

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Report on

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES' RESPONSIVENESS TO THE PUBLIC'S COMPLAINTS AND OPINIONS THROUGH THE PRESS

As stipulated in the Press Law 1989 and Decree 51/2002 instructing the implementation of the Press Law, the press have a responsibility to receive complaints and opinions from the public, then either report them on their publications or transfer them in written form to the relevant government agencies. The responsible officials of these Party and government agencies must respond to the press within 30 days about the solution to the problem or the actions that have been taken.

In other decisions issued by the Prime Minister (including Decision 77/2007, Decision 1390/2008, Decision 25/2013) and following a trend of promoting accountability (regulated in the Anti-Corruption Law and Decree 90/2013), the responsibility of the heads of government agencies to be accountable to the public has been clarified, become more specific and closer to international practice.

To find out more about the implementation of the above-mentioned regulations and to come up with effective recommendations, between August to November 2013, the research team did a survey of 279 journalists, who are in charge of handling complaints, investigations and economic news in 19 provinces and cities nationwide. We also interviewed leaders of media organisations and representatives of government agencies in “hot” areas. The initial findings of the research were introduced at three roundtable discussions in the North, Centre and South of Vietnam, in which we sought comments on the report from leaders of media organisations, representatives of relevant government agencies and independent experts. The final report and its recommendations were sent to competent government agencies and officials and all those who work within the Press Law’s frame. The report’s key findings include:

- There are a lot of contradictions in the legal system which limit the level and quality of government’s reponse to the media such as the lack or removal of sanctions againgt the late response from government agencies while the trend to control press activities is on the rise.
- The level of government agencies’ responsiveness to the public’s complaints reported by the press is rather low: Timely replies account for only 25% and 75% of these replies only consists of generic information.
- The reasons for this low level of responsiveness come from both the press and government agencies, ranging from their awareness [of media laws and their related rights and responsibiliy], institutional set up to ensure effective

government response to the media to the lack of knowledge and specific skills by journalists and government officials.

- Other factors that have impacts (either positive or negative) on the level of government responsiveness to the media include the intervention of media management agencies, journalism ethics in handling public complaints, and the competition of or interaction with social networks and personal blogs.

Based on the findings, the research team comes up with recommendations targeting different audiences, including:

- **The legal system** must ensure equal treatment and consistency. In the short term, the sanctions against government agencies' late response to the media should be added to media laws. On that basis, a decree on protection of journalists' rights should be developed in order to provide guidance on the implementation of Article 2 of the Press Law. In the long term, the Press Law should go through a comprehensive revision in line with international best practices.
- **Journalists and media organisations** should strengthen their professional skills and ethical standards so as to make better use of information sources from the public and pay due attention to the role of social networks and non-traditional information channels.
- **Leaders of government agencies** should change their mind set: they should see the response to the public's complaints through the press as an 'opportunity' [to show their commitment to transparency] rather than an 'obligation'. As such they will be more willing and proactive to do so and will take initiatives to quickly fill the gaps in the procedures and skills to handle better the public's complaints reported by the press.
- **Media management agencies** should increase the autonomy and sense of responsibility of both the media and government agencies, serve as a bridge between the two to proactively promote accountability, and watch out for any interference of individuals or "interests groups" so that all social conflicts can be spotted early and solved effectively in accordance with the laws.