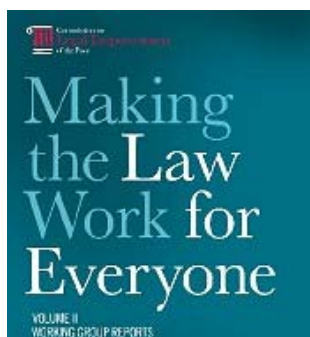


UN Commission Seeks Legal Access for Poor in Southeast Asia

By Chad Bouchard
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A U.N. commission is urging the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to adopt rules that help poor people get access to the legal system. Chad Bouchard reports from Jakarta.

U.N. officials say key legal reforms could help people lift themselves out of poverty.



A new report by the U.N. Development Program says four billion people around the world are excluded from the rule of law.

The report says people living in the so-called informal sector have no means to protect their business, property, or labor rights. They often have no legal proof of birth, citizenship, immigration status or employment. Many also avoid paying taxes.

Naresh Singh heads the UNDP Commission on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor. Thursday in Jakarta he said people working outside the legal system are often reluctant to use the law to protect themselves, because they are afraid they will have to pay taxes and will have nothing to gain.

He says governments must create a demand for law among poor people by educating them about the benefits.

"Governments will have to be prepared to show that if you pay taxes, the services will improve as well. And then I believe people will want to work within the rule of law. That is what we call a culture of the rule of law. Governments are benefiting, people are benefiting, and the society grows within the culture of the rule of law, just like the developed world," said Singh.

The commission says, for instance, the legal system can help the poor by providing property titles. The report says doing that increased land value in some areas of the Philippines by more than 50 percent.

Commission member Erna Witoelar says the Association of Southeast Asian Nations needs to adopt a policy on legal access for the poor, and pressure members to implement reforms.

"Even governments needs to be empowered, yeah? People working on these issues can sometimes lose for (to) larger interests, economic interests, personal interests. And so, having a regional compact would strengthen then also the national compact, who (which) then in turn would strengthen the local," said Witoelar.

Members of the commission hope ASEAN members will adopt guidelines on legal access during their annual summit in December.