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## SOAPS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

*by Kevin Conway*

It's suppertime. In communities across northeast Thailand villagers eagerly await the next instalment of this region's hottest new radio drama. What makes this Thai soap unusual, however, is its subject matter: aids. Behind the jokes and puns is a serious attempt to educate and change risky behaviours.

The group responsible for this novel mini-series is an international team of health researchers. Its co-leaders are Thicumporn Kuyyakanond of Thailand's Khon Kaen University and Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale of Canada's University of Windsor. With idrc support, they pioneered an aids awareness program to prevent the spread of hiv through the rural communities of Thailand's dry northeast.

The program was based on the team's earlier research. Local women were interviewed individually and in focus groups. Although the rate of hiv infection across Thailand's northeast is low, most of the women were aware of aids. The results also showed that few women felt personally at risk, despite knowing that their husbands frequented prostitutes.

According to Maticka-Tyndale, the women's sense of immunity is rooted in community norms and the belief system surrounding sexuality. She uses prostitution and married men as an example. There are certain rules. Having sex with someone other than your wife is not wrong, but it should never be a threat to the marriage unit.

As long as men were discreet about their liaisons, wives were expected not to pursue any suspicions they had. Most said they trusted their husbands not to put them at risk.

The interviews also revealed another cultural barrier to open communication between husband and wife; a cool heart. A cool heart or a calm emotional response towards others is a trait that Thai women value highly. We played into all of that, says Maticka-Tyndale. We had to encourage men and women to recognize that they had to prevent hiv transmission or those rules would have been broken.

The radio scripts were based on stories taken directly from the focus group discussions, thus reflecting real village situations. Cliffhangers that ended each broadcast sustained conversation and discussion, says Maticka-Tyndale.

The dramas were styled after a traditional, much-loved form of Thai theatre called Maw Lum. Maticka-Tyndale describes Maw Lum as a mixture of soap opera and improvisational theatre.

With a captive audience wanting more, the researchers held village meetings to discuss the radio shows and make hiv/aids a community issue. Maticka-Tyndale's own research has shown this step to be critical in changing individual behaviour. In some villages these discussions led to community action plans. One community even set up a condom-dispensary near a bus stop so that men heading for town to party would have easy access to protection.

Maticka-Tyndale believes that similar programs could be adapted to other cultures and other countries. The only thing that would change is the radio dramas. Specific interventions, based on prior research, would be tailored to individual communities needs.

The nature of hiv infection is such that measuring the program s effectiveness was problematic. The best you can do is look at behaviour changes, things like condom sales and distributions and community awareness, says Maticka-Tyndale. However, the lack of hard data didn t stop Thai health officials, in collaboration with local ngos, from expanding the pilot to province-wide programs.

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