

Drug addiction fight forges new approach

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Kao Than (F), 25, works in a cell phone repair shop as part of a new community-based drug rehabilitation project in Banteay Meanchey province. Photograph: supplied

Located up a dirt path off the main road in Banteay Meanchey's Sisophon town, the Phnom Bak Detention Centre is a walled enclosure ringed with wire.

Two volleyball nets stretch across a main yard, and to the right, concrete dormitories house recovering drug addicts who aren't allowed to leave.

Hardly 10 minutes away, former addict Kao Than, 25, works in a cell phone repair shop as part of a new alternative drug treatment program. He said he has never spent a night in those dormitories, or played a game of volleyball on those courts.

“My mother warned me that if I didn’t stop using drugs, she would cut me out of her life,” said Than, who started smoking “yama”, a form of methamphetamine, seven years ago when his friends offered it to him at a party.

In Banteay Meanchey, it is pretty easy to get high, and the northwestern province has troubling rates of abuse. There is an influx of narcotics from the border with Thailand, and when northbound migrant workers cross the other way, they can get hooked on amphetamine-type substances to work longer hours.

So it comes as no surprise that the province is on the front lines of a battle being waged against drug addiction in Cambodia. But while the enemy is a common one, there are competing visions on the best way to fight.

There is the Phnom Bak Detention Centre model, where parents send their kids for up to one-year stints of enforced sobriety, hoping that the boot-camp style environment will set them straight.

And then there is what might be called the Kao Than model, a voluntary road to recovery. The program is treading on new ground in Cambodia, where drug users are often cast aside as social pariahs whose treatment is limited to compulsory rehab centres, or worse, prison time.

Supported by the [United Nations Office of Drug Control and Crime](#), the Community-Based Drug Treatment program began in 2010 in eight Banteay Meanchey communes.

The program is a collaborative effort that eschews shuttling addicts off to drug detention centres – places that the most recent [Human Rights Watch](#) report on the subject excoriated based on allegations of physical and sexual abuse by workers. Drug authorities in Cambodia have rejected the findings.

Clay Nayton, technical adviser with the [Social, Environment, Agricultural Development Organization](#), an NGO in Sisophon partnering with the UNODC, emphasised the difference between the old and the new approach.

“It’s not really a centre, it’s a method,” he said.

That method covers multiple stages of recovery. There is peer counselling with current and former addicts, medical referrals and check-ups, micro grants for small business ideas, and social help with reintegrating into the community.

SEADO has yet to publish data on how many of its users avoid relapse. But judging by positive feedback from commune chiefs and local authorities, the program is helping addicts turn the corner, and it recently expanded into Battambang and Stung Treng provinces.

Its resources are small-scale, however, which raises questions about what kind of impact it can have nationwide.

“The project suffers from the same financial constraints that most NGOs have to deal with given the current climate of scarce funding from all international agencies and across all development sectors,” Nayton said in an e-mail message. “There is potential for this to be upscaled to include a wider target group and across more provinces.”

The pilot phase was carried out on a budget of roughly \$200,000. In about the same time period, the United Nations Development Program allotted \$4.5 million for its climate-change initiative in Cambodia.

But a little bit of money went a long way for Thoeun Doeun, a small and wiry 35-year-old singer from Tuek Khla village in Sisophon. SEADO bought a chicken farm for him as part of the community-based treatment’s income-generation plan.

An addict for more than 10 years – he used to stay up all night with friends, drinking wine spiked with ground yama for an extra kick – he decided to stop after his wife became pregnant.

No one in the village would lend him any money. He realised they all thought he’d choose getting high over helping his wife.

“The community didn’t believe me,” he said.

After getting involved with SEADO in 2010, he claims to have defeated the addiction and is starting to save money from selling chickens, which live in a small coop adjacent to his wood-frame house. With the profits, he bought a motorbike, which makes trips to the market a little easier.

“Right now, villagers in the community respond to me,” he said.

Regaining a level of normalcy is key, according to Aaron Watson, a UNODC officer.

“Neighbours sometimes cross to the other side of the road when they see drug users,” he said. “There is not a big budget for income generation activities, but it helps to reintegrate people into the community.”

Officials in Banteay Meanchey support the program, but not if that means closing down detention centres.

“We need them both,” said Chhum Vannarith, the deputy provincial governor and member of the Provincial Drug Control Committee.

“Most people who are sent to the centre are not arrested by the authorities, they are sent by their parents,” he said. “The detention centre for drug users supports only one person for six months, or one year, meaning this centre helps those people for clearing the drugs out of their body and provides training skills for them as well, but it’s not long term.”

Vannarith did say that his office has seen a drop in drug use around Sisophon, though he was unable to cite specific numbers. He credited the community-based treatment with the decrease, and said there were no plans to build more centres because of associated costs.

In the Human Rights Watch report, published in 2010, the group interviewed people who stated they suffered beatings amounting to torture, as well as others who had been forced to perform sexual acts on staff at various centres.

Phil Robertson, deputy director of HRW’s Asia division, said in an e-mail that while the new approach is a step in the right direction, more needs to be done to stop the horrors.

“There’s no way that this program itself will close the many drug detention centres where people are being detained and abused. So what’s needed is far more pressure on the government demanding closure of abusive centres – and most people are tip-toeing around that issue.”

On Monday, Post reporters were allowed into the Phnom Bak centre.

Director Prak Saran answered questions about Phnom Bak’s activities for addicts, but he would not let the reporters see inside the dormitories. Few addicts were viewed on the grounds. No one was playing volleyball.

“The people who are sent for detention in this centre, they get the treatment and education for training skills” in a number of professions, including barbering, Saran said.

Inside the office, there is a picture on the wall of a young man, presumably an addict, giving somebody a haircut. Crude smoking pipes with plastic straws sit on a wooden table. Saran said the display is for visitors and educational purposes.

While all was quiet at the centre, Than, the 25-year-old cell phone repair worker, was about to head back into the shop.

He said that with his training, he hopes to open up his own store. He wasn’t embarrassed about his past, in fact, he insisted to a Post reporter that his full name be published, and was proud of the fact that he reconciled with his mother.

“I want to give this message to young people, to both drug users and those who have never used drugs, to understand.”

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<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2012081658036/National-news/drug-addiction-fight-forges-new-approach.html>