

Welcoming Speech

ARNEC

Sheldon Shaeffer, Chair, Board of Directors

Your Excellency, Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia, Ms. Karin Hulshof, Regional Director of UNICEF's East Asia and Pacific Office, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood -- ARNEC -- I welcome you all to its 8th regional conference. I wish to offer my gratitude and special thanks to the Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo HUN SEN, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Your time and presence in this opening ceremony is truly appreciated. With your robust support, the on-going efforts of the transformative power of ECD and holistic interventions will be positively enhanced.

We are here, in part, to celebrate -- to celebrate the fact that the world, in its framework for sustainable development from now until 2030, has recognised the critical importance of early childhood development. This is reflected first in its Goal 4.2 -- ensuring by 2030 that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. And it

is also reflected in the wide range of other Sustainable Development Goals which promote many additional aspects of integrated, holistic child development – child and maternal mortality, adequate nutrition for mothers and children, a sustainable environment, and many more. Thus, beyond Target 4.2, the well-being of young children is seen in the new global framework as a basic foundation for sustainable development.

We are also here to share and learn – first from the strong commitment of the Government of the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia to early childhood development and from the good practices of its public and civil society institutions in implementing early childhood development programmes – but also from the 531 participants at this conference. These are government officials (including 12 Ministers and Deputy Ministers), programme planners, practitioners, academics, and development agency staff from 36 countries throughout the region and beyond.

The theme of this conference is an important one and builds on related themes in earlier ARNEC conferences -- The transformative power of Early Childhood Development: The importance of holistic interventions. Its three sub-themes cover (1) policies and programmes which address

the holistic nature of early childhood development, (2) approaches which focus on equitable access and participation, and (3) the quality monitoring of outcomes.

These themes link closely to the Sustainable Development Goal I mentioned above. The goal has two indicators, different in kind and in the degree to which their progress can be assessed, but both of equal importance. The one most likely to become the focus of government efforts, due to its relatively simple measure of progress, is linked to the target of achieving universal participation in organized learning one year before the official primary school entry age – that is, one year of compulsory, but also high quality, pre-school experience for all children.

As the ARNEC Vision 2020 states, “One of the key region-specific challenges is improving equitable access to early childhood development. There is inadequate attention to equity, particularly access for young children from disadvantaged groups on account of location, language/ethnicity, gender, disability, income and/or economic status.”

More complex but in some ways even more important in the context of holistic, integrated, and inclusive early childhood development is the second indicator for progress towards SDG 4.2 -- the proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being. This indicator links directly into the conference's third sub-theme on the monitoring of outcomes, a very challenging but essential task.

We, as champions of early childhood development, can be helped to convince others of the importance of this field if there is evidence that good quality early childhood development programmes actually work and achieve the outcomes they are meant to achieve – especially for the most excluded groups of the population which benefit most from these programmes and yet participate in them the least.

ARNEC has tried to put into practice its commitment to holistic, integrated, and inclusive early childhood development by seeking participation in its annual conferences from the wide range of stakeholders who share this commitment – stakeholders not only from education but also from health, nutrition, and child protection. It has also striven to ensure attention to the globally accepted definition of the age range covered by early childhood – namely, from conception to

the age of eight - a definition that Cambodia, among many other countries in this region, now accepts.

It is only by having the holistic and integrated nature of early childhood development reflected in a conference such as this, through participation from a wide range of sectors concerned with the wellbeing of children, that the full benefits of good quality early childhood development programmes – early brain development and later learning, improved health and nutritional outcomes, individual and social economic development, and cultural revitalisation – can be analysed and understood and ultimately become essential to future government planning and budgeting.

With gratitude to the hard work of the ARNEC Secretariat and to the support and commitment of its counterparts in the Government of Cambodia, beginning from the Minister of Education, Youth, and Sports, I am most pleased to welcome you to this conference. I am especially pleased to welcome you to Siem Reap. I first came here in 1969, some 48 years ago, when I rented a bicycle for several days and enjoyed the wonders of Angkor Wat virtually alone – an experience impossible to have today. I learned then to admire Cambodia's people and culture – an admiration that has grown through many visits since

then – and I therefore look forwards to ensuring that this conference has positive results not only for the work of each individual participant and for the field of early childhood development as a whole but also for the young children of Cambodia.