

CHAMPION OF CHANGE

Chea Chantum

to put ICPD commitments at the core of progressive national policies on population, ageing and a range of other issues.

Under his watch, Cambodia significantly scaled up investment in family planning. A country that only a few decades ago was mired in conflict can now point to sharp declines in fertility rates, comparable to those in much more advanced countries, as well as improved maternal health.

“We have stressed the right to have children but at the same time urged couples to think about their own well-being and that of their family,” he says “So much can be done through education and awareness.”

Cambodia is in the process of introducing comprehensive sexuality education as part of the national curriculum from grades 5 to 12, building on the back of Chea's persistent call to respect the sexual and reproductive rights of adolescents and youth. He also helped drive the creation of a national health equity fund that provides free health care to poor citizens across the country.

A civil servant for almost 30 years, Chea started his career as a police officer before going on to get degrees in rural development and public management. It was while spending time in rural areas that he began to see the inextricable links between population and development.

“At first, I did not understand the importance of population,” he recalls. “Now I know that population is the main thing for development. That motivates me to do everything I can to understand what people need to improve their well-being.”

“It is not enough just to provide a few services,” he stresses. “We have to include all people in our development. If we don't have people, we have nothing. Only people can make our country continue to move forward.”

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