SUCCESS STORY

Giving Cambodians a Digital Voice

A new smartphone application improves typing speed and ease in Cambodia’s native language

In 2014, smartphone use in urban centers in Cambodia was growing rapidly. However, it was difficult for many young users to express themselves online in Khmer, Cambodia’s most widely spoken language. Most smartphone software did not provide easy-to-use support for Khmer, and the few add-on apps available were hard to use and unreliable.

Vanna Kruy, a software engineer, wanted to do something about this. In 2014, Kruy joined the 5D Lab at USAID’s Development Innovations project space to link up to technologists and social innovators. Kruy said, “I wanted to develop this keyboard app. But I was working from home, and it was difficult—I felt alone. I posted a picture on Facebook, and someone saw it and commented: ‘You should come to the 5D Lab! There is room and lots of geeks like you.’ I decided to come and check it out, and I found my support network.” The 5D Lab is a social innovation space for civil society and technologists who want to address development challenges and link up with technological solutions.

Tech and student community members helped with writing, coding, and video editing and his user base expanded rapidly. In March 2015, Development Innovations gave a small grant to his company, Alien Dev, matching the funds Khmer Smart Keyboard raised through its crowd funding campaign—another idea born out of the 5D Lab—for the further development of its features.

The app, which dramatically improves typing speed in Khmer, helps thousands of Cambodians more easily express themselves and have a voice online. In April 2015, it was the #1 Khmer language app in Cambodia’s burgeoning smartphone app market, with over 170,000 downloads for smartphones.

Development Innovations encourages and supports the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to address development challenges and deepen development impact in Cambodia.

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