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Key to a better future



All of these children have a disability yet not one of them is allowed to become a teacher in Cambodia!

## Human Stories

### Living stories, realizing hopes and dreams

Here we tell about some of our members. They all have various roles as beneficiaries, advocates, community activists, organisers, peer-to-peer educators, etc. Each has given permission to feature. These are summaries - we are happy to give you full PDF versions.

**Rouern Heng.** We are pleased to report on the following human story. Although most credit must go to Heng for her success, NHS was asked to assist in the self-help group formation process from which she emerged as a leader. This was the first time in Mondulkliri among indigenous groups that this process of community development has been tried. Now in less than a year, four self-help groups are working, mainly women, and they are moving towards forming their own federated body. It will be noted that Heng is disabled.

N.B. In accordance with Article 31 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People [Intellectual Property Rights etc] we thank and attribute this story to Heng. Please click the link above to read her story.



**Sokim** came from a family of seven with parents and an older brother who are farmers, an older sister who is a factory worker and two younger siblings who are still in school.

Sokim first did a short computing course with NHS after she finished high school. NHS then prepared her to apply to study in CIST. She passed her test and interview, and started data entry training in Phnom Penh in October 2010.

Six months later she finished her course and started work in Digital Data Divide (DDD) in Battambang. We visited her twice in Battambang and saw that she had settled down well. DDD helped to transport her bicycle and other belongings to Battambang and they also helped with finding accommodation. Her place is near enough for her to bike to work and it is only a 5 minute walk to the market to buy food.

Sokim's first task in DDD was to enter data in Greek! It was difficult, but she worked hard and learned to recognise the characters. She spends her time after work to study more English on the computer in DDD.



On our second visit we were rather worried when Sokim's room-mate told us that she and Sokim buy a single bag of food to share, and Sokim eats very little. A bag of food costing 2500 riels is already little for one person, and then sharing and eating less is even worse. Like every dutiful daughter, she has been saving money to send back to her family. We advised her that she has to look after herself first or she will fall sick and will not be able to work. We hope to visit her again soon



**Sopheak** finished high school in 2007 but had no money to continue his studies and did not have a job. He came to NHS to study computing. When CIST started a new course to train data entry staff for Digital Divide Data (DDD), Sopheak had the chance to apply and passed the entrance exam. In May 2009 he started his training in CIST and six months later he started working in DDD. From a situation of having no job and no money to study, Sopheak now has both. He has matured to be a confident person and during this year's new CIST intake he came to help prepare NHS students for the CIST logic test and interviews.

This October Sopheak started his degree course in IT at SETEC University, with DDD paying 60% of his fee and the rest taken from his DDD salary. In Sopheak's own words:

"After I passed scholarship in CIST I think that my life is changed I can improve my knowledge and skill, especially data entry. In CIST I knew a lot of teachers that have good experience for teaching students in

all the subjects. This school has good rules for students, every student that study there after finish they get good knowledge and can find a good job easy. I think that all of the people that has opportunity to study there is a lucky person.

After I finished my 6 months Data Entry Operator(DEO) at CIST I have to work at DDD. I have now worked there for 8 months. I'm very happy that I can do the work that the team leader gives me and next month I'm going to request for money to study at University.

Now I'm very happy because I can get the salary to support myself everyday, work experience and especially can get the scholarship. I hope that in the future I will finish university and can find a better job than now. If I finish the university and can find the good job to support my family, my teachers and DDD would be happy. I think that I'm a lucky person that can study at CIST and work at DDD. In my mind in the future I won't forget CIST and DDD because these places help me to start my life again after I finished my study at high school."



**Sovannak** had also finished high school for a year with no job to go to and no money for further study. When NHS announced its next computer class, he came to enrol. We encouraged him to apply to some vocational institutes run by NGOs and he passed the test for Don Bosco in Phnom Penh. He now studies IT and pays only \$40 a year for the fees. He stays with his father's friend who also provides him with meals.

Sovannak has five brothers and one sister. His parents are separated and the children live with their mother. His two younger brothers and his sister are still in school.

NHS also provides support when necessary. In his spare time he joins Vechheka and his CIST friends to do more training with Andy.

**Vechheka** comes from a small and relatively young family consisting of both parents and a younger sister. His father is a musician for weddings and ceremonies. His mother makes a Khmer sweet and goes round with the tray of food on her head to sell. It is a hard job, especially in the heat or rain. Both parents incomes are irregular. Their wooden house is built on a bit of land belonging to a friend and consists of only one room with a lean-to.

After studying computing at NHS, Vechheka assisted his computer teacher, Rithy, and looked after the new students during their open sessions where they do more practice on the computers on their own. Being a bright lad, he passed his entrance exam and interview for CIST and is now doing IT which is what he likes most. CIST (Centre For Information Systems Training), a French organisation specialising in IT courses, is practical in its approach and trains students in good work ethics. They study the whole day and Vechheka will be ready to start work after his two year course.

Not only can he study for free, CIST also provides free accommodation in Phnom Penh and a small food allowance. He shares a house with 10 other students near his college in Phnom Penh. NHS continues to provide support when necessary. In his spare time he and his CIST friends do more training with Andy who was also his trainer in NHS.

We can still count on Vechheka to organise or arrange things for us - it will be done!



**Hun**, in theory is just our office cleaner. It is the one and only job she has ever had. In practice she does much more. For visitors, she is the first smiling face that greets them. For guests residing with us, she is the cook. For the children, she is the mother-figure. So she deserved to star in our New Year's Card, but sadly the smile was lost as she was worrying about no job, no money from 1 January. Thanks

to Stepsafe the smile is back. And look what good partner NGO "CNVLD" is saying about her:



"The **ANZ Royal** wheelie crews arrive at the CNVLD office in the afternoon from many different provinces as they will sleep overnight on the CNVLD office floor so we are all prepared for a 4.00 am departure to Kampong Som on the coast. Again I observe the remarkable support and networking amongst the athletes, all of whom are truly remarkable in dealing with their significant disabilities. I watch Hun, 4 ft, with a severe spinal deformity, from Kampong Chhnang, work her wonders as she organizes the food for 30+ athletes and the subsequent office clean up (and just about everything else if we didn't tell her to stop and have a rest) - she really is the backbone of this group and I make a mental note to make sure she is always present when we travel with the wheelies in the future."

Hun remains supportive, especially to disabled sports, but has been unable to be active since 2009

**Chok Him** "Then and now!" He and his family now have a thriving small-holding with chickens and a retail stall. He serves as one of the NHS Senior Focus Persons in his district. Chak Him and his wife's



story is so moving, how they have endured adversity, that it featured in Resmei Kampuchea - Cambodia's biggest daily newspaper.

After losing almost all family in the Khmer Rouge period, Chak Him, on military service, lost his legs in a landmine explosion in 1984. His wife helped him to overcome thoughts of suicide but then tragedy struck when she had a miscarriage. They had no choice but to sell his lifetime pension benefit in order to raise the cash to pay for her medical treatment, but she went back to hard labour in the rice fields too early. Her wounds ruptured, she almost died, and was left disabled herself. Chok Him admits he drowned his sorrows in drink. The family languished in absolute poverty until NHS found him, new opportunities opened for them, and his achievements have earned him a place and esteem in his community.



**Sokounthea:** *"Up, Up, and Away!"* She used to be very typical of many disabled girls in Cambodia. She stayed on her own at home; she was very shy, and had little hope in life. Then she heard about classes at the NHS Centre. She applied with the support of her father and mother. She was very keen to learn computing but accepted that she had to learn English first, so she enrolled in those classes. Then she joined the dancing and drama group, revealing a hidden talent, and soon starred in public performances to much acclaim. Later she passed the entrance tests to start her computer class. Her English was so good that she assisted the CNVLD Wheel-chair Racing Trainer in interpretation and that opened up the opportunity she had dreamt about.



**Visal:** *"Always looking on the pleasant side!"* Visal was one of the first eight students in NHS's computer training project in Kampong Chhnang, notable as a very bright and pleasant lad. He is a polio victim brought up by his uncle and aunt. When Visal finished his level 12 at high school, he didn't have money to further his studies. His days were spent helping at his uncle's tyre shop and assisting the new computer teacher at NHS. As he showed great interest in computing, his former teachers, Ming and Andy, later sent him to train and work in Lucky Diana computer shop in Battambang.



Whilst there, he stayed with AFS, a French NGO helping poor children. In return for free accommodation he taught computing to their children in the evenings. He went back to Kampong Chhnang during the weekends to continue helping. For six months, he did three jobs and every week travelled between Kampong Chhnang and Battambang - a good four hours' journey on the bus. His hard work paid off - he was soon ready to move to Phnom Penh and start his four year degree course in Information Technology at SETEC University. He studies in the evenings and in the day time he works at Yejj, an NGO which specialises in computer services and job-oriented training.

For updates on Visal's progress, please see Latest News 1 August 2011 and 16 January 2012.

**Phalla:** *"The Little Girl Seldom Seen and Heard"*, lives with her mother, two sisters, young brother and nephew in a humble dwelling made from wood and thatch. The family was "very poor", income derived from digging up wild bamboo, minor retailing and keeping two pigs. Phalla, although unlucky in many ways, is lucky because she can attend school and is in grade 6, three to four years behind her age. However she only looks 12 and unlike most girls is not talkative. She is small not just because of poor nutrition and parasitic infections but from an undiagnosed condition that may be cerebral palsy. Her mother says that since she was a toddler, she has periodic illnesses with very high temperatures. The right side of her body is weak and she says "she is slow to learn and develop".



Phalla and her family's only real hope for her is in education, for her to obtain a paid job, which is why they are making a special and unusual effort for her to go to school. Poor families tend not to send daughters to school. The family does not think she will marry, as "men will not find her attractive as a wife". Phalla takes part in NHS activities including dancing and the Child Advocacy Group, one of whose tasks is to counter the double prejudice against disability and gender!

**Kosal:** *"Singing for his Supper"*, Seng Kosal is his real name but they call him "Preap Sovath" in the market in Kampong Chhnang. He used to sing to entertain people to make extra money for his widowed mother and younger sister. The real Preap Sovath is a famous singer. Kosal dreams of emulating him some day, "if only". His mother says his father died a few years ago from a debilitating disease, for which she was in debt, but fortunately she is not HIV+. The family's income is around \$1 per day selling vegetables. (The first \$0.33 used to go to servicing her debt, until NHS talked to the loan-shark.)

Kosal developed fever a few weeks after he was born and he suffered from it on and off until he was four. His mother blames the illness for the disfigurement on one side of his body, most noticeable with his crooked left leg. Kosal is plucky despite his hardships. He has been mimicking songs since he was 5. He soon learned where to go to



receive appreciation. The extra cash helped him to attend school. Kosal's singing talent has opened up new opportunities for him. He has won a national competition to appear on a children's VCD which is now for sale in shops.

Things have been looking up for Kosal recently and you can read about his progress [here](#).

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