

Raising the Voices of People Living with HIV/AIDS in Vietnam

Trainee: “I will get my messages out more effectively. I won’t be afraid!”

Internews held a pilot training this July in Hanoi for 16 representatives of the Bright Futures network – a Vietnamese organization of people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA). The participants represented vulnerable groups such as women, youth and former injecting drug-users.

The three-day workshop titled “Getting the Message Across” was organized in partnership with the Policy Project, an organization working with host countries to develop public policy on health issues. The training focused on packaging HIV/AIDS-related messages more dynamically and clearly by developing a better understanding of the needs of the media, and diverse target audiences. Most importantly, the training aimed to strengthen the voices of people living with HIV/AIDS in Vietnam, fostering a public dialogue about AIDS with a human face.

FINDING A VOICE

The Internews training approach in “Getting the Message Across,” is multi-targeted, with an emphasis on strengthening relationships, cooperation and coordination among media, NGOs, donors, officials and PLWHAs.

People living with HIV and AIDS have the potential to be the most effective messengers of HIV/AIDS information, as they are the ones who have the most important insight into the HIV/AIDS issues. Given additional communication skills, their voices can be powerful, far-reaching, and can work with media to encourage better coverage of HIV/AIDS related issues. Only then can stigma and discrimination be challenged.

International trainer Fiona Lloyd knows from experience that when it comes to talking about HIV/AIDS it is crucial to engage with the psychological blocks – often related to fear – that can prevent key messages from reaching their target. “Unless we can step into the shoes of our audience and understand why they feel as they do, our messages will never be effective,” she says.

“Personal confidence is also key, so the training included physical exercises to release

stress, voice work and interview role-plays,” adds Internews Trainer Lyndal Barry.

As one Bright Futures participant commented: “Now I understand that we have to strike a balance. Good communication depends on who we’re talking to, and what we are trying to achieve at a particular moment. Sometimes our voice should be more assertive and persuasive. At other times we’ll need to be more gentle. The most important thing is that we must try to control our emotions – even if we have boiling blood! We are the ambassadors for Bright Futures.”

A colleague said, “I will use this knowledge when talking to the government, to journalists, and to friends who are PLWHAs. I can also write newspaper articles on special occasions, like National Children’s Day. I will get my messages out more effectively. I won’t be afraid!”

DEVELOPING TRUST

In the past, the relationship between PLWHA organizations like Bright Futures and the Vietnamese media was characterized by a lack of trust. Many PLWHAs believed that journalists were reluctant to connect with positive people or their networks, and unwilling to engage with the deeper complexities of HIV/AIDS reporting. Journalists often felt that PLWHAs were trying to tell them how to do their job, and were unaware of daily newsroom pressures.

To help PLWHAs and media to develop a better mutual understanding, the Hanoi training culminated in an interactive session with four journalists who had attended the Internews HIV/AIDS journalism training in June. The session was as much about listening as it was about talking. The result? The two groups realized they had more in common than they initially thought – and that working together in the future would not just be possible, but also could prove exciting.



Vietnamese journalists take part in a training activity to prepare stories on HIV/AIDS.

“Frankly, before today I never liked people from the media! But these journalists were so open and friendly. I was really surprised,” said one Bright Futures participant. “I was able to talk to them about how I feel, and what it’s like to live with HIV.”

A journalist summed up the feelings of her colleagues: “I see now that there is no need for us to fear any disease. Not even HIV/AIDS. But as journalists, what we should fear is our own lack of confidence and our own lack of empathy.”

Another journalist commented: “Sometimes people living with HIV/AIDS are very reluctant to talk to media. As a human being I can understand this, but as a journalist I feel frustrated because their reluctance makes it harder for me to write my stories. That’s why organisations like Bright Futures are so important. They can be a bridge for understanding.”

This program was supported by British Department for International Development. The Policy Project Vietnam is supported by United States Agency for International Development.