

SUCCESS STORY

An Unlikely Leader

How one HIV+ woman models success in her community



Photo: Amanda Epling

Chreb, 28 (center) is balancing her WORTH group's account during their weekly meeting in Sihanoukville, Preah Sihanouk Municipality, Cambodia.

"I contracted HIV seven years ago from my husband and have since devoted my life to building awareness in my community. It is important to be able to talk about it."

Cambodia has made significant advances in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS, with the prevalence rate amongst adults now below 1%. However, for Chreb, one of the approximately 56,000 Cambodians still living with the disease, significant social and financial obstacles remain. She explains how stigma about her health affected her family's financial stability, "I used to be very poor. Money lenders would refuse me loans because I am HIV positive."

By joining her local WORTH group, titled "Chlatvey" which means clever, Chreb has been able to improve her economic condition. She has taken out several loans from the group to expand her fruit-selling business and has accumulated savings of over 230,000 KHR or US \$55.

Pact Cambodia is implementing Pact's global women's empowerment program, WORTH, in the fishing communities of Preah Sihanouk Province with funding from Chevron Overseas Petroleum (Cambodia) Limited (COPCL) and in partnership with two local non-governmental organizations. The WORTH program is built upon the belief that women possess the potential to improve their economic situations if provided the proper tools and training. The program teaches women how to build savings by incorporating basic literacy and accounting training, business development and village banking to create small, cohesive savings groups whose members are financially independent.

Chreb has been a member of Chlatvey since its formation in February 2010 and is currently the group treasurer and literacy volunteer. Chreb encourages illiterate group members to devote extra time to literacy training by arguing that if they learn to read and write they cannot be cheated out of money. In addition to improving the literacy skills of her fellow members, Chreb makes sure that her group incorporates HIV/AIDS and TB health training along with family planning into their group meetings. Chlatvey is a strong group with 22 committed members from which Chreb stands out as a natural leader. Chlatvey helped Chreb overcome her financial limitations to become a leader and an educator within her group and community. "I used to be a bit of an outcast who people would avoid, but now I feel like I am part of a family."