

Education critical in addressing nutrition problems

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A LEADING NGO involved in nutrition around the world, Helen Keller International, or HKI, makes education an essential component in any nutrition campaign.

“You need a strong nutrition education component,” said Zaman Talukder, HKI’s Cambodia Country Director and Regional Food Security Advisor.

“We are the leading nutritional education institution in Cambodia and we provide huge training support to other agencies. We have trained more than 15,000 community health volunteers in the last 10 years,” he said.



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Founded in 1915 by Helen Keller and George Kessler, HKI is one of the oldest international NGOs devoted to preventing blindness and reducing malnutrition around the world. Now active in 22 countries, HKI is named after Helen Keller, who was left blinded and deaf at the age of 19 months as the result of a fever. When Keller’s parents engaged a tutor named Anne Sullivan, Keller, age 7, despite her blindness and deafness, learned to read and write, eventually earning a degree from Radcliffe Collage at the age of 20.

She went on to a brilliant career – helping other blind and deaf people.

HKI has been active in Cambodia since 1998 and also works in Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Nepal, as well as other countries around the world.

At present HKI is working in Battambang, Prey Veng, Pursat, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Speu, and Ratanakiri provinces – with 10,000 households and 50,000 people.

Country Director Talukder says to address Cambodia’s nutrition challenges, fruit and vegetables are not enough – but animal sources of nutrition are important too.

“We promote poultry, eggs, pigs and goat raising – but bio-availability is not enough. We are promoting more than 20 different types of food intake,” he said.

Beyond just project implementation, Talukder says HKI takes a keen interest in the impact of the projects, in order measure effectiveness.

For Talukder, top priorities for Cambodia include reducing stunting and wasting in children through a combination of approaches including promotion of breast feeding and complimentary feeding.

A pregnant mother has to get the nutrients to deliver a healthy baby and then make sure the baby remains nutritionally fortified especially during the first 24 months of development.

“Women have to be involved in the decision making of the household,” he said.

Another key factor for Cambodia’s nutritional success is combining agriculture and nutrition, Talukder says.

“Nutrition is coming from food – and food is coming from agriculture. Both sectors have to work together. Health people should know the importance of agriculture and agriculture people should know the importance of health,” he said.

“For Cambodia, this is an important time for people to work together.”

HKI has a Homestead Food Production programme underway in Rattanakiri province, which is among the least developed provinces in Cambodia.

There are also Village Model Farms, which serve as places for training and demonstrations as well as ongoing technical support.

HKI is also working to improve nutrition in areas like Rolea Phaer district in Kampong Chhnang, a district with a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

“Medicines don’t work well on a body that is undernourished,” Talukder said.