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Introduction

I am very glad to have this opportunity to participate in a discussion which UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) believes to be central to the future of East Timor.

NGO's and broader civil society are a fundamental building block for democracy. The relations that your organizations build with each other and with the new government are indispensable in creating a strong and sustainable democracy.

In the context of this discussion today perhaps it is also timely to remember and praise the role played by many of you and your organisations in bringing East Timor to the point where the election of a democratic government is now only a short time away. I am sure that this contribution will be long remembered.

Government – Civil Society Relations

So to the future. Firstly, in discussing relations between government and civil society, it is important that civil society acknowledge the legitimacy of democratically elected government and its role. It is equally important that this acknowledgement be publicly stated and that government fully understand that civil society does not seek to replace it nor enter into competition with it. However, within this, the role of NGO's and civil society as one of a number of "checks and balances" mechanisms is essential. All democratic systems of government build in mechanisms to ensure that no one arm of the state can operate without scrutiny or without transparency. Traditionally this has been delivered by the separation of powers between, for example, the administrative and the judicial system. Increasingly, and for good reason, civil society is now being accepted as a core part of this checks and balance system. NGO's and civil society need to be seen by government therefore as valuable development resources, not as entities to be suspicious of or as bodies which must be controlled and managed by the state.

However, in assuming this role, civil society and you as NGO's in particular, will face new challenges. Not least amongst these will be the challenge to input more substantially into the formation of public policy. This will

require the capacity to develop comprehensive policy positions and to access and influence key policy and decision makers. It will require NGO's to operate as effective interfaces between your members and government and vice versa. This will involve the development of effective communication and information systems, a challenge not to be underestimated in the context of East Timor where communication infrastructure remains under developed. However, those of us who attended the Canberra conference witnessed co-ordination and a much strengthened voice from the NGO Forum which will undoubtedly impact on subsequent decisions on the timeframe for the development of a national constitution.

Secondly, I would suggest that this issue of building effective points of contact between the broader public and government is of considerable importance. For many people in other countries participation in elections is often their only opportunity to participate in the democratic process. Experience shows that this limited participation is not always healthy. However, when you see the role of NGO's and civil society as being a core component of the operation of the democratic system you begin to understand how a situation can be created where more active involvement of citizens in democracy is possible. This active involvement, active

citizenship if you like, is crucial if democracy is to be protected and to flourish.

Let me also put two questions to you. What is the role of the NGO's in forming a bridge between the concerns and needs of local communities and national policy. How will these concerns and needs be reflected in policy design and implementation and how will NGO's make sure this happens.

Secondly, what role does the NGO sector see for itself in relation to the private sector, especially in ensuring that private sector enterprises are net contributors to the development process in East Timor.

Finally, I would also like to express my best wishes to the NGO Forum in your ongoing work. The Forum undoubtedly plays a central role in the development of East Timor. Your capacity to create a critical mass of organizations to act as a partner with government is very important. Equally, your capacity to develop unified positions on many issues will enable such a partnership to be a more productive one. In saying this I do not underestimate the ongoing challenges which any large organization like the Forum faces. However, I equally do not underestimate the energy, commitment and talent which you individually and collectively assemble to meet such a challenge.