

History of the HIV/AIDS-Epidemic in Thailand; Success and its relativity

Thailand is one of the few developing and emerging countries in the world whose public AIDS fighting campaign was and is effective. In 1991 there were more than 140.000 new infections while for 2003 experts estimated 19.000 new infections. Since then, the number is still decreasing but only slightly.

History

Everything began in 1984. This is the year of the first registered case of AIDS in Thailand. But it didn't look like it's going to spread widely: For the next years only special groups like gay men, commercial sex workers, drug users and (sex) tourists were likely to get infected with HIV and so the government focused its prevention campaigns on these groups. The general public became informed about AIDS by private media not until 1987, when newspapers and TV shows published the human side of the case of a fabric worker, who was infected with HIV by a blood transfusion.

But this didn't change the view of the government: In its eyes only a few people in so called high-risk groups were likely to become infected. The general opinion was that HIV and AIDS came from outside of Thailand. "Thai-to-Thai transmission is not in evidence" [1], stated one government official. That's why some MPs even suggested that tourists should be required to pass an HIV test before being allowed to enter the country.

In 1991 a new Prime Minister came to power and AIDS prevention and control finally became the number one issue in Thailand. The AIDS control program became directly responsible to the Prime Minister and its budget was more than doubled. A large-scale public information campaign on AIDS was launched: Every hour anti-AIDS messages interrupted the country's 488 radio stations' programs and the country's six televisions' programs. Schools were required to teach about AIDS. The government even forged partnerships with NGOs and other organizations involving them in anti-AIDS projects.

Furthermore a very important "100 percent condom program" was launched. Although commercial sex is illegal in Thailand, the government worked together with the owners of sex establishments to increase the prevalence of condom use. Sex workers and their clients were required to use condoms that were distributed freely by the government.

These campaigns showed results. The condom use by sex workers rose from about 50% to nearly 100% between 1990 and 1994. In the same time, the number of new HIV-infections halved. Overall, the HIV prevalence decreased from about 4% in 1993 to less than 2% in 1997.

Later, a second "National Plan for Prevention and Alleviation of the AIDS Problem" was initiated. It would cover the period from 1997 to 2001 and included the previous features but was extended by programs to mobilize communities and people living with HIV/AIDS. However the budget for AIDS fighting programs was cut back in 1998 and the following years because of the Asian Financial Crisis. Although there were more infected people in 2000, the government still spent less money on anti-AIDS programs than it did in 1997 (before the financial and economic crisis).

But the efforts of the government still went on. In 2000 the "Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy" was started. This is a special antiretroviral treatment that slows down the spread of the HI-virus in a body and so makes it possible for people living with AIDS, to live relatively normal and relatively long. In the next years the number of people being treated with the newly introduced therapy increased while the number of deaths due to HIV/AIDS decreased. Moreover the government also set off a national system to monitor whether their efforts to reduce mother-to-child transmission was successful.

In 2002 a third national anti-AIDS plan was launched. It covered the period till 2006 and had ambitious aims: Reducing the prevalence of HIV to less than 1% (1.8% in 2003) and providing medical treatment for at least 80% of the people living with HIV. This aims were not reached, but decisive steps in the right direction showed that Thailand's government took the right way.

Today

Today AIDS is still a leading cause of death in Thailand. Antiretroviral therapy services – although expanding – only reach about two thirds of the people who are in need of treatment. The prevalence of AIDS is down to 1.4% which means that about 580'000 people are living with HIV/AIDS. The government programs show big improvements in many areas but it's still not enough. A big problem is that most government efforts focus on the health sector, only slightly touching the education and security sector. "But experiences of stigmatization and

discrimination are still reported by up to 40% of people living with HIV” [2]. So the problem has to be discussed more in communities.

Future

The government of Thailand wants to reduce the number of new HIV infections by 2010 by half. The UN supports the efforts of the government and encourages especially decentralised solutions to deal with AIDS/HIV, because people in special groups and little villages may not be reached by the government’s campaigns.

Quotes:

[1] World Bank (1997) 'Confronting AIDS: public priorities in a global epidemic', Oxford University Press, p.275-276

[2] <http://www.unaids.org/en/CountryResponses/Countries/thailand.asp>, break 8, line 5, 21/12/07 13:43

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