

# MULTIMEDIA TRAINING KIT

## **Case Study Name : Volunteers Contributing to MDG: #6: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases**

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Dispelling misconceptions about HIV / AIDS - Viet Nam

Vern Weitzel is a UN Volunteer in Viet Nam who is using Information and Communication Technologies to address many different issues of development in his adopted country, including HIV/AIDS.

According to him, a central issue regarding addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis in Viet Nam has been disorganized communications within the government and among aid organizations, as well as a lack of ability of the people living and working with those affected to communicate together. In his work, he is constantly trying to address these issues of communication: "It is not uncommon to have two different international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) working in the same district but not aware of one another," asserts Mr. Weitzel. "Regionalism and poor communications among government bodies have tended to limit bottom-up communications and promote local autonomy. So people in one province know little about what is going on in other provinces and the Government has had little grasp on what is happening locally. The setting here in Viet Nam is one of very strong controls on information at almost all levels, yet also a lack of communications in key areas where one might think communications is vital. I won't go further into the cultural reasons for all of this, but they are quite important to the problem ... and the solution."

Mr. Weitzel believes that volunteers have an important role to play in the Vietnamese society: "When we apply to be a volunteer, we are asked questions to see if we are more interested in the financial benefits than the commitment. It would be nice if I made lots of money as a consultant to do the same thing. But then people here in Viet Nam would think of me differently. Vietnamese people, even the educated and powerful, have suffered for many years of poverty. So they are keenly aware of the difference between Western and Vietnamese salaries. There is a great benefit for me in doing my job that I do not make more money than my Vietnamese colleagues. People find it easier to accept me as an equal. People don't see me as a source of Overseas Development Assistance but rather, like them, as a worker. That is why we live in a worker's apartment and eat the same food as the people around us. My wife still travels on an old bicycle and dresses in ordinary clothes. So when she stands up for her rights in the marketplace it is as a citizen and not the wife of an important foreigner. Things like that are very important to us."

Misconceptions about HIV/AIDS abound in Viet Nam, according to Mr. Weitzel. "Even now it is seen as a 'social evil', subject to police investigation and sometimes police action; there is a general (and very much wrong) reasoning that people who are HIV positive are drug injectors, prostitutes or homosexuals, all of which are illegal in Viet Nam. As a result, it has been very difficult to encourage people living with or affected with HIV/AIDS to organize themselves. 'Western' advice regarding HIV/AIDS is seen by many in the community as an intrusion into Vietnamese culture; after all, it

has long been assumed by many here that drug injecting, prostitution and homosexuality are Western vices that were exported to Viet Nam."

UN Volunteers and local volunteer activists are working together with the government, INGOs, and Viet Nam non-governmental organizations (VNGOs) to address these issues and misconceptions with ICTs in a number of ways.

When asked why volunteering is important to him in his efforts to improve the living situation of many Vietnamese, Mr. Weitzel had this to say: "Volunteering is a bit like being a scientist. You do the work because it needs to be done, and not really because you get paid to do it. Some people like to put this in terms of commitment and I have several reasons for being committed to the development of this region. But at essence, it is an attitude, a sense that we should use our lives to do good things for this world and not just ourselves. Millions of people are volunteers in small or large ways, I guess for some of the same reasons. So it is very important that there exist organisations that can help us make the most effective use of our wish to help others."

Volunteers in Viet Nam, including from UNV, have set up several e-mail-based discussion groups and distribution lists for passing on (mainly international) information on HIV/AIDS among INGOs and VNGOs. The most important has been JVNET, a VNGO-based email list on AIDS and gender issues. The local UNAIDS Coordinator has also initiated a regular information distribution list to the community working on HIV/AIDS. Working with USAID, volunteers and staff at INGOs, VNGOs and UNDP have set up an email distribution list among the foreign development community, known as a Technical Working Group (TWG), which also has email sub-groups on Access to Care, Harm Reduction and GIPA (Greater Involvement for People with AIDS).

"What we are intending to do now is to find a better way to tie all of these email and in-person resources together," notes Mr. Weitzel. "UNAIDS is about to revise their website as a main source of information on this subject in both languages (if possible). They don't intend to archive emails or meeting minutes there, but they can make sure that contact information is readily available. And we can post documents there easily for downloading."

"The above are all very general tools that we can use to help inform people, mostly in English. For now that makes sense, Vietnamese people are still lagging in their use of the Internet - because of cost as well as language. It is going to be difficult to bring even Vietnamese experts to these websites. So it would be useful if we can use other media more effectively. My former colleague, a UNV in Myanmar, created a wonderful CD of documents on HIV/AIDS in Vietnamese and in English which has been passed around as much as possible. We need ways to improve the distribution network so that information like this gets to more places, even distant ones. This is a transportation issue and it is also cultural in the sense that Vietnamese people tend to be information hoarders and not dispersers. A mechanism which sends information out, should do so in a way that makes it easy for everyone to know about. The Internet would be perfect if we could encourage its use by Vietnamese people."

At the grass-roots level in Viet Nam, the organization of "self-help groups" for people with disabilities has been difficult. The Disability forum and web site at <http://forum.wso.net> has helped network people throughout Viet Nam by computer. Additionally, if someone is involved with the group, that person is asked to help communicate with other PWDs about the forum. "It is important for PWDs to work together to effect change, to improve their status, advocate better conditions and so

on. But legally they don't have a right to meet on their own," notes Mr. Weitzel. "They can only meet within the framework of Government supported 'Mass Mobilisation Organisations' which may not totally serve their interests and in any case are not composed of PWDs! Making 'self-help groups' legally approved and appropriate entities at the local community level is therefore an important step. The relevant ministry has agreed to address this issue and we are hoping that soon people in their own communities can gather and discuss mutual needs for the disabled. Draft guidelines and legal references have been circulated. If we can agree to self-help groups for the disabled, than why not people with HIV/AIDS? The cultural, security and stigma problems are enormous but if we can overcome them, then there are opportunities for them to use ICTs to help them help themselves, just as is being done with the disabled."

Vietnamese society does interact with computers, but generally the people at greatest risk for HIV/AIDS don't know about computers. Radio and TV have been mainstays in using ICT to fight HIV/AIDS with the poorly skilled. However, the Internet does have a role. "The Internet has been a toy for rich and urban youth, and chatting is a big fad. One of the most vulnerable groups today, and not just for HIV/AIDS, are Vietnamese youth -- all youth. By tapping into this culture of computer chatting, as well as networked schools and urban youth, all of these can provide information on issues like HIV/AIDS. If we can make sure that such messages are advertised at schools, youth magazines and newspapers, then people will visit the web sites and forums we set up for them regarding HIV/AIDS."

Volunteers have also been involved in the onsite distribution of a comic book regarding the MDGs to a few schools, and will soon have an online version as well (<http://www.un.org.vn/tuonglai/>). "We are thinking about making the concept interactive so that it will be more interesting to school kids. One of our projects with AusAID has developed another cartoon-based information guide which we would also like to put online. We are waiting for Government approval for that. This is a sensitive topic and placement of toons showing drug injection and condom use needs to be tasteful. AusAID has in fact funded other cartoon advocacy tools in the past which (lacking funding for a new print edition) could be circulated online."

The future for the potential of ICTs in Viet Nam to fight against and educate about HIV/AIDS continues to look good: Vietnamese government is now networking schools, particularly high schools, to the Internet. There is a plan to put an Internet-connected computer in every post office in the country (Village Post Office Cultural Centres web site: <http://vietnamgateway.org/vanhoaxa/>). Viet Nam is actually assembling most of its PCs already, so they are more and more common, even if, as Mr. Weitzel notes, "the trickle-down to rural communes has been a very slow drip." Mr. Weitzel recently saw a demonstration of software called IRUS which uses a Peer-Driven model for recruiting outreach workers from among drug users to reach Injecting Drug Users (IDUs), and notes that this is now being used rather effectively by NGOs in Viet Nam's northern provinces; he is exploring this software further and tracking the project's progress and expansion to other areas.

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