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**Title:** A Walk to a Better Community: Nothing is a Miracle

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**Name of Institution** World Bank Group

**Country of Study**

**Major**

**Degree**

**Course Title**

**Type of Document** Essay, 1<sup>st</sup> place winner

**Year** 2007

# **Cambodia Essay Competition 2007**

## **Winning Essays**

**education | HIV / AIDS | domestic violence | agriculture**

**How Do You Contribute to Solving Community Problems?**



The World Bank

**March 2007**

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## **Awards**

The winners will receive their awards during the World Development Report 2007 launch on March 15, 2007 from Senior Minister H.E. Kol Pheng, Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, and Ian Porter, World Bank Country Director for Cambodia.

### ***Winners:***

Winner of the 1 <sup>st</sup> Prize:	Mr. Nguon Pheakdey
Winner of the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Prize:	Mr. Chim Chamroeun
Winner of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> Prize:	Ms. Pisey Chea
Winner of the 4 <sup>th</sup> Prize:	Mr. Ka Chhorng
Winner of the 5 <sup>th</sup> Prize:	Mr. Seng Sangha

### ***Awards:***

1 <sup>st</sup> Prize:	1 200 000 riel
2 <sup>nd</sup> Prize:	1 000 000 riel
3 <sup>rd</sup> Prize:	800 000 riel
4 <sup>th</sup> Prize:	600 000 riel
5 <sup>th</sup> Prize:	400 000 riel

**First Prize**

**A Walk to a Better Community: Nothing  
is a Miracle**

**Mr. Nguon Pheakkdey**

## **ABSTRACT**

Not only is the definition of community varied according to contexts, the problems existing in a particular community might also be different from those of others. The high rate of HIV/AIDS infection, the confusion of gender responsibility, and the illegal use of weapons are examples of the problems found in Cambodian society. To contribute to solving these problems, I have been working as a volunteer for several organizations.

First of all, I worked with the Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia (RHAC) for two years. As a peer group educator, I participated in activities aimed at increasing the social understanding of gender roles, family planning and the prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the community. I was also one of the volunteers for the Control Arms Project, sponsored by Oxfam, Amnesty International and IANSA, which was campaigning to push for an international treaty on the trade in weapons in Cambodia and the world. In addition, some time before Christmas, I signed up as a volunteer for the Samaritan's Purse Organization's project called the Operation Christmas Child 2004. During that time, I helped out with the collection and wrapping of gifts received from the community, and sending them overseas, especially to developing countries. Currently, besides being a senior student at university, I am working as a volunteer for the Servants International Organization under the TASK/Project HALO as a curriculum facilitator and a teacher for the Children's Safety Project.

I face both challenges and success in my work. However, I cherish all the good and bad times that I have been through because I think that every challenge makes me stronger and helps me find my niche. In retrospect, I personally believe that it takes first of all individual enthusiasm and commitment to make our community, society, and the world a better place for ourselves, our children, and our children's children because nothing is a miracle.

## **A Walk to a Better Community: Nothing is a Miracle**

Though the definition of community might vary according to contexts, the World Book of Community (2001) defines it as a group of people living in the same arena who share similar beliefs, customs, and a sense of belonging and feel an obligation toward other members of the group. Likewise, community, in a Cambodian context, refers to a group of people living together and sharing the same interests and traditions. There is no denying that every community has problems of its own. Some communities, for example, might have problems in getting access to modern technological appliances while others, such as Cambodia, might not even have access to basic healthcare services. In fact, as one of the poorest countries in the world, Cambodia has lots of problems, including a high rate of HIV/AIDS infections, discrimination against people infected and affected with HIV, misunderstanding of gender role, and the illegal use of guns.

Albert Einstein once said “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though everything is a miracle. The other is as though nothing is a miracle.” I personally prefer the second option because if we are just hoping, without actually doing something, that for example, all the problems in Cambodia and other developing countries will one day eradicated, the end result is that nothing may improve. Therefore, this essay describes my experiences as a volunteer for individuals in the community, especially for those who are alienated because they have or are affected by AIDS. I will first of all list the names of the associations and organizations that I have worked for, followed by the people who I have helped, the achievements and the challenges that I have faced, and the measurement of the results of my work respectively. This essay also provides reasons why I think the work that I am doing is innovative. Finally, it looks at possible strategies that would help improve my impact on reducing the

HIV/AIDS infection rate, and the advice that I would give to young people who want to replicate my experience.

It all started when I was in high school. From 2000 to 2002, I worked as a Peer Group Educator at the Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia (RHAC). I participated in activities aimed at increasing the social understanding of gender roles, family planning and the prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the community. First of all, after the RHAC's selection procedures, I along with other students from different high schools, were given special training at the organization about the methodology of how to share with our fellow students and people in our community the information we received regarding the prevention of HIV/AIDS, STDs, family planning, and gender roles. Having completed our training, each of us was sent back to our own high school to share with students in our school what we had learned. Firstly we requested the permission from the school principal and the timetable of the entire 10, 11, and 12 grades. We then had to figure out the period that the students were free so that we could go and teach them. It took fifty minutes to present one of the above mentions topics. The class normally started with a thirty-minute presentation followed by the question and answer time. We then had to keep record of each class so as to not to teach the same topic next time.

On top of that, RHAC in associations with other organizations had arranged lots of opportunity for us to go and talk with people in our own community about the aforementioned topics. For example, in 2002, RHAC with its partners held an educational concert at my very own high school, and I was the master of ceremony. The theme was Youth and HIV/AIDS. In addition, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, RHAC and its partners annually sponsored an educational tour to provinces in Cambodia. For instance, on December 1<sup>st</sup> 2001, we went on a trip to

Kampong Charm, one of Cambodia's largest provinces. It was great fun because we stopped at lots of villages along the way to our destination and asked village people questions about such topics as HIV, STDs, gender role, and family planning. The answers that we got were shocking as few people know what gender role or family planning was. Fortunately, most people were aware of HIV and STDs and their consequences.

During my time with RHAC, I was generally working with people my own age or older. However, there were both achievements and challenges. For instance, regarding the age factor people at school, especially those of my own age group, were comfortable talking with me about their personal problems, while older people in my community were reluctant to share their problems with me. Therefore, it was very hard for me to really understand their problems so as to give advice. This is understandable because of our conservative culture. In fact, this culture also gave me challenges. The problem was that some people, old people to be specific, did not really listen to my advice because they might have thought that I was too young to tell them solutions to these kinds of problems. Some people even thought of me as a sexually active teenager, which was not good. Realizing these obstacles, the RHAC produced another kind of peer group educator by selecting some middle age people from the community to have them work with older people in their own community and others. As a consequence, other young volunteers and I were only working with people our own age group both in the community and school. In the end, after two years of hard work, we were very pleased that the percentage of people infected with HIV in Cambodia was gradually decreasing.

Although, I stopped working with RHAC once I commenced university, I was still involved with other kinds of volunteer work. In October 2003, I joined the Control Arms campaign, which was

sponsored by Oxfam in association with Amnesty International and IANSA. The aim of the campaign was to push for an international treaty to control the arms trade which stimulates conflict, poverty, and human rights abuse all over the world. The campaign called for effective arms control to make people authentically safer from the threat of armed violence. To carry out the task, volunteers were assigned to go around Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city, and ask people to sign the petition in the form of drawing a face on a piece of paper in support of stopping the use of weapon in Cambodia and the world as a whole. Surprisingly, it turned out to be a great success because not only thousands of citizens agreed that we should put an end to the problem, but the Cambodian governments also pledged their support for an international Arms Trade Treaty. This milestone announcement came just two months after the Control Arms campaign was launched. High Excellency Sar Kheng, Deputy Prime Minister of Cambodia said "as a country that has been severely affected by weapons, Cambodia will support the international Arms Trade Treaty. The Royal Government of Cambodia is committed to controlling weapons which have such a great impact on humanity, society, the economy and peace."

In 2004, I was awarded, as the first Cambodian recipient, the International Development Program's (IDP) Peace Scholarship Program to study for two semesters at the University of Tasmania, Australia. During my stay there, I was not only doing the academic work at my faculty, but I was also involved with volunteer work. In November 2004, I volunteered for the Forever Women Conference held at City Gate, Hobart. My job during that conference involved catering, ushering, and cleaning. The main theme of that conference was for women to help bring up their children to walk with Jesus Christ. Although, it was a Christian conference and I have been brought up a very strong Buddhist, I still did my thing. Many people criticized me, but I took little notice because I am an open-minded

person. I believe that every religion is good provided that it leads people to live their lives happily and morally correct according to the norms in society.

During my stay in Australia, I was lucky enough to be invited to Oxfam's formal dinner at the Tasmanian Parliament House. From the president of the Oxfam organization report, I realized how people, especially children, in other parts of the world manage to survive through harsh periods such as wars or natural disasters. Suddenly, an idea sprung to mind, the idea that we are not alone in this seem-to-be very lonely universe. Someone, somewhere far away is thinking of us, taking care of us and loving us. I believe this is the greatest message of all. This is demonstrated by the projects that Oxfam carry out to help people in developing countries improve their living conditions through enormous support from communities across the globe.

I was in fact able to personally participate in this concept through the Samaritan's Purse Organization. Some time before Christmas, I was informed that there was a project called Operation Christmas Child 2004 organized by the Samaritan's Purse Organization. The program aimed to send Christmas gifts to the world's hurting children in developing countries. The simple message for those children was, as I mentioned earlier, that someone from somewhere in the world is watching over them and loves them. Therefore, I signed up as a volunteer and collected and wrapped the gifts received from the community, put them in shoeboxes, and sent them overseas. I donated a shoebox myself hoping it would at least make one child somewhere on this planet happy.

To my surprise, during the Franklin Graham Festival in Tasmania, I discovered that some of the shoeboxes were also sent to Cambodia. I was overwhelmed by emotion and cried of happiness when watching the video report and seeing all the happy faces of my people as well as

other children around the world. I never imagined that the shoeboxes would be sent to Cambodia. I hope someone here received my box because I wrote a letter in Khmer sending the recipient my love and best wishes for Christmas.

So far, most of the work that I had done concerned HIV and children. I am actually very passionate about working with children who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. Therefore, upon my return home from Australia and since October 2005, besides being a senior student at university, I also work as a volunteer for the Servants International Organization under the TASK/Project HALO, as a curriculum facilitator and a teacher for the Children's Safety Project. There are four classes consisting of 25 to 30 students that I am teaching now. The four classes are divided into two groups according to the students' age. The first two groups are made up of children from seven to eleven years. The other two consist of children between twelve and seventeen. Each class takes place once a week on Thursdays; thus one theme is introduced per month. My main responsibility is to design a curriculum for the themes that the organization wants to get across to the children and teach them. Some of the topics are for example concerned with the dangers of drug use, discrimination, disability, HIV/AIDS, and sexual abuse towards children.

One thing that really upsets me about my class is that all the children's parents who come to my class are HIV positives. Some of them have already passed away leaving the children with their relatives or no one at all. Even some of the children are HIV positives themselves. It really breaks my heart every time I see them. As far as I am concerned, the biggest challenge for me doing this work is that I am not sure. For instance, I sometimes am unsure of the effectiveness, usefulness of my teaching. Most of the time, I am anxious, aggravated, intimidated, and terrified. For example, sometimes I am very exasperated with the thought of the parents ruining their children's lives with AIDS. There

are also times that I sit down and ask myself how the information that I am presenting to the children will be of any usefulness to them because they are already infected. In addition, some of the people I know, knowing that I am working with children infected and/or affected with HIV, tell me that my work is useless because the children will sooner or later pass away like their parents. However, I have to really thank my family, friends, and colleagues for their encouragement to keep me running this race. They told me that acknowledging the fact that some of the children are positive, it would be great that I could teach them how to live with HIV/AIDS.

Fortunately, the good news is that the program is working very smoothly because all the students are really involved in the learning process. They are very energetic and enthusiastic now, though they were very shy at first because of our traditional culture. In fact, I am very pleased to see that the children can now understand that it is fun to work and learn together as a group. To measure my teaching success and also to check how much information the students have obtained so far, the first progress test will be conducted in April. Then after another six themes, which is going to take approximately six months, there will be a second progress test followed by the final examination.

What the organization and I myself as a teacher want to achieve is to build the children's confidence and show them that they do have the same value as other children in their community and that they deserve to be loved and treated fairly. They need to believe that the fact that they are poor and their parents are infected by HIV/AIDS does not make them different. In addition, I would not hesitate to disregard an individual who discriminates against my students and other people infected with HIV because these children do deserve their dignity as other people in this country. I have to tell people, sometimes even some of my friends hundreds of times, to distance themselves from the virus not from those affected or infected. I think that poor and

unfortunate people in this country are just as smart and talented and hardworking as everybody else, and they have a right to make their voices heard. It was just that most people were unfortunate that they are infected. In some case, it is not even their mistakes at all that they have the disease. I also believe that all they need is a leader who can prove to other people in the community that they are also people as they can walk, talk, use their brain and dare to speak their minds to make informed decisions. That is my ultimate and hidden goal for each and every student in my four classes.

There are many problems in Cambodia for which I may not be able to contribute a solution. However, if any one asked me how I feel about the work that I have done, I would say that it is innovative as it has two implications. The first one is that it would more or less change people's perspectives about youths from being obsessed with useless things to actually participating in building a better community. Moreover, I personally have grown a lot from my current teaching work because I can apply things that I am learning at school such as the principles of teaching, the psychology of learning, and the methods of testing, into the real world. I normally think of this job as an extra curricular activity that I enjoy doing. Secondly, I strongly believe that my work could be considered as a model for other youths, in particular Cambodian youth, showing them that they, too, could make a difference to their community. This is because in Cambodia, young people are regarded as inferior to older people lacking the power, for example to make their voices heard or to propose solutions to problems.

Looking ahead, if I could improve my impact on reducing problems in the Cambodian community, the first thing that I would choose to reduce would be the spread of HIV/AIDS infection rate. I would encourage non-government organizations to have special workshops or training courses for parents to understand that their children,

especially girls, need to know basic information about how to protect themselves from the virus. I would also suggest another program that helps girls build their confidence and skills in negotiating safe sex with their boyfriends or partners, because just knowing about HIV/AIDS or how devastating the results might be, is not sufficient to change the way they behave. Furthermore, I strongly believe that this disease preys most on those who lack power, and girls are the most susceptible, because they are often forced or pressured into having sex, or are deprived of information they need to help them make conversant decisions. They also lack the skills to negotiate with boys or men and the confidence to challenge them to practice safe sex. Finally, I would propose another project for youth and parents living in the slum areas in Phnom Penh to be aware of HIV/AIDS and its consequences. They need to know that the consequences are not only affecting them but also their children.

In retrospect, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the RHAC, Oxfam, IDP's Peace Scholarship Program, Energizer Life Church in Hobart, Samaritan's Purse Organization, and the Servants International Organization for letting me be a part of their tremendous work, because it has lead me to where and what I am doing now. I believe that a better and more peaceful world is not too far ahead of us, if each and every one of us stand up and fight for it. I also believe that we are like snow flakes, unique, and thus have a special gift that we can offer to our community, society, and country. Finally, if I was to give a piece of advice to people on how to be more active and involved in their community, it would be to grasp any opportunity that comes along offering you chances to work with other people because you never know where it leads or what to expect. Just like Forest Gump said in the film with the same name "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get." We are all needed because nothing is a miracle.



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