

A Rose of hope: Rehab, education and care for disabled Cambodians

The Rose Cambodia Rehabilitation Centre (RCRC) is the product of the collaboration between Rose Charities Australia and Operation First Cambodia. Operation First Cambodia was established in 2004 and has conducted many life-changing surgical operations. RCRC began operation in May 2010 and provides holistic rehabilitation and physiotherapy services to complement the surgical program that is already available. RCRC not only provides clinical assistance and treatment, but also inclusion and education-based programs. More recently RCRC has begun to expand its scope beyond the Kandal region of Cambodia and into the neighbouring Prey Veng province. In order to successfully identify projects and people with disabilities in need in this area, RCRC has formed an informal “knowledge sharing” relationship with the Prey Veng Rehabilitation Centre that was established in Prey Veng Town by Veteran’s International Cambodia (VI) in 1995.

Together with Operation First Cambodia, RCRC provides physical rehabilitation for marginalised Cambodian children and community members with disability or injury. RCRC’s holistic outlook aims to integrate those with disabilities into society to live fulfilling and productive lives.

RCRC’s “Access for All” project in Prey Veng Town aims to address the issue of women with disabilities in rural areas being unable to access secondary and tertiary education. This project builds the capacity of women with disabilities which has a long-term effect on their lives and the lives of their families. This project enables rural people with disabilities (PWDs) to move to the main town of Prey Veng province to live independently and relieve their families of the perceived burden of living with PWDs. The project allows these women to enter mainstream secondary and tertiary education through improving their proximity to such education and providing sponsorship for them to attend classes. This gives the families of PWDs the opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty through

increased income-generation and allows them to recognise the ability of their daughters to have an education, to live independently and have improved long-term job opportunities. “Access for All” also addresses the issues around PWDs not being included in mainstream development activities by allowing these women to represent the needs of their peers, empowering them and their families to join activities at a community and provincial level and to be heard as one voice on equal paring with other members of the community. This project advocates for the equal rights and equal opportunities for women with disabilities.

The Access for All project requires funding to operate a supportive home for women with disabilities. This home provides up to 30 beneficiaries with a safe, supportive environment that allows them accessible proximity to mainstream education at the High School, University and Vocational Training Centre in Prey Veng Town. This opportunity was previously inaccessible to these women, both due to their socio-economic status

and the fact that they were living in very isolated, rural villages where the access routes to such Centres were not disability-friendly. The home provides the relevant skills to these women to enable them to live independent lives and encourage them to follow the natural progression for young adults to decrease their dependence on their families, explore their capabilities and see what they can achieve through gaining a well-rounded education and equal access to employment opportunities. This project allows the beneficiaries to become role models, pioneers in fact, for other PWDs – showing them that they too can follow their dreams and can have the ability to lead independent and fulfilling lives and in time can generate their own income.

An innovative aspect of this project is that the women supported by the home are responsible for driving the project day-to-day. The women who live in the home are encouraged to have leadership roles in the management of the project, and are expected to manage the project’s budget and provide monitoring and evaluation reports to RCRC’s Project Management team. They will also be encouraged to identify issues in their communities and address them when possible, to advocate for equal rights, identify mobility access problems, promote health awareness, provide information on health referral services (particularly the services provided by RCRC and VI), and educate the wider community regarding disability awareness in particular promoting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCPRD).

Cambodia is a country with one of the highest rates of disability in the world. National socio-economic surveys conducted between 1996 and 1999 have estimated that the number of PWDs in Cambodia is about 1.5% to 3% of the population [Source: Disability Action Council, Cambodia]. Out of the total persons with disabilities, 19% are children, and 42% are

female [Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, Cambodia, 2002]. PWDs typically share the profile of general poverty in Cambodia. Due to their disabilities they are more vulnerable and their experience of poverty is more intense,

making their opportunities to escape from poverty, more limited. In Cambodia, as in elsewhere in the developing world, poverty is a significant cause of disability due to the fact that poor people lack access to basic health care, simple infections and permanent disability often result from illness or injury that go untreated or are mistreated. Sometimes, poor people are forced to live near landmine affected areas and are forced to enter these areas to collect food or firewood. Poverty often brings psychosocial mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, which can also be disabling. Women and



children are particularly vulnerable to this.

In Prey Veng alone there are 14,320 people with disabilities (PWDs) identified and 8,517 (44%) of them are women [Source: Prey Veng Provincial Department of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation]. In the 15 years that Veteran’s International (VI) has operated in Prey Veng, the organization has worked hard to advocate for the inclusion of PWDs, particularly women, in mainstream development programs. VI have recognized that PWDs are invisible to mainstream programs as their capacity is not seen as equal to able-bodied beneficiaries. This has severely limited the access of PWDs, particularly women, to education in Prey Veng and across Cambodia. Prey Veng community members who are linked to the work of VI together with the local University campus identified the need for women with disabilities to be given the opportunity to access education and shared this information with RCRC to see if they could manage a project to address this.

“Access for All” has already built the supportive home for women with disabilities in Prey Veng through the kind donation of Prey Veng community members and their international network of friends. The most sustainable aspect of this project is that it begun with local

Prey Veng community members who have been trained in the development, disability and education sector identifying this need and addressing it themselves. They have already managed to rally volunteers and donors to build a home for these women on land supplied by an inspirational local community member who himself has a disability. Mr Ull Meng Hour saw the need for women with disabilities living in rural areas to be given the opportunity to access education and fundraised for money to build the home in stages over the past two years. Mr Sok Rady, the Director of the Prey Veng campus of the Chea Sim University of Kamchay Mear has equally devoted what resources he can to accepting PWDs into courses on scholarship. These project “guardians” have taken full ownership of the project and will do everything they can to support its longevity, provided they are given some assistance from their international friends to find monetary support.

Recently RCRC was successful in applying for funding from the Disability Inclusion Assistance Fund (DIAF). DIAF is a funding mechanism supported by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and managed by the Australian Red Cross (ARC). The goal of the DIAF is to reduce the vulnerability of persons with disability including landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) survivors, their families and affected communities in Cambodia. Beyond this grant from DIAF, which will assist with the operation of the project up until June 2012, more funds will be required with a vision for the first group of graduates in 2-3 years time, being able to use the skills they have learnt at University to establish their own small social enterprise which will fund this project long-term. This structure decreases the project’s dependence on donors and allows for full ownership of the project by the women it helps. Similarly, the same model is beginning to be established for disabled men in the town who have not yet received any external funding support.

Current social enterprise ideas that are beginning to be investigated are the possibility of starting a printing press which produces khmer language books, a rarity in Cambodia’s education system,

a business where the members of the supportive home are employed by Australian companies to do accounting book work, the establishment of a tourist company based in Prey Veng town which currently has no tourism industry, and the establishment of an offsite conference centre in partnership with a local hotel which NGOs from Phnom Penh would be encouraged to use for team-building sessions and rural project site visits. Investment is required to make one of these ideas a reality. As well, RCRC are seeking sponsorship of these disabled women and their male counterparts for their University Fees through the Rose Education Sponsorship program, typically a cost of USD1200 for one person. More computers are also needed and RCRC has approached the Telstra/NAB Helping Hands project which supplies reconditioned laptops to projects in Cambodia, for more resources but are currently awaiting a response.

For more information on this project or if you are able to fundraise for us, please contact Rose Charities Australia Director, Sarah Miller on sarah@rosecharities.org.au, +61 408 376 535 or visit www.roseeducation.wordpress.com/category/education-support-worldwide

