Address by Gwang-Jo Kim,
Director of UNESCO’s Office in Bangkok

On the occasion of the opening of the
Regional Dialogue on Freedom of Information in the Mekong Countries

Hotel Pullman Bangkok King Tower, 12 October 2015

Your Excellency Mr Staffan Herrström,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you today to the launch of the Regional Dialogue on Freedom of Information in the Mekong Countries. As you may know, the first Freedom of Information law was enacted 249 years ago in Sweden and I am extremely happy to have the Ambassador of Sweden joining us today. The launch of today’s Regional Dialogue on Freedom of Information was made possible thanks to the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

Your presence here today underlines your commitment to this important right and we look forward to our continued cooperation.

My special thanks go also to our partner, the Southeast Asian Press Alliance and their members, for their valuable contribution to the project, and to all of you: civil society advocates, representatives of NGOs, experts and UNESCO colleagues, who have travelled to be with us today. Your commitment in advocating for the right to information has been a major inspiration and motivating factor for us in holding this meeting.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Freedom of Information is the right of all people to access information held by public bodies.
It reflects the fundamental principle that public bodies hold information not for themselves but as custodians of the public good. As such, this information must be accessible to all and can only be withheld if there are legitimate reasons for doing so, such as privacy and security.

Freedom of information is pertinent in several important social and economic areas, from enabling access to medical records held by public hospitals to acquiring information on public procurement modalities, or other information relating to health, safety and the environment. It determines the ability of individuals to both participate effectively in decision making that affects their lives and to scrutinise the actions of their governments. As such, freedom of information is often seen as an essential means to ensure accountability, fight against corruption and promote good governance.

The history of freedom of information can be traced back to Sweden, where it has been protected since 1766 with the adoption of the Freedom of the Press Act. But it was only after the Second World War that this right became recognized through international jurisprudence and a global movement in favour of access to public information truly emerged.

As a result of this development, legal protections of the right to access public information have improved considerably around the globe. In 1990, only 13 countries had adopted freedom of information laws. Today, 104 countries at varying levels of economic development and different political systems have freedom of information provisions.

In the Mekong region, the overarching trend observed by many studies from UNESCO, Freedom House and other NGOs paints a very contrasting picture, with unprecedented opportunities and public demands for the expression of new voices on one side, and new forms of restrictions, surveillance and controls on freedom of speech on the other.

In this context, UNESCO has a role to play so that public access to information become a reality both legally and in practice. UNESCO’s 1945
Constitution specifically calls on the organization “to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image”, making it the only United Nations agency mandated to promote freedom of expression and its corollary, freedom of information.

To this end, UNESCO has adopted several recommendations and guidelines aimed at improving public policies and strategies towards universal access to information: the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace in 2003; the Policy Guidelines for the Development and Promotion of Public Domain Information in 2004 and the Universal Declaration on Archives in 2011.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to see such a diverse group of civil society advocates, media professionals, experts and development partners. Your presence today is testimony to the common conviction we all share that access to information is crucial not only for journalists and human rights defenders but for every single citizen in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly refers to public access to information as a means to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”

This year will also see the launch of the ASEAN Economic Community. In this context, it is crucial for civil society groups to develop strong partnerships to make sure that the economic integration of the Southeast Asian nations coincides with more transparency and more open governments.

How can we move forward in promoting international, regional and national cooperation on Freedom of Information? What are some good practices in advocating for and exercising the right to public information?
These are some of the questions that will be addressed over the next three days. I would like to thank you all again for your important contributions to this discussion.

UNESCO will closely consider the outcomes of this regional dialogue in order to better understand the needs of our member states and to determine how we can best support efforts towards more inclusive societies and the Sustainable Development Goals.

I wish you all a fruitful meeting!