1st Southeast Asia
Pro Bono
Conference

Vientiane, Lao PDR

The 1st Southeast Asia Pro Bono Conference was held in Vientiane Laos on 28 and 29 September 2012 bringing together over 150 delegates from 20 countries. It was a grand celebration of the importance of pro bono legal work and the pro bono ethos.

Co-organized by Bridges Across Borders Southeast Asia Community Legal Education Initiative (BABSEA CLE), the National University of Laos Faculty of Law and Political Science (FLP) and the Lao Bar Association (LBA), this was a conference where great enthusiasm and passion was displayed about what pro bono can, and has, achieved. There was much active participation from delegates supported by law students from Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore, Vietnam, and India.

The heart of the two day conference came from the stories of lawyers undertaking pro bono work in their own countries and their successes and challenges.

For example, Mr Lewis Truong, Country Counsel for IBM in Vietnam and Ms. Erlynne Espenilla Uy, IBM Senior Attorney based in Singapore, told the conference how they had formed a partnership with Baker & McKenzie to deliver legal assistance in healthcare. They also shared their experiences working with National Economic University (Vietnam) and BABSEA CLE to develop a small business legal clinic.

Myanmar lawyers spoke about the very low awareness of law in their country and how they were trying, on their own initiative, to register a 'legal aid system' with government so they can help people in need without charge, train paralegals and provide community legal education.

A new definition of pro bono was suggested by Kong Phallack, a Cambodian lawyer, and Dean of the Pannasastra University of Cambodia Faculty of Law, who defined it as "Metta" (a Buddhist concept meaning a strong wish for the welfare and happiness of others) or hearted legal services provided by a law firm or a lawyer to the needy either free of charge, minimal charge or charge without return, the latter a reference to contingency fee work. The idea of "hearted legal services" captured the essence of pro bono for many of the delegates.

Coming from countries where the rule of law and the independence of the legal profession is not often strong, the ideology of pro bono resonated strongly with many, as a way in which law in their country can have greater meaning and effect. Pro bono was seen as a way of raising legal awareness through demonstrating that lawyers want to help their community. For example, in the Lao PDR, where lawyers often struggle financially, more than 60% of the country's lawyers are engaged in some type of pro bono activity.

The keynote address, from Ms Malathi Das, President of LawAsia, from Singapore, urged delegates to revel in the nobility of the law and to be there to provide legal help when people are in need, before this need causes further damage to society.

The Law Society of Singapore's Pro Bono Services Office (PBSO) showed what can be achieved when the legal profession really gets behind the development of a pro bono legal culture. "The Incredible Lawyer" initiative, aimed at building the pro bono culture across the profession, and "Project Schools", aimed at the education of students about how the law affects everyone, were highlights of the conference.

In the sessions discussing clinical legal education, there was an overwhelming consensus that this should be a mainstream part of the law curriculum. It was put strongly by a panel of four speakers from Singapore, Thailand, Australia and Cambodia that this 'experiential learning' must focus on ethical practice, community service and the role of pro bono in the legal profession in order to effectively inculcate the pro bono ethos in students.

The conference ended with an official handover to the 2013 host, the University of Economics and Law in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, who will host the 2nd Southeast Asia Pro Bono Conference. in September/October 2013.

For further details, please contact:
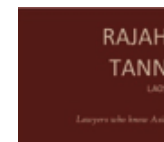**probono@babseacle.org**

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