEMBER 14 -15, 2006

GROUP OF 4 STATEMENT

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The members of the Group of 4, comprising Canada, New Zealand, Switzerland and Norway, would like to congratulate the Vietnamese Government on hosting this important consultative conference.

The Group has for the past 5 years taken a special interest in ethnic minority issues in Viet Nam, with particular emphasis on the socio-economic development in the remote areas and the promotion of minority rights and religious freedom in the Central Highlands.

Through our regular visits to these areas we have observed numerous examples where the Government has made significant efforts at improving the lives of disadvantaged groups. The group acknowledges the enhanced attention by the Vietnamese Government to ethnic minority issues, i.e. promulgating policies on the socio-economic development of the mountainous and ethnic minority areas, making important efforts in reducing the poverty and improving the access to basic services in these areas. Yet the challenges remain vast and require concerted attention from the Vietnamese Government and support from partners.

The Group welcomes the development of new measures for the socio-economic development of the mountainous and ethnic minority areas for the years 2006 to 2010, which were presented at the international consultative forum organized by the Ministry for Planning and Investment and the Committee for Ethnic Minorities on 28 September. However, a sustainable improvement of the living conditions of poor ethnic minority households and communities goes beyond infrastructure and economic development. As stated on previous occasions, the Group encourages the Government to further involve the affected communities in this important process.

The improvement of the situation of disadvantaged groups is directly linked to the relations between the State and its citizens. The Group therefore highly welcomes the recent reinforced attention by the Government and Party on underpinning the relation between State and Civil Society. Increasing the transparency of information dissemination and decision-making processes, inviting all citizens to participate actively in the public debate, and enhancing the role of the media in the society at large are, in our view, all important measures that will readily address the increasing demands in a society of rapid change. In this regard we emphasize the significance of further amending the law on association and introducing the law on referendum in order to allow interest groups to participate in the further development of the country.

From experiences in our own countries the Group is familiar with the challenges Vietnam is facing in combining economic and social development with cultural diversity. Such challenges could be approached from several angles:

Firstly, we consider it important to look closer at how minority groups can be more actively engaged in the decision-making processes in the local administrations. It is important to create conditions so that citizens can easily interact with the authorities. In order to ensure sustainability of the socio-economic development programmes, a more participatory approach is important, taking into account the feedback from the consulted communities. By drawing ethnic minority communities into the planning and decision-making processes the ownership to their own destiny will be reinforced.

Secondly, capacity building of local authorities is of great importance. Raising the understanding of ethnic minorities' issues among district officials will contribute to making the services more efficient and better matching the needs of the local people. Empowering the ethnic minorities' representation within the administrative and political level will more easily incorporate minority perspectives into policy and processes.

Thirdly, the Group would like to underline the importance of ensuring the preservation and promotion of culture, religion and language. Last year we underlined the value of teaching methodologies that use both Vietnamese and the language of the local ethnic minority. This year, we have noticed with some unease that many officials, researchers as well as media still use language describing the culture and behaviour of ethnic minorities as backward and tradition-bound. Such attitudes might on the one hand very easily create less incentive to include these groups into the decision-making processes related to their own development, and on the other hand discourage minority groups from taking an active part in public life. From the experiences in our own countries it has been important to acknowledge that ethnic minority cultures form a vital component of a country's cultural heritage and play an important role in the development of a dynamic and contemporary society.

The Group of 4 will continue to pay interest to the ethnic minority issues and to the civil society at large. We reiterate our willingness to be a constructive dialogue partner and our long-term commitment in assisting Viet Nam in building a society based on the principles of democracy and human rights.