

# Keeping Hanoi's Youth Safe from HIV/AIDS

Anti-HIV/AIDS project in Viet Nam shows the importance of being at the right location

By Jennifer Francis and Abby Tan

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. Viet Nam's nongovernment organization (NGO)-led initiative to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS is using this key element to reach Hanoi's urban poor youth in order to promote awareness of reproductive health in relation to the dreaded epidemic sweeping across Asia.

First, the umbrella NGO spearheading the project, the Australian Foundation for the Peoples of Asia and the Pacific (AFAP), is focusing on the vulnerable youth groups concentrated in cheap guest houses. Second, the initiative, sponsored by ADB and supported by the Hanoi local government units and other NGOs, has now created youth health clubs in Phuc Tan Ward, a poor district of the capital.

These health clubs are meant to provide many activities to attract the youth, many of whom are jobless, and then to draw them in to discuss serious issues on reproductive health and the risks of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.

Phuc Tan Ward hosts many such cheap guest houses where mostly young people looking for jobs in Hanoi rent sleeping spaces. They—girls and boys—and even those working as prostitutes, sleep together in common dormitories. This atmosphere could lead to high risks of infections.

The statistics on HIV infections in Viet Nam are worrisome. The AFAP says that 0.53% of the adult population in the 15–49 years age group, or approximately 300,000 people, are HIV positive. The economic impact on Viet Nam's growing economy could be disastrous, considering that this age group constitutes the country's main labor force. Focus on the youth in this anti-HIV initiative therefore is the priority.

The initiative began with a baseline survey of 300 people living in Phuc Tan Ward, to guide the project design and program. The survey results reflect a low understanding of HIV/AIDS.

At least 60% of the people interviewed have talked about or heard of HIV/AIDS, but a greater 64% have an incorrect understanding of how the disease is transmitted.



Focusing anti-HIV initiatives on the youth in Viet Nam—the group that constitutes the country's main labor force—is the priority.

Over 10% feel that people living with HIV/AIDS should be isolated and discriminated. This indicates the importance of including a program to remove the stigma associated with the disease. The high-risk atmosphere is compounded by a low use of contraceptives. In fact, the majority of those interviewed do not know that condoms can be used to prevent HIV, and many do not even know how to correctly use one.

The initiative thus had to begin with an information and education campaign before the project could begin training some of the youth to be peer educators, and, consequently, lowering the stigma associated with HIV.

The first youth club was set up in June 2007. The meetings in these clubs are held at night, with games and short activities used to stimulate learning and to create an environment where the youth feel comfortable to seek out information related to reproductive health and HIV infections. As of October 2007, four youth clubs have been set up in Phuc Tan Ward.

During the summer holidays, activities in the youth clubs are increased to as many as 40 a night. Short discussions on HIV awareness and prevention figure prominently in each meeting.

About 40 young people between the ages of 9–15 years attend each of these events.

The project has extended training to 27 owners of cheap guest houses so that they too can play a role in educating their young guests, and to support the holding of some activities within their establishments.

In September 2007, the project decided to expand the outreach program to hard-to-reach people like sex workers and drug users, who normally do not want to be identified. This component will be adopted in the next phase of the project implementation.

The program wants to include vocational training for the jobless youths. Negotiations have been concluded with various schools in Hanoi to teach the girls cooking, baking, sewing or restaurant services, and the boys in mechanic works, motorbike repair or TV and video repair.

The early results show that the project has been well received by the authorities at all levels due to its community-led approaches in working with the young people, the project team says.

The youth health clubs and cheap guest houses have proven to be a positive environment for young people to acquire knowledge and skills on reproductive health in general, and on HIV awareness and prevention in particular. These activities have also contributed to helping young people to feel they are part of the local community, where they can share ideas and information about sensitive issues and where they can make new friends. ■

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