

Remarks by USAID's Acting Mission Director, Scot Covert ESCUP Lessons Learned Seminar

Sunway Hotel, June 17, 2008

Excellency Im Sethy, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
Representatives from the Ministry of Education
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this Lessons Learned Seminar, where we will discuss three and a half productive years of the Educational Support to Children in Underserved Populations (ESCUP) project. The U.S. Agency for International Development is committed to helping the Royal Government of Cambodia increase the relevance, access and quality of basic education for all Cambodian children, especially those living on the fringes of society, and ESCUP has helped us make great progress in realizing this goal. Through ESCUP, USAID has provided direct assistance to approximately 60,000 children in remote areas of Mondulkiri, Kratie, and Kampong Cham provinces. Many of these children are from minority groups like the Cham community, hill tribes in the mountainous areas of the northeast, or fishing communities living in near-isolation on islands in the Mekong River. USAID has been working with ESCUP to provide these children with scholarships, bilingual classroom assistants and other specialized support.

We're pleased to report that the program has been a success. In ESCUP-targeted schools, we've seen increases in enrollment and attendance. Fewer students are repeating grades, and the skills they learn at school – how to grow crops, how to start a small business or how to use a computer – will serve them well as they enter the work force and prepare for lives in the rapidly changing global economy.

But engaging young people from all walks of life in the education system has benefits beyond prosperity or economic growth, and I'd like to take a moment talk about some of these. USAID believes that reaching all citizens through the education system is essential to ensuring a stable, functioning democracy. Because of the growing geographic reach of Cambodia's education system – thanks to the efforts of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport – the country's schools are one of the best ways to reach out to marginalized members of society. USAID is finding that schools can do much more than just teach students the basics of reading, science or math. They are a forum for nurturing the critical-thinking skills that are essential to a healthy civil society and an engaged electorate. We've also found that schools are an ideal channel for development assistance.

Let me give you just one example. Through ESCUP-targeted schools, USAID has reached over 1,000 children with disabilities or life-threatening ailments who, if they had not attended school, might have slipped through the cracks and not received the

medical attention they desperately needed. Faculty members at ESCUP-targeted schools identified these children in their classrooms and, with support from the project, helped them find their way to hospitals and clinics. By supporting this kind of advocacy in schools, USAID has been able to demonstrate that the Cambodian and U.S. governments, along with other donors and NGOs, care about them and are looking for ways to help them – and that we want them engaged in society. This is a powerful statement to make to those accustomed to living on society's margins. Similarly, USAID has been thinking about ways to use schools as a means of promoting other development goals, such as environmental conservation.

As you are all no doubt aware, the ESCUP Program is due to end in September. This is a great opportunity for those who have worked closely with the project to share publicly the challenges they faced and the lessons they learned. We need to know what kinds of strategies and approaches worked, and where the remaining challenges lie. This workshop, therefore, is of great importance to USAID as we ponder additional ways of assisting the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport in improving the country's education system. USAID believes basic education is essential for Cambodia's continued development.

I would like to thank the Ministry once again for its valuable cooperation with USAID-supported projects such as ESCUP. You have been instrumental in the program's success, and we look forward to working with you on similar projects in the future. Thanks also to the participants in today's event, who have a lot of insight and knowledge to offer. Finally, I'd like to wish everyone a productive, engaging discussion today.

Thank you.