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Summary Of Proceedings

By

Virgilio Labrador
SEMINAR ON MASS MEDIA AND AIDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

August 17 - 19, 1994
Bangkok, Thailand

Prepared by

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17 -19 August 1994
Bangkok, Thailand

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Introduction

This report summarizes the proceedings of the Seminar on "Mass Media and AIDS in Southeast Asia" held in Bangkok, Thailand from 17 -19 August 1994. The seminar was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), in cooperation with the Faculty of Public Health of Mahidol University with the support of the ASEAN CANADA Fund.

The objectives of the seminar were to review and assess the use and impact of mass media on AIDS communication in the region; to determine the applicability of current health promotion and communication strategies and approaches; and to generate actionable recommendations on how to strengthen the linkage between mass media and health organisations towards more effective media coverage of the AIDS issue.

Twenty-eight journalists, scholars and health communications professionals from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam participated in the three-day meeting. The seminar programme included panel discussions and country presentations from the seven Southeast Asian countries represented in the seminar. In the final day of the seminar, the participants were divided into two working groups which formulated recommendations based on the seminar deliberations(see Appendix A for the conference programme and Appendix B for the list of participants).

Day I, Wednesday, August 17, 1994

OPENING SESSION

The seminar began with words of welcome from the principal seminar organisers, Mahidol University and AMIC. In his welcome remarks, Dr. Adulya Viriyavejakul, Vice-President of Mahidol University, stated that while many surveys conducted in Thailand confirm that the mass media is the main source of information on AIDS, the public’s perception of personal risk and adoption of preventive behaviour remains low. Thus, he said there is a need to assess how mass media can be made more effective in disseminating information on AIDS.

Mr. Vijay Menon, Secretary-General of AMIC, in his welcome remarks, said that AIDS problem in Asia calls for immediate, concerted and sustained action. He said that those who control or influence the media must be aided, encouraged and challenged by the public health sector to assist in creating an informed and enlightened population.

The chief guest, Dr. Udomsilp Srisaengnam, Deputy Minister of Health of the
Kingdom of Thailand, called for the strengthening of linkages between government and non-government organisations engaged in AIDS education and prevention. He said that various channels should be utilised in AIDS information including small community media and non-traditional media to ensure greater scope and coverage of communication campaigns.

In his keynote address, Mr. Hedayat Ahmed, Director of the Principal Office for Asia and the Pacific of UNESCO, emphasised the importance of education in the prevention of AIDS. He said that education and information dissemination through the mass media may provide the only solution in the absence of a cure or vaccine preventing the spread of AIDS. Mr. Ahmed called for the development of an information dissemination policy to create a more effective national response to the AIDS problem.

SESSION I: Strategies and Approaches to AIDS Communications

The seminar began with country presentations on the various strategies and approaches in AIDS communications being utilised in Southeast Asia.

Danny Yatim, an AIDS counsellor at Mitra Indonesia, said that Indonesia has just recently released its National AIDS Strategy in June 1994. The strategy calls for the Indonesian community and the government to work together in a national effort to control HIV/AIDS. Mr. Yatim said that in a culturally diverse and society such as Indonesia, various strategies must be utilised in AIDS communications depending on the target group. In view of the paternalistic nature of Indonesian society, however, he feels that the government should take the lead in implementation of AIDS communication programmes.

Dr. Anothay Konsayasak, Deputy Director of the Centre for Information and Education for Health of Laos, said that the Laotian government has set-up a National Committee for the Control of AIDS in 1990 to coordinate all AIDS prevention efforts. Although the incidence of HIV/AIDS in Laos is relatively low, its proximity to Thailand has led the government to launch a nationwide campaign against AIDS. Among the strategies utilised include trainings, production and distribution of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials, television and radio programmes, and special campaigns such as the organisation of World AIDS day activities. Effort at AIDS education in Laos, however, are hampered by lack of funds, poor coordination and bureaucratic delays in project approval by the government.

Edmund Ewe, Assistant Director of the Health Education Division of the Ministry of Health, said that in Malaysia, various activities have been carried out since 1985 emphasising AIDS education. These activities include training, production of radio and TV spots and docudramas, outdoor advertising through billboards and signs displayed in public buses and taxi shelters, public forums, exhibitions, concerts, plays and production of educational materials and collateral materials such as key chains and T-shirts. To assess the effectiveness of their campaigns a survey was conducted in 1992. The results showed that while awareness of AIDS is high, the knowledge of the general public on AIDS remain clouded with the common myths and misconceptions associated with AIDS. The findings of the survey led policymakers in Malaysia to reassess their AIDS education programme putting more emphasis on groups with greater risk of HIV infection.

Dr. Enrique Hernandez, President of PHILAIDS, enumerated various strategies in
AIDS communications being utilised in the Philippines, including TV and radio ads, telephone hotlines and distribution of IEC materials. He said that from the Philippine experience the more effective strategies prove to be community-based interventions which use maximum local input. He said that while a multi-channel approach is desirable, interpersonal channels are most effective.

Mrs. Chuo-Ng Peck Hiang, Director of the Family Life Education Coordinating Unit of the Ministry of Health of Singapore presented the salient features of Singapore’s National AIDS Control Programme. The programme combines legislation, public education, research, and monitoring and treatment of the disease. Mrs. Chuo-Ng said that over the years, Singapore’s AIDS Educational Programme has become more targeted towards at-risk groups. However, HIV incidence continue to rise in Singapore, which she attributes to the unequal status of men and women. She said campaigns should target women in order to assert their rights and protect themselves against AIDS.

Ms. Pawana Wienrawee, communications officer of AIDSCAP, Thailand, said that Thailand has one of the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in the region. However, the use of mass media such as incorporating AIDS messages in television soap operas and radio talk shows has raised awareness of AIDS among the public in Thailand. Awareness of the problem, according to Ms. Pawana, does not necessarily translate into "how-to" knowledge of AIDS prevention techniques. She says the challenge for the media is to effectively disseminate information aimed at changing attitudes and behaviours that increase the risk of getting HIV.

Ms. Nguyen Viet Thang of the Vietnam Women’s Review enumerated the various strategies in AIDS education being used in Vietnam. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Health, AIDS education efforts in Vietnam include extensive use of print, broadcast and outdoor media. In order to be more effective, greater coordination is required between Vietnamese health and mass media organisations, according to Ms. Nguyen.

Dr. Rabin Sarda of the World Health Organisation could not attend the seminar due to pressing engagements, but sent a copy of his paper which was distributed to the participants. The paper outlined the extent of the AIDS phenomenon worldwide noting that Asia registered the highest percentage increase in HIV positive cases.

SESSION II: Social Mobilisation for AIDS

The second session examined strategies for mobilizing different sectors of society towards AIDS education and prevention. Ms. Susan Chong, AIDS programme director of the National Council of Women’s Organisations, presented Malaysia’s efforts in involving non-government organisations (NGOs) in AIDS-related activities. She categorised NGOs involved in AIDS as basically of two types: those that were established specifically to address the AIDS issue and those whose primary function is "not specific" to AIDS. To involve as many organisations in AIDS prevention, the Ministry of Health has initiated the establishment of the Malaysian Council of NGOs on AIDS. The Council has been successful in its efforts in involving NGOs, especially those which were not primarily set-up as an AIDS organisations, according to Ms. Chong. The relatively few number of NGOs working in AIDS in Malaysia facilitated coordination.
Dr. Kaan Sheung Kin, vice-president of Action for AIDS (AfA), presented their organisation’s efforts in involving various sectors in Singapore for AIDS. He explained that AfA is an NGO began by some concerned individuals in Singapore to mobilize the community against the spread of AIDS. AfA’s primary tool is networking, and through various strategies such as use of the mass media and coordination with government agencies, AfA has been conducting a sustained campaign to educate the public on AIDS.

In Thailand, NGOs are very active in the AIDS issue, according to Dr. Chalermpol Tansakul of Mahidol University. There are a number of AIDS organisations with varying objectives and target groups in Thailand. Although there is a great deal of coordination among the NGOs, it can still be improved. Due to the number of NGOs working in the same area, there also exists some competition for limited resources among NGOs involved in AIDS.

SESSION III: Print Media Coverage of the AIDS Issue

In the day’s final session, three speakers spoke on print media coverage of the AIDS issues in their respective countries.

Mr. Mouen Chhean Nariddh, a reporter of the Phnom Penh Post, explained that while a number of articles on AIDS have appeared in the Cambodian newspapers, there is not enough reader interest in the issue, as it is overshadowed by the war and other more pressing issues reported in the press. AIDS is also not perceived from a business standpoint as an issue that can boost circulation. Thus, while editors are sympathetic, they are not very enthusiastic about AIDS stories.

Ms. Odinah Batnag, reporter for the Philippine Weekly Graphic, said that in the Philippines, reporting on AIDS focus on the more sensational aspects of the issue. The perception among health professionals is that AIDS reporting in the Philippine media contains many inaccuracies and serves to perpetuate some of the myths and misconceptions about AIDS. Ms. Batnag attributes poor reporting of the AIDS issue to the lack of training on AIDS of Philippine reporters.

Mr. Wee Soo Cheang, reporter of The Nation, said that in the Thai print media there is no dearth of articles on AIDS. The reporting has improved considerably over the years since the first articles on AIDS appeared in 1984. However, Mr. Wee feels that however extensive the coverage of AIDS in the Thai newspapers, they only reach out to the middle and upper strata of society, while the need for AIDS information is at the grassroots- and community-level.

Day II, Thursday, August 18, 1994

SESSION IV: Broadcast Media Coverage of the AIDS Issue

Three speakers from Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand spoke on radio and TV coverage on the AIDS issue. Ms. Nawiyah Che’Lah, Director of International Relations of Radio Television Malaysia said that the broadcasting environment in Malaysia is undergoing major changes. New players are entering the field and more and more channels are being added. These changes will have an impact on AIDS programming, according to Ms.
Nawiyah. She said AIDS programmes will have to meet the standards of a more competitive broadcasting environment.

Ms. Suprapti Widarto, Deputy Director of Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI), enumerated the various AIDS programmes and information campaigns on Indonesian radio and TV. She said that while there is a good number of AIDS programming in Indonesian TV, none of them have been broadcast on prime time. She re-echoed the sentiment of other presenters of the need for more training of broadcast people on AIDS.

Ms. Sumitra Amarayon spoke on the various activities of the Public Relations Department of Thailand (PRDT), which is encharged with overseeing the broadcast media. In her presentation, she enumerated the various radio and TV programmes on AIDS being undertaken by the PRDT. Among the programmes include the use of traditional media through the broadcast of plays and the marketing of cassette tapes on AIDS featuring traditional songs and instruments.

SESSION V: Prostitution, AIDS and Mass Media

Mr. Horacio Severino of the Centre for Investigative Journalism explained the relationship between prostitution, AIDS and the media. He said that sensational reporting of the AIDS issue in the Philippines have given rise to misconceptions about sex workers and the spread of AIDS. Media reporting has focused the spread of AIDS on the sex industry obscuring the fact that AIDS can be transmitted through various other means such as heterosexual activity. Mr. Severino said that while it makes for a good sensational story, blaming the spread of AIDS on the sex industry is misleading and does AIDS education efforts a disservice.

Mr. Praween Payawipapong, director of the Population and Social Development Association, presented his organisation’s efforts in reaching out to the large numbers of women engaged in Thailand’s sex industry. He said that their efforts at educating these women are targeted towards the promotion of safe sex and to dispel the common myths and misconceptions about AIDS. Their programmes are usually conducted as close to the workers’ environment as possible and through various innovative approaches, they try to reach the widest number of beneficiaries.

SESSION VI: Civic-Media AIDS Awareness Campaigns

In the final session, case studies of specific experiences in civic-media AIDS campaigns from the countries of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore was discussed.

Mr. Teguh Budiono of Project Concern International presented two case studies from Indonesia. One project targeted young men involved in the sex industry in Bali and another project targeted young student leaders. In both cases, the use of group and interpersonal media proved effective in disseminating the desired messages to the target audience.
Dr. Vincentita Cervera of PHILCADSA presented the case of a coordinating council of NGOs in motivating their member-organisations to engaged in AIDS awareness activities. Through the use of various media, including personal networking, and intensive training activities, PHILCADSA was able to involve the 73 organisations under its umbrella to conduct AIDS information and education campaigns.

Ms. Jeannie Thng, Head of the Mass Media Education Unit of the Ministry of Health of Singapore, presented a case study of AIDS advertising campaigns launched by the Ministry from 1998 to the present. She said that the Ministry's advertising campaigns have evolved from being "disease-centred" in its early stages to being "behaviour-oriented." The advertising campaigns have been very successful, registering a 94 percent awareness rating among its target audience in an evaluation survey. Ms. Thng attributes the success of their campaigns to the following factors: focused messages targeted at specific audiences; careful media selection and periodic evaluation.

Dr. Joseph Sommerville of the School of Communication Studies of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, presented some key characteristics of effective AIDS awareness campaigns in terms of form (or channel) and content. In terms of form, he said that strategies of social marketing should be utilised and that mass communication channels should be combined with interpersonal channels. In terms of content, he recommends that campaigns should focus on a specific message; address existing beliefs that impede desired behaviour; and focus on the positive consequences of healthy behaviour.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After the presentations, the participants were divided into two working groups that called for action in the following areas of priority:

1. **Attitude.** Many media organizations and practitioners in Southeast Asia do not seem to place enough importance on AIDS, in spite of evidence that it is becoming a worldwide epidemic. Media practitioners generally seem to have a narrow perspective of the problem, neglecting the political, economic, and other non-health implications of what is commonly perceived as a purely public health crisis. They must also become more sensitive to the ethical and cultural values which have an impact on AIDS.

2. **Professionalism.** To cover the AIDS issue more effectively, media practitioners need to develop their professional skills in information-gathering and analysis.

3. **Access to information.** Media practitioners often lack access to accurate information from technical and institutional sources on a public health crisis in which the only effective response is preventive education.

4. **Cooperation.** Practitioners need more cooperation from sources who can provide information. Coordination between media and information sources can also improve the dissemination of information and the quality of media coverage.

5. **Resources.** Without more financial and other resources, media are limited in covering AIDS issues, and distribution of information is constrained.
6. **Evaluation.** There is little effort to evaluate media campaigns or seek feedback about media information from the public in order to improve coverage and future information efforts.

7. **Distribution.** There are population groups at risk who still do not receive adequate information about AIDS.

The seminar recommended the following responses to the above deficiencies in media coverage:

1. The perspectives of media practitioners can be broadened with regular workshops and other opportunities for exposure to AIDS issues. Journalism skills can also be upgraded with training opportunities and exchange programs. Training can also address the packaging of information in usable formats and interesting styles.

2. Information disseminators of AIDS information should maintain closer contact with media practitioners to facilitate flow of information. In particular, linkages should be formed between media groups in the region and such regional AIDS organizations as the Asia-Pacific Council of AIDS Services Organizations (APCASO) and the ASEAN Task Force on AIDS. Glossaries and press kits can be prepared to provide timely and convenient information. An inventory of health and media professionals interested in AIDS can be prepared and distributed to encourage collaborations and facilitate information exchanges. The early and continuous involvement of media in planning, research, and evaluation should be encouraged.

3. Government and other sources of funding need to appreciate the magnitude of the crisis, the importance of timely and accurate public information, and the need for resources to enable media to respond to the situation adequately.

4. Media should regularly evaluate their information campaigns or reports so that the feedback from their audiences can contribute to improvements in the quality of media coverage.

5. Distribution can be improved by identifying target groups and tailoring information for those groups more accurately.

**Evaluation**

Overall, the participants rated the quality of the programme very highly. On a scale of one to five, where five is the highest, 41 per cent gave the overall value of the conference a 5, while 53 percent gave it a 4 and the rest a 3 no rating of 1 or 2 was given. The participants likewise gave very high ratings to the presentations and discussions. An average of 50 per cent gave the overall relevance of the presentations a 5 and an average 40 percent gave it a 4.
The seminar was generally regarded as a success in meeting its objectives. The participants particularly noted the opportunity for networking. The seminar also brought together representatives from the media, AIDS NGOs and health professionals together to discuss common issues of concern. The seminar also provided a forum for the discussion of very important issues.

Follow-up

The participants suggested regular follow-up seminars with representatives of health and media organisations. They also recommended training courses on AIDS for journalists and broadcast media personnel and communication skills training for health professionals. The conduct of a research study on mass media utilisation and effectiveness for AIDS was also suggested.

Conclusion

In sum, the discussions were comprehensive and stimulating. The conference achieved the objectives it set. In-depth discussions on a very important issues of concern to the region. Follow-up activities were identified for action.