

## Bridging authorities and civil society



*Some people in Cambodia still believe leprosy is an incurable and inherited disease. Therefore they are reluctant to touch, shake hands with, eat meals with, or use the same toilets as leprosy victims, fearing they will become infected. Leprosy victims among the indigenous people are often shy of their disease, due to the way other villagers treat them. They isolate themselves and avoid social interaction, because they fear they will be stigmatised. Because of this, there are still untreated leprosy victims in the remote areas of Ratanakiri province.*

The ICC iBCDE project (identity Based Community Development and Education), working with various groups of indigenous people in Ratanakiri province, is always striving for everyone's participation in a community, in order to reflect on and analyse problems, and together seek to find solutions. During such reflection it was revealed that a community had people living with leprosy. The iBCDE team learned that these leprosy victims are being neglected, and they have no relationship with the other villagers in their community. The community has stigmatised these sick villagers.

ICC's target group is the least-served people, and the organisation does not discriminate against people because of their health. Hence, iBCDE team started to explore the scope of leprosy cases in their target areas. The iBCDE team afterwards reported on the found leprosy cases at a Provincial Health Department meetings, and about community exclusion of the victims, who are now isolating themselves. At that particular provincial health meeting one representative from the Ministry of Health happened to be present. He was surprised about this information, as the Ministry of Health was of the opinion that there were no longer any cases of leprosy in the area. This was one of the reasons that the National Program of Leprosy has been ended in Ratanakiri province.

The representative of the Ministry of Health requested to make a visit himself to the leprosy victims, which he did in February 2017. During his visit he officially diagnosed leprosy cases. As a result the Provincial Health Department is now again providing health care services to leprosy victims in the communities. A strong working relationship is seen between the various department officials, referral hospital and health centres in Ratanakiri province, in order to address the leprosy disease effectively.

Furthermore, the Provincial Health Department has requested the iBCDE team's help in monitoring and collecting information on variations of leprosy cases in rural communities. This includes data collection on numbers of leprosy patients receiving medicine from public health centres. The project team is very encouraged and motivated with this constructive collaboration between authorities, civil society organisations and communities. One valuable outcome from this collaboration, besides patients receiving medicine and treatment, is that indigenous people now understand their rights to health care as being equal to other Cambodian citizens.