



## FIRST PERSON

# Protecting Vulnerable Children

### DEPDC offers at-risk children support and protection



Photo: USAID/Suzanne Ross

***“Without DEPDC children would be fending for themselves during the day, leaving them at risk from being lured, coerced or forced into an exploitive sex labor situation,” said Sompop.***

Many girls living in Chiang Mai or along Thailand’s border with Burma are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and HIV/AIDS. But Sompop Jantraka, director of the USAID-supported Development Education Program for Daughters and Communities (DEPDC), believes that if girls are able to attend school or live in a supportive home environment, they can avoid these hazards. With help from teachers, village leaders, community members, monks, police, medical personnel and border authorities, Sompop offers protection and support to the children who are most at risk. Through its emergency shelters and permanent homes, DEPDC provides children with the opportunity to attend school, participate in vocational training, develop life skills and find employment once they graduate. Over the last 15 years, the USAID-supported outreach has helped more than 1,000 children.

Of these, 30 beneficiaries — representing ethnic minorities from Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and China — expressed their desire to give back to society what they learned from DEPDC, but they didn’t know how. USAID helped form the Mekong Youth Net, which trained them to be peer counselors through lessons on trafficking, human rights, program management, project development, monitoring, funding and public relations enabling them to manage satellite efforts in their home countries. Today, DEPDC beneficiaries work through the Mekong Youth Net to implement projects and support at-risk youth.