

## REMARKS BY USAID MISSION DIRECTOR, ERIN SOTO, NATIONAL YOUTH NETWORK CONFERENCE “Youth and Community Services”

Sihanouk Ville, Cambodia  
September 22, 2007



*Erin Soto, USAID Mission Director participates during a National Youth Conference entitled “Youth and Community Services”, Sihanouk Ville.*

Good Morning! On behalf of USAID, I am honored to be here this morning to help launch the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC) National Conference.

Last month I had a chance to visit the Youth Festival in Svay Rieng province implemented by YCC. It was an outstanding event that left me reassured about the future of Cambodia, for so many of you actively and enthusiastically played a constructive role in motivating youth to engage in the future development of your country.

I am delighted to talk with all of you for you are the “leaders” not only of YCC network but, more importantly, the future leaders of Cambodia. Leaders come in all shapes and sizes. Some are tall, some are short; some are men, some are women; some stand up and give speeches while others work behind the scenes for change. But good leaders have some characteristics in common – they set a good example by their behavior; they put others before themselves; they know right from wrong and have the courage to stand for what is right regardless of the risk; they are responsible citizens – they know and exercise their rights—and responsibilities; they believe in themselves; they don’t let the word “no” or anyone stop them from achieving their dreams. Each of you is a leader and by demonstrating your leadership in big and small ways, together you can make a difference. You are the hope and inspiration for the future of Cambodia!

I appreciate the opportunity to share a few thoughts at the opening of today’s Conference. I will focus my comments on two important issues where your leadership is needed to make a difference in not only your lives, but the lives of your families and your communities. Your country needs your leadership in the fight against corruption and in the election process.

I would like to start by commending your hard-work, dedication and commitment in positively contributing to the betterment of the Cambodian society through your volunteerism promoting democracy and civic activism.

Currently, youth accounts for at least 67% of total population, undoubtedly representing a potential massive influence on the nation. Your participation is crucial to promoting the development of democratic institutions, more responsive and accountable elected and non-elected government officials. Good governance is a fundamental democratic principle and essential for building the prosperity, stability and social justice within a country. While Cambodia has made significant progress in the last decade, further progress is needed. Corruption stifles and undermines the foundation of democratic institutions, which in turn jeopardize the prospects of building a just and prosperous society. Your Prime Minister HE Samdech Hun sen recognized this when he made good governance and combating corruption as the core of the strategy for developing Cambodia.

According to various studies, corruption costs Cambodia up to \$500 million per year in terms of forgone state revenue; revenue that could otherwise be spent on public services in education and health care and jobs for Cambodian youth. Let me repeat, \$500 million per year is lost! \$500 million is equivalent to the cost to construct 20,000 six room school buildings, or the ability to pay every civil servant in Cambodia an additional \$260/month in wages. Think about how many jobs constructing and staffing 20,000 schools would create. Think about how this corruption affects not only you and your family but your democracy. You, both individually and collectively, represent a powerful force that could potentially play a vital role for a greater transparency and accountability in the government. In addition to what you have done in promoting democracy and youth activism, you could begin by:

- (1) refusing to pay bribes – bribing takes two people; it doesn't happen if one person refuse... that includes no payments for special treatment in exams;
- (2) reporting demands for bribes to proper authorities;
- (3) reporting specific cases of corruption to journalists so they can make it known to the public;
- (4) insisting that the organizations in which you work also operate in a clean and transparent manner, especially with regard to finances; and
- (5) incorporating corruption issues in your Advance Democracy Seminar (ADS). You together can make a difference in rolling back corruption that deprives you of your future and dreams.

Another major pillar for democracy and good governance is a free and fair election, without which elected government would often not be as accountable to you and responsive to the needs of the people. I understand that the youth network has participated in the past elections process including the 2007 communal election. Your contribution to make Cambodian elections freer and fairer is commendable, illustrating your desire to build a more prosperous and democratic Cambodia.

As the general elections are fast approaching, your continued contribution and participation in the electoral process is vital for your future. The election process including cleaning-up of the voters' list and updating voter registration is now under way. This offers you the opportunity to be involved in ensuring each eligible citizen is properly registered to vote. The voter registration process is as critical as Election Day participation and monitoring.

Your continued contribution and participation are of even greater importance for the upcoming elections. According to the recently-conducted Voters Registration Audit (VRA), some 24 percent of eligible voters under the age of 19 remain unregistered. Your effort to help encourage the unregistered youth to have their names registered will help to positively contribute to the elections process.

Realizing the importance of youth in Cambodia's development, USAID is pleased and proud to provide support for YCC's youth festivals, Living Democracy and Advanced Democracy Seminars, and development of the Youth Leadership Challenge TV program. I encourage the Cambodian youth to get involved in the development process of the country. Simple actions such as your attendance at Commune Council meetings to ensure accountability and transparency, or your private discussions with friends and family about your new expectations for the future can have a tangible and important impact on the nation's future.

Again, I applaud and commend the hard-work, dedication and courage each and every one of you have shown to enhance good governance in Cambodia. You will have opportunities every day to exercise your rights and responsibilities, to set the example for your family and friends, and to create the government that works for you. It is up to you to make the right decision and lead the way for others to follow. It won't always be easy but I believe in you. I am confident and optimistic that with your leadership, not only will your future be bright but your collective actions will result in a brighter future for your family and friends and you will help build an accountable, just and prosperous Cambodia.

I would like to thank YCC, Forum Syd, co-share, and IRI for all the work they have done in providing you the tools and necessary resources for you to work for a better future. On behalf of the American people, I would like to extend to all of you my heartfelt wishes for a stimulating and enriching conference.

Thank you!