

## Improving access to HIV services in Northeast India through Community ART Refill Groups

I-TECH India has supported the formation of Community ART Refill Groups (CARG) in India's Northeast region which are managed by the community, under the guidance of a treatment supporter. The refill groups are formed by stable PLHIV who are willing to disclose their HIV status to the other members of the group. The members take turns to visit the ART centre and collect ART drugs for themselves and for the other members of the group. S/he also undergoes the routine clinical, virological and lab monitoring during the visit. The members of the group contribute to the travel cost of the group representative. A PLHIV, living in a far-flung area, may spend 500 rupees per individual visit to the ART centre. On the other hand, when ten such people come together as a group and financially support the travel of the group representative, the contribution per head would be 50 rupees which is just 10% of the amount required for individual visit to the ART centre. CARG model benefits PLHIV from difficult terrains who find it difficult to visit the ART centre regularly due to various factors highlighted above. The group functions like a self-help group and provides psychosocial support to its members in addition to HIV related services.

One such story is shared by our treatment supporter Mr. Wonthai, on the improved HIV services in the Noklak region:



*“My name is L Wonthai. I started voluntary work for PLHIV in 2013. At that time, I was serving as the choir master at my church in Old Pangsha, a village on the Indo-Myanmar border area in Noklak district, Nagaland. The road connectivity between my village and the Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) centre in Tuensang was very poor. People had to walk several hours to the nearby town, Noklak, from where shared taxis were available to Tuensang. Due to the distance and cost involved in monthly visit to the ART centre, many PLHIV dropped out or completely stopped taking ART. A decentralised ART delivery facility established in Noklak was yet to become fully functional.*

*Seeing my friends dying without the life-saving ART, I decided to help them. I started visiting the ART centre to collect ARVs on behalf of my friends. Whenever there was no transportation, I had to walk for several hours to the centre and back. As time passed, a lot more people came to know about my work and approached me for support. I*

*continued to bring ART to the village with my own earnings and with the occasional financial support by the community and other benefactors.*

*In 2020, I-TECH India approached me to form Community ART Refill Groups (CARG) in Old Pangsha and nearby villages. With I-TECH's support, we formed more groups, standardised their functioning, and strengthened adherence monitoring. We could also bring more services closer to the clients like index testing, community-based HIV screening and viral load testing. Many PLHIV are being benefitted through the model which addressed issues related to distance, transportation and financial constraints faced by the community and improved retention in care.”*

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