



SUCCESS STORY

Monks as “CHANGE AGENTS” For HIV/AIDS Care and Support

USAID/Cambodia and its partners in development, Family Health International, local non-government organization KHANA, and POLICY Project all have care and support activities designed to sensitize communities on issues such as HIV/AIDS, orphans and other vulnerable children, and providing care and social support to the sick. One approach has been to work within the religious community of monks by providing them with life skills training that includes topics such as HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, among others. This approach is working, and has had a positive impact on the communities in which these trained monks serve.



Life was 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 neighbours stopped speaking, 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 her playing with his children, grabbed her favorite toy and threw it away. "Don't play or touch anything from that family or you will get AIDS," he warned.

Keng not only heard people say her father was a "bad man" who got AIDS because he went outside his home for sex, she saw her family, which was unable to earn money, sink further into poverty. Her mother sold the family's motorbike to buy medicine and food. Her older sister not only cooked and did the housework, she 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 did not begin to crumble until 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 Ling courageously told them of her family's plight, their lives began to change.

Now Keng Lina and all her siblings are enrolled in school. They receive clothes and school supplies from Wat Kien Kes' Education Network. The volunteers also arranged for a land owner to lease land to the family and forego payment until they sold their vegetables.

The WAT Kien Kes monks supplied them with fertilizer and helped the family buy ducks, chickens and a pig. In return, Keng Lina's older sister, Keng Savy, works with the monks to provide food, HIV/AIDS and hygiene education to other members of the community. She even helps bathe and wash clothes for others stricken with AIDS. Today, Keng Lina and her family have hope. Their lives have changed for the better.

Monks attending 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*”. Stigma and discrimination aside, many community members responded by attending the funeral.