**Ms Ritsu Naken’s opening remarks**

**QIII Provincial HPG, Yen Bai, Tuesday 3 November 2015**

Vice-Minister Le Quang Cuong,

Dr Tran Thi Giang Huong, Director-General ICD,

Colleagues, distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning to you all.

It is my honour to co-Chair this HPG Meeting alongside Vice-Minister Cuong. On behalf of development partners, I would like to thank Ministry of Health and Yen Bai Provincial People’s Committee and Department of Health for organizing this important meeting. This is the second Health Partnership Group meeting to be hosted by a province and it is a great privilege to be here in Yen Bai. The HPG receives wide recognition in Viet Nam as a model for development partner coordination and policy dialogue. It is important to have this forum outside of Hanoi as the implementation of policies and actual delivery of services take place in the field. I look forward to hearing particularly from colleagues who are based in northern provinces during the meeting today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

From a global perspective, we are at a significant moment - The year 2015, which is the deadline for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, is nearing its end, and we’re looking at the new Sustainable Development Goals ahead of us. At the same time, Viet Nam is also transitioning from the current SEDP cycle to the new one, starting from 2016.

Over the past 15 years, Viet Nam has achieved substantial success in reducing poverty and raising living standards, and it is well recognized that the country made particularly impressive progress in improving the health of its population.

For example, the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) was halved between 1990 and 2005 and the infant mortality rate (IMR) fell by 2.5 times over this same period, which means the IMR target has now been achieved. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) has also declined and Viet Nam is on track to reach its target by the end of 2015.

However, we are still facing ‘unfinished business’ in order to fully achieve the MDGs. In particular, there are significant disparities across geographical regions between the Kinh and ethnic minority populations.

Maternal mortality rates are twice as high in rural areas, and three times higher among ethnic minority groups than among the Kinh. The trend is similar for U5MR with high rates among ethnic minorities (30% vs 12% among the Kinh) and in rural mountainous and disadvantaged areas (27% vs 13%). The adolescent birth rate remains significantly higher in regions where ethnic minority groups reside and socio-economic conditions are less developed. Ethnic minority youth still often face barriers to access reproductive health services and information.

Viet Nam also remains one of the 22 countries in the world with the highest burden of TB cases, and we know that this is a disease that disproportionately affects those who are socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable to shocks.

In addition, achievements in improving water and sanitation have been unequally shared. Malnutrition and stunting therefore persist, especially in the hard-to-reach areas of the northern midland and mountainous provinces – provinces that many of you here today, represent.

Distinguished Guests and Colleagues,

The country now needs to tackle the unfinished MDG agenda and ensure that the health of Viet Nam’s entire population remains at the core of its post-2015 development agenda. This will require great efforts not only at the national level but also at the local level.

The need for coherence of policies between the national and local levels, and the strengthening of the local health systems are all the more important as we address these remaining challenges and shift our gears towards the Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs.

In fact, we should all recognize that the unfinished MDGs directly link to the SDGs. SDGs’ focus for health sector is Universal Health Coverage, which means every one must be able to enjoy right to health. It is about “leaving no one behind”. SDGs also emphasize the importance of partnership because strong partnerships among diverse stakeholders, including private sector and Civil Society Organizations, are crucial to address complex and ambitious development goals. Therefore, we need to work together even more closely to ensure everyone in Viet Nam, including ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups, can have equal access to quality health care.

Today’s meeting offers the opportunity to hear from the provinces where the least progress towards attainment of the health related MDGs had been made. We are eager to hear the challenges you have faced and continue to face, and to learn about some of the innovative solutions you have applied. These lessons will then be reflected at the national level as the government is now developing key plans for the next five years, such as the SEDP and the national health sector plan.

Once again, on behalf of development partners, I would like to thank the Ministry of Health, the Provincial People’s Committee and Department of Health of Yen Bai for their kind hospitality. I look forward to a productive and enlightening discussion this morning.