



U.S. Agency for
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Development

Bureau for
Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Monks as Change Agents for HIV/AIDS Care and Support

LIFE IS NOT EASY for 13-year-old Keng Lina, her mother, and four siblings. Her father was dying from AIDS and her oldest sister had to drop out of school to care for him. When customers stopped buying the cakes Keng Lina's family sold for a living and neighbors stopped speaking to the family, Keng's distraught mother further isolated her children by telling the younger ones to stay at home. That was difficult for Keng's friendly, outgoing younger sister. One day, she ventured out but returned home crying. A neighbor, who saw the young girl playing with his children, grabbed her favorite toy and threw it away. "Don't play with or touch anything from that family or you will get AIDS," he warned.

Keng heard people say her father was a "bad man" who got AIDS because he went outside his home for sex, and she saw her family sink further into poverty because they were unable to earn money. Her mother sold the family's motorbike to buy medicine and food.

Her older sister cooked and did the housework, but she also tried to sell some of the vegetables she found in the forest and rice fields. It was not unusual for Keng Lina and her siblings to go to bed hungry.

Their wall of isolation began to crumble when a team of monks and volunteers from the nearby Wat Kien Kes Temple set out to assess the needs and problems of orphans and other children affected by chronic illnesses, especially AIDS. Once Keng Lina courageously told the monks of her family's plight, their lives began to change.

With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development, partners like Family Health International have provided technical support to the monks of Kien Kes Temple to run activities in a target area. People living with HIV/AIDS, orphans, and vulnerable children receive vocational training and small income-generation funds to improve their standard of living. Kien Kes Temple

also receives technical support to strengthen program management and community mobilization, to reduce discrimination and increase compassion, and to strengthen networks serving people living with HIV/AIDS, orphans, and vulnerable children. Kien Kes volunteers work without a salary; modest financial support is provided to implement activities at village level.

The POLICY Project and a local nongovernmental organization called the Khmer HIV/AIDS NGO Alliance (KHANA) have also been working with religious communities of monks. Monks are revered in Cambodia, and with their new training they are leading the communities in which they serve by showing compassion and respect for those infected and affected by AIDS.

Keng Lina and all her siblings are now enrolled in school. They receive clothes and school supplies from the Wat Kien Kes Education Network. The Kien Kes

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Photo courtesy of Family Health International



Monks attend the funeral of a community resident who died from AIDS-related complications. Before the procession began, one Monk called out to the community in a loud voice, "Come and join us. Come with us ... we are burying one of our own." Many community members put aside their disdain to attend the funeral.

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volunteers also arranged for a landowner to lease land to the family, and to forego payment until Keng Lina's family had sold the vegetables they produced.

The monks mobilize the community to donate food and provide other support, such as clothes, land to plant vegetables or build a shelter, and child-care services for affected families. Other supplies provided are fertilizer and ducks, chickens, and pigs.

In return, Keng Lina's older sister, Keng Savy, works with the monks to provide food to other members of the community, along with lessons on HIV/AIDS and hygiene. She even helps bathe and wash clothes for others who have been stricken with AIDS.

Today, Keng Lina and her family have hope. Their lives have changed for the better.

Cambodia, October 2003