

Australia - Thailand HIV/AIDS Community Sector Partnership

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Background

ACON and the Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand (RSAT) are two community-based organisations (CBOs) focused on HIV/AIDS and the health and human rights of sexual minorities, based in Sydney and Bangkok respectively.

What is RSAT?

RSAT began in 2001 and is the leading organisation in Thailand working with people of sexual diversity. RSAT has a strong focus on HIV prevention with MSM and also works on a range of health and human rights issues affecting people of sexual diversity.

Thailand has a generalized HIV epidemic, but high and rising levels of HIV have been found among MSM in Bangkok (Van Griensven et al, 2008).

What is ACON?

ACON began in 1985 as a key part of the Sydney gay and lesbian community's mobilisation against the HIV/AIDS epidemic emerging at that time. Over its history ACON has evolved into a broad gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) health organisation that continues to provide HIV prevention programs and HIV services along with a range of other health promotion programs for the GLBT community, sex workers and people who use drugs.

Most HIV infections in Sydney have occurred among men who have sex with men (MSM) and the HIV infection rate has remained stable over the last decade (Guy et al, 2008).

The Partnership Project

During 2006/07, ACON and RSAT collaborated on three mutual capacity-building exchanges that aimed to build an ongoing collaborative relationship between the two organisations.

Additionally these exchanges aimed to:

- Strengthen RSAT's HIV prevention programs with MSM.
- Develop RSAT's organisational systems.
- Build ACON's links with the Thai community in Sydney, especially Thai MSM.
- Increase ACON's capacity to engage with similar CBOs internationally. ACON had previously had only limited contact with comparable organisations in other countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

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Exchange 1 in December 2006 involved RSAT visiting ACON in Sydney. This exchange focused on:

- Introducing the two organisations and their work to each other.
- Strengthening RSAT's organisational infrastructure including financial management, organisational structure, governance, sustainability, strategic planning, human resources and personnel management practices.
- Strengthening RSAT's HIV prevention programs including advocacy, community-based research, campaign and information resource development, outreach strategies, volunteer management and other programmatic strategies important in responding rapidly to rises in HIV infections among MSM.

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Exchange 2 in January/February 2007 which saw RSAT return to Sydney concentrated on building on the content of the first exchange and assessing its initial impact. This exchange focused on:

- Campaign development and implementation, fundraising strategies, advocacy and volunteer management strategies in greater detail than the first exchange.
- Linking ACON and RSAT more strongly to the Thai community in Sydney (including the Thai GLBT community) through meetings with Thai community organisations and representatives of the Thai government in Australia.
- Introducing RSAT to other HIV and GLBT community organisations in Sydney that ACON partners with.

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Exchange 3 in June/July 2007 involved ACON visiting RSAT in Bangkok. This exchange focused on:

- Improving ACON's understanding of RSAT's work.
- Strengthening the relationship between ACON and RSAT by planning the next phase in the two organisations' relationship.
- Introducing ACON to key partners of RSAT including human rights organisations, sex worker organisations and clinical services for MSM.
- Meeting with Australian government representatives in Bangkok.

Outcomes and next steps

The exchanges resulted in substantial changes in both organisations consistent with the focus of the exchanges. A range of changes have occurred in RSAT's program delivery and organisational systems. Links between ACON and Thai MSM in Sydney have been strengthened and ACON has increased its international work.

Moreover, the intention of the Partnership was to link each organisation together so they could continue to work together in the future. Through AusAID's Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development program, ACON now has a staff member located in Bangkok within the UNAIDS Regional Support Team. This is helping ACON and RSAT to develop a joint campaign between the two organisations which targets MSM in Thailand as well as Thai MSM in Sydney. There is ongoing communication and sharing of information between ACON and RSAT.

Practical learning from the Partnership

- The development of meaningful international links between CBOs requires financial resources and a significant commitment of time. These costs need to be funded in addition to the ongoing program and service delivery of CBOs. These investments can lead to significant benefits.
- Robust evaluation activities should be funded as part of capacity building projects. Evaluation needs to be resourced for longer time periods than the initial capacity building activities so that greater analysis of long term impact and processes of change can take place. Evaluation should also aim to capture the many unintended benefits and outcomes of capacity building projects in addition to the measurement of pre-planned objectives.
- Effective strategies for bilingual communication are important in the development of international relationships between CBOs. These strategies can provide opportunities for significant community participation.
- There can be many points of mutual learning and skills building between CBOs. Shared characteristics in the case of ACON and RSAT included:
 - having a broad interest in the health and human rights of sexual minorities,
 - having a key focus on addressing HIV among MSM especially in highly urbanised environments, and
 - being based in their respective local communities in structured and tangible ways.
- Similarly, there is substantial international travel between Sydney and Bangkok, with communities of Thai MSM living in Sydney and Australian MSM living in Bangkok. Population mobility and international social links can provide rational contexts for relationships between CBOs.
- Many CBOs have strong partnerships with other organisations in their local areas including research institutes, government agencies, clinical services and other CBOs. In responding to the needs and desires of their international partners, CBOs can facilitate links with these other organisations.

Free trade and the Partnership

The Partnership was funded by the Australia-Thailand Institute (ATI), a section of the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The ATI was established as a result of the 2005 Free Trade Agreement between Australia and Thailand. It supports organisational and people-to-people links between the two countries across a wide range of public policy areas.

Globalisation, trade and sexual minorities

- Globalisation has generated both problems and opportunities for the response to HIV/AIDS. For example, globalisation has generated increased population mobility that can lead to the expansion of the epidemic. At the same time, it has promoted the international social movement and global and regional structures that have responded to the epidemic.
- An important, even primary feature of globalisation is its economic dimension, which promotes the intensification of trade across national borders (Giddens, 2002). This has most recently led to the formation of free trade agreements in many parts of the world.
- Free trade policy has created significant barriers for the response to the epidemic, notably regarding access to cheap, generic HIV medicine.
- However, free trade may also provide unexpected opportunities for sexual minorities and other groups who are marginalised in the response to HIV/AIDS to build international relationships.
- These opportunities, based in the logic of trade rather than development, are located outside the relations of the international health and development system. This means these relationships can be founded on bilateralism and mutuality, rather than the donor-aid recipient model of development.
- CBOs are often isolated from one another within the global development system. Links between CBOs can strengthen local responses to HIV/AIDS because the nature of the technical assistance they can share is based on demonstrated experience and practice.
- Free trade agreements and other structures that promote international trade may represent an important source of support for sexual minorities to establish international links that can strengthen local and regional responses to HIV/AIDS epidemics among MSM.
- Trade-based sources of support could be important alternatives to the development sector for CBOs. Because these sources of support are not specifically related to HIV/AIDS or health, concerted effort should be made in order to make use of these opportunities.
- Despite this, trade requires strong people-to-people links across national borders. Additionally, the potential for HIV/AIDS epidemics to impact negatively on trade strengthens the case for trade-related resources to be made available for the purposes of HIV/AIDS-related activities.

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Find out more about ACON and RSAT at:

ACON: www.acon.org.au

RSAT: www.fasiroong.org

