

**Same Same but Different:
“Talking HIV” in the Highlands**

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SUMMARY:

To date, UNESCO Bangkok has produced 13 soap operas in minority languages to address the linked triad of problems: HIV/AIDS; drugs; and human trafficking/migration.

The UNESCO team used the title: “Same Same, but Different”, as it is a saying that is very familiar to people resident in Thailand, but the underlying theme is: everyone can catch the disease and different people have a different perception of the disease.

Challenges:

Prevention material is mostly disseminated in national or international languages. Ethnic minorities are also disproportionately represented among infected and exploited people.

To address these issues, the objective was to produce culturally and linguistically appropriate materials in minority languages to address the three issues of HIV/AIDS, drug abuse and human trafficking.

This strategy involved a 12-step methodology that incorporates the use of drama, research-based programmes, life stories turned into dramas, and radio programmes to educate diverse ethno-linguistic communities about health risks.

The UNESCO team found that radio stations provided the most cost-effective means of disseminating information to ethnic groups. Radio broadcasts reach out to scattered populations that are not easily accessible in remote, hill tribe areas with inaccessible roads during the monsoon season.

All of the approaches use drama as the central format. The methodology can easily be used to produce other types of visual materials, including theatre performances, videos or printed materials such as posters or brochures. The approach can also be used for other kinds of messages such as maternal child health, or malaria.

The programmes are also written in the local languages by native speakers, rather than simply translated from English or the national language so that they are culturally, as well as linguistically acceptable to the communities.

It is important that locally recorded sound is used in the dramas to ensure authenticity. One community member told us that our recording of a dog barking was inaccurate as an Akha dog barks differently from a Lahu dog!

One of the most innovative projects UNESCO has undertaken was the staging of a hill tribe pop concert against HIV/AIDS, human trafficking and drugs. This event involved twenty of the most popular singers of the Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Lisu, Mien and Shan tribes. They appeared together for the first time in a five hour concert broadcast live by Radio Chiang Mai and televised live for an hour nationwide on Thai television. This event was a huge boost to our efforts to disseminate information to as many people as possible in such a short period of time.

Discussion:

Q. You have some very creative approaches, why are they successful?

A. People are excited to hear their own voices and their own languages in stage, radio performances. Etc. They can also easily access radio programmes, so they listen! People are also interested in listening to the story. But to reach the people, you have to use their language.

Q. What strategy do you use in an area with many ethno-linguistic groups?

A. A “one-size fits all” approach does not work in reaching those most at risk. We work in areas that have a diversity of ethnicities in the Greater Mekong sub-region, such as 56 ethnic groups in China, 49 in Laos and 54 in Viet Nam. It is important to use highly creative approaches. Step 12 of the UNESCO methodology involves producing tapes and CDs of the programmes made, and these are distributed for use by communities and health officials. As UNESCO anthropologist David Feingold said: “While good information does not guarantee good choices, no information virtually guarantees bad choices.”