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Open Cambodia 2014: Collaborative learning for Cambodian NGOs

In one of the largest and most innovative training events for civil society organizations (CSOs) to take place this year, **Open Cambodia 2014** gathered last week in Sihanoukville over 100 program and technical staff members of 70 CSOs working in the health, trafficking, migration and human rights sectors. The week-long camp – organized by the Open Institute and funded by USAID through the SPICE and DEVELOPMENT INNOVATIONS programs – was designed to facilitate collaborative learning among participants on topics related to e-advocacy and basic data and communication security for CSOs.

Given the diversity of strategic and technical expertise of participants, the event was architected to ensure that each attendee finished the week with a demonstrably higher level of knowledge and applicable skills, with new knowledge focused specifically on the topics that they most wanted to learn in the areas of advocacy and security.

During the event, as many as 30% of the participants also acted as facilitators on their topics of expertise, training other participants and learning from them in highly interactively break-out sessions. Some of these sessions had as many as 20 participants, but the event also encouraged one-to-one trainings, with skills being shared individually among participants upon request.

The large number of topics covered by the event ranged from broad discussions on advocacy strategies and the adequate use of online tools in advocacy campaigns, to more technical sessions such as using data visualization to effectively transmit ideas, use of maps, video, photography, and other media in advocacy, crowdsourcing, use of interactive voice response systems (IVR), use of the cloud and other ways to ensure security in communications, and many more.

Participants in the event were at first surprised by the collaborative training methodology being used, but quickly understood that it was providing them with a better framework to learn from all others and to offer what they knew already.

Mr. Rethiya Khan, a participant from an NGO, felt that “Open Cambodia open a gateway to a more creative advocacy for all of us.”

Javier Solá, Program Director at the Open Institute, highlighted the fact that “the event has created a strong network of advocacy leaders who have already experienced sharing with each other what they know, and whom we hope will continue doing it, strengthening the CSO sector in Cambodia.”

Open Cambodia 2014 was organized by the Open Institute, with technical support from the US-based NGO Aspiration, a non-profit which specialized on helping CSOs connect with software solutions that help them better carry out their work. The UK-based organization FabRiders also helped to facilitate the event.

Allen Gunn, Executive Director of Aspiration, observed “This was a uniquely vibrant event, with strong peer leadership and very high collaborative energy. The facilitators really created effective spaces for learning, and participants stayed engaged to the very end. I’m excited to see how each of them will apply the learnings in their respective practices after the event”

The **Open Institute** is a non-governmental and not-for-profit organization that envisions Cambodia as a country in which widespread access to high quality education, information, communications and technology lead to a more developed and just society. The mission of the organization is to ensure that the benefits of technology for social and economic advance are usable in Cambodian society.

The **U.S. Agency for International Development** (USAID) supports a broad range of programs designed to benefit all Cambodians, including programs in health, education, democracy, governance, and combating trafficking in persons. USAID provided a total of \$65 million in assistance to Cambodia in 2012.

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