UNESCO EXPERT CONSULTATION

“PROMOTING STANDARDS FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL RESEARCH
ON THE ISSUES OF HIV/AIDS AND TRAFFICKING”

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BANGKOK, THAILAND

Issues arising out of Small Group Discussions and Recommendations
1 ISSUES ARISING FROM SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

During this consultation, over 60 researchers convened to discuss gaps and barriers in the production and use of socio-cultural research, and ways forward. Over the three days small group discussions were held, firstly on gaps and barriers in existing trafficking and HIV socio-cultural research, secondly on cross cutting issues such as gender and sexuality, migration, ethnic minorities and culture, and finally on ways forward vis a vis research priorities in both areas, methodological standards, use and dissemination of research findings and collaboration with donor agencies.

Detailed below are the gaps and barriers identified by participants during the consultation.

1.1 Gaps in Existing Socio-Cultural Research

i. HIV/AIDS

A major criticism of existing socio-cultural research on HIV/AIDS is it is too narrowly focused. This problem is attributed to the dominance of the biomedical and/or public health model in the response to HIV/AIDS and manifests itself in, for example, a concentration on “risk groups” (such as MSM and IDUs) or “hotspots” rather than on the broader contextual factors which influence vulnerability such as gender and poverty. As a result, some populations vulnerable to HIV/AIDS (e.g. married women) remain under researched because they do not fit into proscribed risk categories.

Apart from the scope of socio-cultural research, there are also significant geographical gaps both between and within countries, such as

- Southern Thailand (compared to Northern Thailand where a vast amount of research was conducted in the 1990s);
- Non urban areas e.g. in Vietnam there is comparatively little research conducted outside Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City; and
- Myanmar, which has scarce research available on any aspect of HIV/AIDS, let alone on particularly sensitive issues such as sexuality.

Finally, there is little social science or behavioral data at the sub-national or provincial level in any country. Furthermore, socio-cultural research efforts are not always applied in the areas or populations which such data identifies as vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. For example, in Thailand there is relatively little socio-cultural research on men who have sex with men or injecting drug users, despite high prevalence in these groups.

ii. Trafficking

A significant gap in socio-cultural research on trafficking is the lack of data on the size of the problem (in terms of the actual numbers of people trafficked), composition of people being trafficked (e.g. sex, age and ethnicity) the reasons why so-called trafficking takes
place (including the cultural factors such as family risk factors and kinship relations) and the socio-economic context of the phenomenon.

Other gaps in our understanding of trafficking include:

a. The distinction between migration (safe or unsafe) and trafficking and the stage at which migration becomes “exploitation”;

b. The economic issues which drive trafficking, for example demand from traffickers, demand from clients and demand at the macro economic level; and

c. Particular groups such as traffickers themselves, male victims of trafficking, and of trafficking networks.

Comparative research is not available on countries where trafficking takes place, both within and between South East Asia and other parts of the world, such as Eastern Europe. This would be useful in two ways. Firstly, it would help illuminate trends in trafficking by contrasting data from countries of origin with countries of destination. Secondly, such comparative research could demonstrate how trafficking takes on different forms. For example within Cambodia and China trafficking does not seem to be an organized crime but between countries (e.g. Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia) it may be.

Issues related to repatriation also remain under researched. These include stigma and discrimination against women and girls who are returned, economic considerations such as how these returnees support themselves financially, self esteem, trauma and healing. In particular, there is no comparative research on those who have been repatriated versus those that have not.

1.2 Barriers to the Funding, Conduct and Use of Better Socio-Cultural Research on HIV/AIDS and Trafficking

In discussion of the barriers in socio-cultural research, a number of common problems pertaining to both HIV/AIDS and trafficking were discussed. These include:

i. Definitional Problems:

Terms such as “trafficking”, “sex worker” and “client” are used often in socio-cultural research yet their meanings are contested. Participants at the consultation gave a number of examples of the confusion this causes, e.g.:

- In trafficking research, there is no clear distinction between legal (safe) and illegal (unsafe) migration. Related to this is a lack of clarity around what constitutes labour exploitation, as, for example, a person trafficked from Vietnam to Cambodia may earn less than other Cambodians but more than if he/she had remained in Vietnam;
• Sex workers are often conceptualized as just sex workers, when this may be merely what they do, not who they are. Such conceptualization has the effect of excluding from the scope of inquiry important social, cultural and economic dimensions in their lives; and

• The term “client” is also commonly used in socio-cultural research on both HIV/AIDS and trafficking, yet is a western notion not always recognized in GMS countries. In China for example, no man would willingly identify as a “client” of a sex worker, thereby making research on this group difficult.

Generally speaking, definitions vary from culture to culture and over time. A clear instance of this is the definition of “adult” which is someone over the age of 16 in China, rather than someone over the age of 18 as is the case in most other countries. The international definition of 18 as the age of adulthood is a relatively recent event. Differences between cultures and over time have implications for how some research subjects, such as child prostitution, are defined.

   ii. Underlying Assumptions

Assumptions about gender and sexuality riddle much socio-cultural research on HIV/AIDS and trafficking, especially on the sex industry. This manifests itself in a number of ways, for example:

• As male sexuality is predatory (i.e. men get pleasure from sex and women don’t), it is male demand for sexual services which propels the trafficking phenomenon. Hence much socio-cultural research on trafficking focuses its inquiry on sex trafficking and the female victims of such trafficking;

• Sex work is not considered to “work”. As a result, use of the “secret client” methodology, where the researcher enters e.g. a brothel posing as a client, has been permitted, whereas in other fields it would be considered unethical.

   iii. Methodological Issues

The primacy given to quantitative over qualitative methods was the major methodological issue in HIV/AIDS and trafficking socio-cultural research, as identified by consultation participants. The main shortcoming of quantitative research methods, such as questionnaires and surveys, is that they are unable to elicit in depth information about beliefs, norms and practices in relation to HIV or trafficking, or the social, cultural and economic context in which HIV transmission or trafficking takes place.

However, it was also acknowledged that numerical data is perceived to be more rigorous by policy makers and donor agencies than textual data. The latter may be beset by the following problems:
• Difficulties in translation;

• Difficulties in defining particular concepts, and when a concept has several meanings this reduces methodological rigor; and

• The time consuming nature of tasks involved, such as transcribing tapes of interviews.

Additionally, the fluid nature of many subjects under investigation, such as culture, cannot be captured adequately by current socio-cultural research methods.

iv. Analysis and Use of Research in the Design, Delivery and Evaluation of Interventions

Apart from the actual production of socio-cultural research in the region, there are numerous problems in the analysis and use of research which does exist, including:

• Donor agencies may commission valuable research which doesn’t get used, because structures for the involvement of researchers in the design, delivery and evaluation of interventions do not exist;

• A dearth of operations research. Operations research is essential to explaining why a program is or is not working, and therefore should form the basis for the scaling up of any intervention in the future\(^1\); and

• Some NGOs have access to good raw data but do not know how to analyze it. For example, potentially useful data is believed to exist on migration and trafficking but remains unused.

v. Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic minorities are a group extremely vulnerable to both HIV/AIDS and trafficking, yet little in depth research is conducted with this group. Participants identified the following as some of the barriers:

• Some potential research subjects, such as trafficked women who have been repatriated, are stigmatized in their communities and therefore unwilling to be part of research which draws attention to their experiences;

• Budgetary and time constraints make it difficult for researchers to establish a trusting relationship with the community they are working in;

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\(^1\) The Population Council has prepared a manual on conducting operations research

http://www.popcouncil.org/horizons/orhivaidshndbk.html
• Often research results are not disseminated or any follow up to the research evident. Communities are frustrated by this and are less likely to participate in future research projects; and

• Some researchers and funding agencies do not see the value of research on small numbers of people, over larger projects with findings that can potentially be generalized to the population as a whole.
2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Socio-Cultural Research Priorities in HIV/AIDS

Donor agencies and researchers should prioritise and undertake research in the following areas:

R1. Vulnerable populations which remain under researched, such as housewives, ethnic minorities and migrants across the Greater Mekong Sub Region;

R2. Issues surrounding gender and sexuality;

R3. Operations research, to determine which interventions are working and why;

R4. The social, economic and cultural context of HIV vulnerability, with particular attention to issues of ethnicity and poverty;

R5. The impact of national government policies, such as drug laws, on HIV prevention efforts;

R6. The role of gatekeepers such as “pimps”, drug dealers, army commanders and schools principals in facilitating and/or preventing risk behaviours; and

R7. Areas with a high concentration of men, such as in prisons, construction sites, mines and monasteries, or women, such as prisons and textile factories.

2.2 Socio-Cultural Research Priorities in Trafficking

Donor agencies and researchers should prioritise and undertake research in the following areas:

R8. Defining “trafficking” in way which accounts for cultural variations in the term and phenomenon;

R9. Interventions research, which includes analysis of what is being prevented and why, analysis of the legal framework and efficacy of legal interventions and post interventions effects (intended and unintended) on the individual, community and culture;

R10. The psychological impact of repatriation on trafficking victims and their families, including analysis of the differences between forced and voluntary repatriation;

R11. The micro and macro level context of trafficking vulnerability, with particular attention to issues such as citizenship status and labor legislation;

R12. Non sex trafficking e.g. for labour and cross border marriages;

R13. The sex trafficking of boys and men;
R14. The determinants and characteristics of safe migration; and

R15. Economic studies of demand for exploitative labor.

2.3 Research Design and Methods

Organisations such as UNESCO, in consultation with researchers should:
R16. Define standards for HIV and trafficking socio-cultural research on sampling, the utility of research, dissemination requirements, community participation in all stages of research and transparency in the collation, analysis and presentation of data;

R17. Develop a code of conduct (separate to standards) on socio-cultural research which encompasses ethical issues;

R18. Promote the use of different methods and multidisciplinary research teams in socio-cultural research; and

R19. Encourage universities and other bodies carrying out research to earmark a proportion of research budgets for capacity building in qualitative data interpretation.

2.4 Cultural Competence

Universities, research institutions and other researchers should integrate cultural competence by
R20. Developing and using cognitive tools (such as knowledge of folk medicine theory and of marriage/divorce systems), to better understand the belief systems which communities operate under; and

R21. Using community members (such as local healers) in research design, data collation and analysis, and the dissemination of research findings.

2.5 Collaboration in the Funding, Dissemination and Use of Socio-Cultural Research

Organisations such as UNESCO and UNAIDS, in collaboration with donor agencies and researchers should:
R22. Communicate to agencies which fund research

- why research is important and the problems in implementing programs without conducting relevant research first;
- how particular methodologies relate to what they know and what these methodologies require in terms of funding and timeframes; and
- how qualitative and quantitative research methods can be better integrated.
R23. Advocate for more investment in research on broader issues related to HIV/AIDS and Trafficking, such as gender, sexuality, death and illness;

R24. Develop tools (such as model questionnaires and a manual for policy makers on the interpretation and use of research findings) which can be used across the region to strengthen the use of research in policy and practice;

R25. Create networks and databases through which research, including studies not published in English, can be shared amongst researchers;

R26. Cultivate relationships with policy makers and the media through regular meetings and the production of briefings, films and press packages; and

R27. Conduct an annual research review to highlight good and bad socio-cultural research on HIV/AIDS and trafficking.