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TechCon 2013: USAID's Higher Education Solutions Network Showcases University-Based Innovations for Global Development

December 3, 2013 – Through the Higher Education Solutions Network (HESN), Universities and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are revolutionizing the way they work together to find, develop, and apply new science and tech-based solutions to the world's most challenging development problems, from poverty and conflict to food security and climate change. To celebrate the one year anniversary of this innovative and collaborative approach, the seven leading universities that USAID called on to act as living "Development Labs" met at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia in late November to showcase their achievements at their first annual meeting, "TechCon 2013."

In conference presentations and exhibitions, the USAID-funded Development Labs showed the progress they have made over the past year to discover and foster innovative solutions to global challenges

- **The College of William & Mary** showed how its AidData Center for Development Policy is building an online database at www.AidData.org that comprehensively maps the locations of foreign aid projects, allowing sophisticated analysis of their impact.
- **University of California, Berkeley**'s Development Impact Lab described how their "development engineering" approach to designing innovations is helping to ensure they are grounded in economic and social realities and thus more likely to succeed.
- **Duke University** explained how the Social Entrepreneurship Accelerator at Duke is providing mentoring and networking support to promising innovators in the field of health to help them expand to a larger scale.
- **Makerere University** in Uganda has launched regional Resilience Innovation Labs at four African universities in to incubate local innovations that will help mitigate the shocks and stresses of poverty, conflict, displacement, disease, and drought.
- **Massachusetts Institute of Technology** hosts two Development Labs (http://d-lab.mit.edu): the Comprehensive Initiative on Technology Evaluation, which is improving the evaluation of technological solutions to development challenges; and the International Development Innovation Network, which is using technology to link local innovators around the world who are addressing issues related to poverty.
- **Michigan State University**'s Global Center for Food Systems Innovation (www.gcfsi.isp.msu.edu) is addressing critical pressures on the world's food supply by creating, testing, and enabling the adoption of innovative solutions.
- **Texas A&M University**'s ConDev (http://condevcenter.org) is helping practitioners design development programs that will have a better chance of building peace in conflict-prone countries.

USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah, who joined the conference by video link, spoke about the high hopes USAID has for these partnership. "We're not just trying to create grant relations with each of you. We are really hoping that you will be the extramural R&D hub for the agency that has significant global capabilities." Alex Dehgan, Dr. Shah's Science and Technology Adviser, underscored this theme in his remarks to the conference, saying, "We're not looking for business

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as usual. We're asking 'are the things that you are working on going to result in innovations that are truly disruptive?'"

The three-day conference gathered 260 experts and students from diverse specialties in development assistance. IBM and Esri provided $6,500 in funding for student innovators who competed in a contest where they presented projects in areas such as women's health, water quality, and the link between disasters and violence. Brian Gitta, a sophomore at Makerere University, was voted the top innovator by conference attendees for the device he invented with his classmates to diagnose malaria through the skin using light and a smart phone. The students developed the prototype with training and workspace provided through Makerere's USAID-funded Development Lab. Finalists included a team from William & Mary that used investigative techniques to reveal patterns of undisclosed foreign-aid spending; a Duke University senior who developed a profit-generating latrine in Togo; and a scientist at University of California-Berkeley seeking to expand the CellScope device that turns a mobile phone into a remote microscope.

During the first year, the HESN Development Labs have engaged more than 160 students in research, design, and internship opportunities across 10 countries. The labs are working with 44 partner institutions in the U.S. and 31 institutions abroad with the involvement of several USAID field offices. For more information, visit www.usaid.gov/hesn or contact HESN at hesnengagement@gmail.com.