

**REGIONAL EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON
DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**
Bangkok, 28-30 March 2006

WELCOMING REMARKS

by

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Ms. Thelma Kay, Director, Emerging Social Issues Division, UNESCAP,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me, at the outset, to extend a very warm welcome to you all to the Regional Expert Group Meeting on Development Challenges for Young People, being organized by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (UN DESA) and hosted by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, popularly known as UNESCAP. On behalf of the government of Thailand, may I extend a special warm welcome to those of you who have traveled from overseas and for whom this is the first visit to Thailand. I wish to express our appreciation to the organizers for kindly giving me the honour of addressing you at this opening ceremony.

I believe we are here today because we all recognize the role of young people in society and in national development processes as well as challenges to their development. Young people are agents of change - politically, economically and socially. Their contribution to society is often underestimated while too often, the negative aspects of youth development serve as policy premises, as pointed out by the World Youth Report 2005. This needs to be changed.

I am very pleased to learn that the 2007 World Youth Report will take on a regional approach focusing on four thematic areas of globalization, urbanization, education and ICT, and that the regional meeting on developmental challenges for

young people in Asia is being held in Thailand. This approach will help raise the profile of issues that are specific to and unique of each region and better understand them while bringing out the common features and challenges faced by young people across the various regions of the world.

Thailand has witnessed strong economic growth over the past decades, which has contributed to improving the quality of life of the Thai people, including youth, through the provision of new opportunities and better means for making use of those opportunities. However, progress achieved has been uneven with increasing gaps between different groups in the population, all of which have had an impact on youth development.

In 2005, young people aged between 15 and 24 years of age in Thailand made up 17 per cent of the population of over 64 million people and the youth percentage is expected to decline to 14 per cent in 2020. Recent studies of the situation of youth in Thailand revealed that among the forces wielding influence on young people are the peer networks, families and images of modernity conveyed through the media and the market. While families continue to play a key role in influencing young people's lives, local community organizations, while important, do not yet serve as vital institutions for youth and often are not linked to youth through their own networks. HIV/AIDS infection rates among youth remain high, while improvement remains relatively limited vis-à-vis secondary school enrollment and completion rates among Thai youth. Evidence also suggests that youth in Thailand are very mobile, migrating to both rural and urban destinations for work and school reasons.

In 2002, the Government of Thailand established the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to devote more attention to the promotion of social progress. Special attention has been paid by the Government to improving the access by Thai youth to opportunities in education, employment and health services. The experience of our country shows that there is a need for coherent and focused policies aimed at making use of the potentials of youth and impacting the social forces wielding influence on youth, through education, employment, social networks, the family, communities and the media. The Government has made efforts to expand educational

options for and access to secondary and tertiary schooling, including the expansion of non-formal education opportunities for youth aged 18 to 24 years old and the expansion of scholarship opportunities tertiary schooling for younger Thai youth. The Government has emphasized the need to rebuild family ties between parents and children to foster communication and respect via community-based social and economic interventions and other programmes geared towards youth. It has been recommended that education, social capital and family support system all work together to insulate youth from risky situations and create opportunities for social and economic mobility. ICT has been incorporated into education and social activities targeting young people.

On Thursday, 30 March 2006, you will have the chance to join a field visit to a new Thai Knowledge Park which includes an ICT centre and an e-library for youth. The Knowledge Park originated from the desire to create a lively center which embraces change and a library that will never die. The center provides alternative learning opportunities for young people using modern information and communication technology in keeping with the needs of the youth of today.

Distinguished participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many of the challenges faced by the countries in the region are similar yet distinctive. It is important for us to learn from each other's experiences. I am very happy to see today many experts from around the region to review the situation along the four thematic areas. I am sure that the outcome of the meeting will provide valuable inputs into the 2007 World Youth Report. May I wish you every success in your deliberations.

To those who come from overseas, I wish you a pleasant stay in Thailand.

Thank you for your kind attention.