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SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Cambodian Network Gives Voice to HIV-Positive

IN CAMBODIA, PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS face the double burden of physical affliction and a troubling lack of human rights protection, an outgrowth of their country's checkered political history. Until recently, stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS were strong enough to prevent HIV-positive Cambodians from participating in public life. But the nation's first national network of organizations supporting people living with HIV/AIDS is changing that.

Since its inception in mid-2001, the Cambodian Positive Network (CPN+) has emerged as a strong, united voice for its 25 support groups and more than 4,000 HIV-positive individuals. Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and managed by The Futures Group International/POLICY Project and local nongovernmental organizations, the network seeks to empower those with HIV/AIDS to participate in policy decisions and advocate for themselves.

CPN+ activities focus on promoting greater access to treatment for HIV/AIDS, eliminating stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS, more participation in formal decision-making processes, and legislative reform. USAID-funded workshops, together with a small grants program and English language training, are enabling local associations of persons living with HIV/AIDS to take their case to national legislators and international donors.

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The group's grassroots mobilization efforts paid off in October 2002 when CPN+ members gathered in Phnom Penh to press for better access to antiretroviral drug treatment. A months-long advocacy campaign that began with a series of stakeholder meetings culminated in a march on Cambodia's Second National HIV/AIDS Conference. The CPN+ Strategic Alliance on Treatment Access, composed of nearly 2,800 persons living with HIV/AIDS, presented a statement to the Minister of Health outlining a plan for expanded access to antiretroviral drugs.

In response, Prime Minister Hun Sen directed the Cambodian Ministry of Health to increase treatment funding, and the number of Cambodians with access to antiretroviral drugs jumped from 250 to nearly 1,000 within nine months.

CPN+ is now widely known and recognized by the Cambodian public, other nongovernmental organizations, the media, and government institutions. Network members regularly participate in Cambodian National AIDS Authority and Ministry of Health committee meetings and are key players in mapping out HIV/AIDS global fundraising strategies and priorities for money disbursement.

The group has also advised the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology, and Sexually Transmitted Infections on developing guidelines for antiretroviral treatment, on treatment for opportunistic infections related to HIV/AIDS, and on a new HIV/AIDS counseling curriculum.

Felicity Young, Director for HIV/AIDS Advocacy for the POLICY Project, says CPN+ and similar organizations in the developing world have had significant influence on how HIV/AIDS policy is made.

"For too long, people living with HIV/AIDS have primarily been seen as passive recipients of services and not as equal players—particularly in the policy-making arena," she says. "Organizations driven and controlled by people living with HIV/AIDS are critical because they can challenge the status quo and hold the other stakeholders to account."

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