

# Reverse development – When Dutch NGOs learned from Thai NGOs on interfaith work and HIV/AIDS

This was an initiative of the Togetherness Foundation and the Constellation for AIDS Competence supported by Oxfam/Novib. The main objective of the initiative was to promote south-north learning and sharing on the AIDS Competence Process (ACP) and its applications in the Thai and Dutch contexts. Major elements of the initiative consisted of 1) a learning event in Thailand for selected representatives of the Dutch NGOs, to be hosted by the Interfaith Network on HIV/AIDS in Thailand (INHAT) aiming at introducing the ACP and how it was integrated in interfaith response to HIV/AIDS, and 2) a return visit of the Thai team to the Netherlands, to consolidate the understanding and facilitate application in the Dutch context.

## The Dutch NGOs' Visit to Chiangmai, Thailand

The learning event in Thailand was conducted at the Catholic Mission Center, in Muang District in Chiang Mai, during February 28<sup>th</sup>- 4 March 2011. The Thai team participating in the event were key INHAT and Norwegian Church Aid staff and a Constellation coach. The Dutch team consisted of 4 representatives from 4 Dutch NGOs (Bastiaan Verberne from Ramadan Festival, Moustapha Baba from Mexit, Brigitte Makkinje from Serve the City, and Alper Alasag from Islam & Dialogue) under the umbrella of the Togetherness Foundation. In addition there were 3 participants from the Constellation. The event included the introduction to the ACP and how it was applied to religion and HIV/AIDS work in Thailand by INHAT and NCA, SALT visits to 3 communities of different faiths in Chiangmai, After Action Reviews, building a common vision, and planning for the return visit of the Thai team to the Netherlands in May. (Notes: SALT: S = support, share; A = appreciate, analyse; L = listen, learn, link; T = transfer, team)



### What strengths did we see in the 3 visited communities?



**Nong Baen Community, Sarapee District, Chiangmai (Muslim):**

- Imam working with the PLHIV, Community shifting from fear to Care
- Families comfortable in living with PLHIV
- Family and kinship giving care to PLHIV
- Care irrespective and across religions – Buddhists and Muslims
- Develop common ground for communicating with those of other religions: broad religious teachings that are common/agreeable/acceptable to both religious communities e.g. caring for others, helping other people
- PLHIV's advice: maintain good health and have an open heart so that there is self acceptance, which in turn gives the courage to go out into the society and get the community members to accept you positively.
- PLHIV's ability to apply and adapt SALT in own family too, not just in working with the community
- Faith leaders have link with other faith and community leaders elsewhere to work together
- Reach out to youth
- The strength of a common humanity which helped to move from fear and stigma to care

- Acceptance of what happens



**Khuang Pao Community, Jomthong District, Chiangmai (Christian):**

- Promoting Income Generating Activities (IGA), leading to sustainability
- Learn about PLHIV's strengths and capacities
- Train PLHIV based on their strengths to build their capacity for public speaking
- Volunteers move from 'getting the job done' to 'enjoy the work' mode and not feeling that it is a work at all
- "There are no sinners", and faith leaders reach out to the vulnerable without Denial, Stigma or DiscrimINATION (DSD)
- Recognize importance of youth
- Everyone, every group, can participate in church activities, including Transgenders and MSM
- Faith leader: "If we tell others that God will punish them for their sins, we are actually the one doing the punishing – not God!"
- Volunteer showing by doing how community people can care for each other, "Do not preach good behaviours. Do it. And others will follow the example"
- Develop new generation of leaders



**Jedi Me Krua Community, Sansai District, Chiangmai (Buddhist):**

- PLHIV moving from thinking about self to thinking about others; from suicide to living for others and to help others. They don't victimize themselves but share their stories with others and inspire others
- Friendship between PLHIV and volunteers, not relationship between patients and carers
- (because of belief that it is due to Karma)
- Faith leaders recognize PLHIV strengths which lead to big change of perception: from fear and stigma, to welfare activities and assistance, to recognizing strengths and capacities
- Faith leaders work behind the scene to help change situations and behaviours, without changing people or their humanity, using the status as respected religious leader to bring about change
- By promoting various activities at the temple for various groups, they are able to create a win-win or double-benefit situation. More people from the community visit the temple, take part in the activities and get some benefits apart from their own spiritual growth. For the temple, monks are able to demonstrate and impart religious values and adherence to these values, during the planning or conduct of these activities. Thus, more people from the community follow religious values eventually.
- Locally mobilizing resources have good potential for sustainability
- Linking two generations like elderly and youth for mutual benefit by joint activities
- Link different concerns and themes; do not work in HIV alone. Combining/integrating themes, topics, and perspectives, they can solve several issues at the same time
- Work and think systematically: linking HIV/AIDS with other issues will lead to sustainability of response
- Advice from the monk: "Work with your heart. Do your best. Don't worry about the outcomes. Do what the community wants to do. Let the community members do it their way, and support them. It's their work, not our work. And if success comes, it is the community's success, not our success."

### What did the Dutch learn overall from this learning event?

- There is in-depth experience and work in Thailand. We learned in-depth about SALT through practice.
- Trust at community level, among team working together of faith leaders, volunteers, PLHIV.
- Different techniques and application, better understanding about the SALT approach
- The context in Netherlands is different. And we have to take different steps to get where Thailand is.
- Understood how the SALT way of working is different from the old method.
- We learned what to do and what not to do. Saw examples of SALT applied to HIV and religion. "We're on the way but it's good to see what can happen!"

- We saw Inter-faith collaboration and the great impact on society.

“In this SALT visit, I learned much more than I expected. I knew that SALT was used with PLHIV, but I didn’t expect that PLHIV would understand and practice SALT themselves. This makes me think of the work that we do with youth in the Netherlands. We do training for them and we use many tools with them. But the youth do not know what the tools are, they don’t understand them, and they don’t know how to use them with others. So this experience of PLHIV understanding and practicing SALT themselves is an eye-opener for me” (Alper, Islam & Dialogue Foundation)

## The Thai NGOs’ visit to the Netherlands

The return visit of the Thai team to the Netherlands took place during ... May 2010. The programme was jointly designed to balance the Dutch need to introduce the ACP to more partners, and the Thai team’s wishes to learn the Dutch context and work. On the first day of the visit there was an orientation and an update session, followed by participation in the International Service co-ordinated by Serve the City, a 3-hour introduction of the AIDS Competence Process to Serve the City staff and volunteers, and a briefing from Blood and Fire (who also participated in the learning event) on sex work issues in Amsterdam in response to the Thai team’s request.



The second day was co-ordinated and hosted by Islam & Dialogue in Rotterdam and consisted of a visit to I&D office for a briefing on migration and minority-related issues in the Netherlands, a 30-minutes presentation of SALT/ACP to the Inter-religious Platform, followed by a SALT visit to the Moroccan Center. In the evening, the team split into 2 small teams: one team facilitated the ACP with a group of youth groups and I&D staff and networks, while the other small team met with a local psychiatrist to learn about drug use and harm reduction issues in the country.



The entire third day was co-ordinated by Mexit and focused on facilitating the ACP for Mexit staff and their network of partners. The day ended with a briefing by STD-AIDS Netherland in the late afternoon and a quick visit to the immigrants neighbourhood.



On the fourth day, the Thai team enjoyed some sightseeing, briefing on Mexit’s work, and travel to Amersfoort for presentation of SALT/ACP to the Board members of the Church Council and a discussion on their work on minority issues.



The last day started with a 2-hour discussion on SALT and religion, in which Jean-Louis Lamboray (Constellation's chair) and Marlou de Rouw (manager Constellation Support Team) as well as several key Mexit staff members (who participated on the third day) also joined in. It was followed by a reflection session where team members discussed their lessons learned during the week. Bastiaan shared some of the feedbacks he had received on the various sessions during the week. There was a planning session when follow-up and possible future collaborations were discussed, followed by evaluation, and closing.

One of the most concrete future possibilities is to apply SALT to the Dutch migrant community in dealing with sensitive life issues such as sexuality, relationships and elderly isolation.



“Because Thailand has a much longer experience in dealing with a Muslim minority, we feel we could use the insights of the Thai to the benefit of problems we face in Dutch society.”

### Feedbacks from participants in the various ACP sessions during the week

- Like the “open our heart” introductory exercise
- Like sharing a story of personal crisis/problem and how we found solutions
- Like the description of the context of INHAT's work on HIV/AIDS in Thailand, including the roles of people living with HIV/AIDS
- Like linking the context and the actual situation with introducing the SALT concepts and the ACP diagramme in Thailand

“My hope is everyone's unique character, competences, etc. will be appreciated by others and put to maximum use”

“This is very useful. Very inspiring. I will have to think how I can apply it in the Dutch context”

“The photo exercise is very powerful. It can also be easily applied in my work.”

“It makes me think that many times we went too fast. We have to make the time, to connect with people, to listen, to go back to the basics”

“I realize that, in our work, we have to make more time to share. I like the exercise in which we talked about crisis and how we coped. It enabled us to tell our story, and to listen to others. It created an environment in which we felt safe enough to share”

“What I learn from the session is you need to step out of your comfort zone sometimes. With a real open mind. To reflect and review your beliefs and values. It leads you back to the basics, to see others as equals”

### Overall assessment of the visit

Overall, the visit of the Thai SALT team to the Netherlands was considered a success. The SALT method was considered to be applicable for the Dutch partners of the Togetherness Foundation.

“Although SALT started in Thailand from HIV issues, it is applicable for life issues in the broader sense. It is especially usable for people working with ethnic minorities in the Netherlands.”

“ Most participants were enthusiastic about the method and deemed it to be applicable for their regular work or voluntary activities.”

“There has been much attention for Thailand and the origin of the methodology. Participants have realized that they have learned a lot from the ‘South!’”

“Participants mentioned having a better image of Thailand after participating in the session”

“The audience who attended the process was wide. The methodology was transferred in such a way that it was applicable for the entire target group. The result was that the participants itself had to think how the methodology could apply in their work.”

Despite mainly positive reactions a few things could have gone better. Limited time for the training and waiting on the translation process were perceived as the main drawbacks. For Dutch professionals it was challenging to get them to free up a whole day. Volunteers were available in the evening or on weekends, but having a session lasting longer than 3 hours was a big challenge. Two separate training sessions would have worked better.

## Application of what was learned in the initiative

### Application and transfer by the Dutch NGOs



**Islam & Dialogue** organized a workshop together with IKV Pax Christi (Christian peace organization) about the Peace Week. They made SALT a part of the programme, thus reaching over 45 cities. In June there was a follow-up meeting to reach the youth and interreligious groups. Alper organised a few SALT meetings with interfaith leaders.



**Serve the City:** SALT will play a role in the next edition of Serve the City. Central is that they will stimulate the homeless to serve themselves and make full use of their capabilities. This is of course a very SALT way of thinking which hopefully will help to raise their self esteem.



**Mexit** used SALT insights at meeting with the government about “inburgering” (integration of third-country nationals). Mexit is trying to reverse the perception of seeing the target group as a problem, but as a group with capabilities. Also the method is being used at the community centre Garage Notweg, which serves as a creative hotspot to guide talent towards a better future. Mexit is investigating the opportunities to implement SALT at this centre.



**Ramadan Festival** Is working on different dialogue projects where SALT can function as one of the tools. The Ramadan Festival is concentrated on discussion of sensitive subjects among migrant like sexuality, gay rights and the Holocaust. SALT has become one of the standard ways of working along with the Socratic dialogue method.

The partners directly involved (Mexit, Ramadan Festival, Islam & Dialogue and Serve the City) are using the SALT approach as one of their standard tools in their regular work. Other partners, such as STD/AIDS the Netherlands, Protestant Parish Amsterdam, Refugee Aid Rotterdam etc, are also highly interested in linking up with organisation using SALT around the world. Interestingly, all Dutch participants mentioned how SALT made a positive impact on their personal life and how they relate to others.

Although Mexit’s and Ramadan Festival’s new proposal (on applying ACP and SALT on sexuality issues) to Oxfam/Novib was not successful, Bastiaan has been drafting new plans together with the Constellation in order to secure a follow-up and create a Dutch Competence Group. As no money had been raised, no real activities have begun yet, but efforts are still being made and interested partners are being identified and contacted. Possibility of connection with Belgium’s Belcompetence and there is still hope for more learning exchange with Thailand and other ‘southern’ countries on the issue of interfaith response to HIV/AIDS.

### Application and transfer by the Thai NGOs



- Promotion of understanding on Islam and Muslims during Ramadan Festival e.g. exhibition on Islam, invitation to other sectors to join in. Efforts have been made to co-ordinate with faith leaders and other leaders to prepare for organizing a similar Ramadan Festival in every mosque in Chiangmai next year.
- Discussion with imams in the INHAT about opening up the mosques to make them more community-friendly, inclusive, and a part of the community life. Similarly, efforts are being made to integrate more community focus and community services in the church, which includes having to work on broadening the conservative people’s attitudes, to include serving the community in addition to being places of worship.
- Reaching out to young people and leading them back to faith and religious places by integrating more youth-friendly services at the church, temples and mosques. Preparations are being made to pilot initiatives at a mosque in Chiangmai where it will host meetings among youth groups, include a fitness room and a multi-purpose activity room for various groups to use. Efforts already have also been made to use music and singing to motivate young people to attend church services. Appreciating the

youth, and looking for their strengths instead of looking at them as problems, and giving them opportunities and space to be creative and constructive, are helping to lead a number of young people from the streets and online games back to the church in Chiangmai.

- Facilitating more interfaith dialogues, starting with INHAT's annual gathering in Chiangmai in September 2011 where an 'interfaith house' will host several interfaith seminars, services, and dialogues
- More attention to conducting activities for children, especially children affected by HIV/AIDS, at places of faith
- More attention to conducting concrete activities to promote self-esteem among target groups including children, youth, and people living with HIV/AIDS
- Collaborating inter-faith to promote understanding of the various faiths among the young generation, including students, in order to promote acceptance and reduce conflicts and alienation. Youth exchanges and study visits have been conducted between Christians-Muslims and Buddhists-Muslims.
- A number of imams have been trained in human capacity development concepts, and introduced to community strengths through a series of community visits.
- A number of Muslim faith leaders in the central region have been trained and participate in home visits to elderly people in such a way that they can integrate spirituality in the visits and provide both physical and spiritual comfort to the elderly.

### **Key Messages from the initiative**

**- faith leaders and faith communities are crucial actors in the response to HIV/AIDS; they can make a lot of difference if they are engaged in the response, and there are tried and tested ways to involve them and promote their roles in the response in different countries;**

**- interfaith work on HIV/AIDS is essential, and possible, because we are all human;**

**- it is important to learn and share our experiences and lessons learned, because they help us do better work;**

**- the north can learn from the south as well as vice versa, because we all have something to learn and something to share!**