

"Tradition and Innovation - Partnerships between Youth Organizations and Religious Leaders"

Lao Youth AIDS Prevention Programme (LYAP)

Presented by

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Executive Summary

LYAP is an organization of youth at the confluence of programs and policies addressing issues related to HIV/AIDS and youth in Laos. The youth of Laos are the primary demographic group in the country so interventions that focus on young people are a priority for efforts to contain HIV/AIDS. According to the UNDP's Human Development Report, a total of 41.2% of the population of Laos was aged 15 years or younger in 2004. If youth and young adults between ages 15-24 are factored in, the UNFPA Laos found that this accounts for fully 62.1% of the people of Laos. While HIV incidence in Laos is still estimated to be less than 0.1%, LYAP recognizes the country is at risk because it is surrounded by neighboring countries with much higher incidence of HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, Laos' young people are highly mobile, with huge numbers of youth migrating to Thailand, Vietnam, and China to seek work. Accordingly, affecting the attitudes of youth and communities towards HIV/AIDS prevention, and building community support for persons living with HIV, are the most critical elements for an immediately effective response to the disease in Lao PDR.

LYAP has focused its strategies in four key areas which all contribute to its overall vision of how to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic. These strategies are (1) creating a network of youth dedicated to preventing HIV and promoting humanitarian response to persons living with HIV; (2) mobilizing Buddhist monks and nuns as the most influential moral authorities in both rural and urban Laos to reverse attitudes of stigma and discrimination against persons living with HIV, and to connect with youth to counsel them against engaging in risky behaviors; (3) targeting intending migrants, most of whom are young people and (4) promoting sustainable livelihoods for persons living with HIV in order to break the nexus of positive status, stigma and discrimination, and increasing impoverishment.

The best practices evident in LYAP's work are first the innovative outreach and networking strategies to engage the youth of Laos, especially at a time when modernization, mass communications, urbanization, and migration/mobility are pulling youth away from many of the traditional beliefs and structures of Lao culture and society. The challenge is to be flexible – both modern and innovative enough to catch fleeting youth attention and hold it while educating on HIV/AIDS, but also tied to social and cultural sources of moral authority and understanding to create receptive community response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS and the need for passionate care for those who are HIV positive. The second best practice is the mobilization of moral authority on behalf of people living with HIV, as embodied in the work of the Metta Dhamma project of

the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization, which links LYAP with Buddhist monks and nuns. LYAP works to prepare them to use Buddhist teachings to undertake the tasks of educating about HIV and risky behavior (especially to youth, such as school children), while in their work with village communities, working to help counsel and support people living with HIV and teach against discrimination towards HIV positive people. The third best practice is the efforts to develop livelihood support for people living with HIV to allow them to have economically sustainable futures – though this work continues to face obstacles and is a work in progress. The fourth best practice is involving people living with HIV in all aspects of the LYAP's programs to respond to HIV. LYAP has led the way in Laos by developing understanding among civil society and Government partners about the critically important principle that HIV positive people must play a central role in the design and implementation of interventions to combat the disease, and that positive people's organizations must be recognized.

Background and Situation before LYAP's work

LYAP was founded in the year 2000 by Vieng Akhone Souriyao and two fellow college students who established the network to combat the stigmatization and discrimination directed at persons with HIV and AIDS. The organization operates as a voluntary organization under the umbrella of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO), and the youth wing of the LBFO's Metta Dhamma Project. LYAP now operates with 17 full-time staff and over 100 volunteers who actively participate in the implementation of many of LYAP's activities, particularly HIV/AIDS education for youth and activities aiming to reduce stigma and discrimination faced by HIV positive people in their communities. There are plans to recruit another 4 full time staff and hire an additional 10 part-time staff to work from hospitals in 4 provinces by the end of the year.

Vieng Akhone says that his initial entry into work on HIV/AIDS was prompted by the situation of a friend who was HIV positive and needed a place to stay after being thrown out of his home when his family learned he had HIV. Vieng Akhone offered to let him stay at his house, and reports that subsequently his friend *"told me how he got infected, how his life changed, how he was stigmatized and discriminated against. He talked very openly with me."* The friend was a returning migrant from Thailand who believed he had become positive while he was working as a migrant. After having his eyes opened by this experience, Vieng Akhone and his fellow students realized the many high risk behaviors that Lao youth were engaging in, with little knowledge of HIV and how it is transmitted, and decided something must be done.

The situation before LYAP started its work was characterized by a lack of knowledge and information on HIV/AIDS reaching Lao youth. This lack of knowledge combined with relatively low prevalence to create a sense that HIV/AIDS was something that existed outside of Laos – and led many youth to think that those who migrated to neighboring countries might be at risk, but for those remaining inside the country it was not a major problem. Simultaneously, in urban areas like Vientiane and Savannakhet, increased access to information, popular TV and media (especially from Thailand) created a youth culture increasingly disconnected from traditional systems of moral and social control, and more prone to risky behavior. Use of condoms was low, injecting drug use was on the rise in some areas, and knowledge was limited about basic methods of preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Regarding stigma and discrimination against persons living with HIV, these practices were widespread in both rural and urban areas and services to persons living with HIV were almost non-existent. Migration to neighboring countries, especially Thailand, was continuing unabated and youthful migrants traveling for work were going without any real understanding of the potential risks they faced from HIV/AIDS.

Philosophy and approach of LYAP

Long-term interactive education that incorporates life-skills is the most effective

It has become clear that in Laos knowledge alone is not sufficient to change risky behaviour and negative attitudes toward people living with HIV/AIDS. Many youth can now respond accurately to questions concerning modes of HIV transmission and prevention, but attitudes of fear and prejudice continue to be pervasive, as do high rates of HIV transmission. LYAP has found that long-term interventions are critical to making any change and that these must address participants' attitudes, belief systems and issues of gender.

Start working on HIV/AIDS prevention where young people live

LYAP believes it is important to provide youth with the tools and skills to protect themselves in modern times. LYAP believes that unless youth are given the power to make their own decisions, there will be few changes in rates of infections and levels of discrimination. For this reason, LYAP is committed to creating opportunities for vulnerable youth (such as out of school youth) to develop leadership skills and knowledge to play an important role in society.

Motivated and committed youth peer educators are the most effective way to teach other youth about HIV/AIDS

Intergenerational communication and education are often impeded by thick walls of judgement and distrust. In order for change to take place, youth must gain awareness of their own risk behaviours and feel safe to openly explore methods of protection which they feel are appropriate. Many youth who find it impossible to talk to an adult about HIV/AIDS are eager to talk with their peers. LYAP is committed to reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS in Laos through interactive peer-led activities that promote prevention through responsible decision-making and maintaining healthy lifestyles (both amongst youth and in their communities) as well as taking precautions if engaged in risky behaviour.

Empowering youth to face the challenges of the future

LYAP believes that it is critical to engage young people in social change so that they can find creative and powerful solutions to fighting HIV/AIDS as well as playing a leading role in responding to other social issues and problems in their community.

Effective AIDS education needs to work in conjunction with people affected by HIV/AIDS

LYAP believes that prevention work needs to happen in conjunction with people directly affected by the epidemic. Many of LYAP's staff and volunteers are HIV positive which reflects the organization's belief that actively engaging positive people in this work is among the most effective methods to confront and defeat attitudes that foster discrimination against persons with HIV. LYAP staff and volunteers (both HIV positive and not positive) join with other persons living with HIV to talk with vulnerable youth to let them see that people with HIV look just

like anyone else, that there is nothing to fear, and that it is not possible to tell by appearance if a person is HIV positive. LYAP's HIV positive staff and volunteers also provide encouragement and hope for youth who are HIV positive, or who have relatives who are positive.

Those affected by HIV/AIDS are the best placed to respond to the needs of HIV positive people

LYAP actively involves people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS wherever possible in the response to HIV and AIDS in Laos, particularly in terms of care and support. These people are best informed about the needs of HIV positive people, best placed to respond to these needs, and are most likely to undertake effective interventions. This was the foundation on which LYAP was built and remains central to its work.

Linking income generating for and Reduction in Stigma and Discrimination

The positive income generating is based on the innovation that there must be an incentive for people not to stigmatize and discriminate against PLHA and similarly that there must be an incentive for PLHA to disclose their status and fully participate in care services. In this project, an HIV-negative person must team up with an HIV-positive person in a "positive partnership" to become eligible for use of micro-loans and other income generation support which allows them to undertake income generating activities. The incentive, when combined with the teaming of HIV-positive and HIV-negative partners and community education, is a mechanism to reduce stigma and discrimination. At the same time, it generates income, helping alleviate poverty and financial burdens faced by PLHA. The use of use of micro-loans and other income generation support to explicitly reduce stigma and discrimination is the main identifying feature of the Positive Partnership Project. While the use of micro-loans and other income generation support component of the project is an important dimension for improving the economic status of participating PLHA, the impact extends far beyond the PLHA who receive loans.

Areas of Work and Activities of LYAP

LYAP now has programs that reach approximately 100,000 youth per year. These programs aim primarily at preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS in vulnerable groups, as well as reducing stigma and discrimination towards people with HIV/AIDS. Various LYAP programs are run in all 18 provinces, with target groups including out-of-school youth, in-school youth, drug users, MSM and migrant workers.

Working under the auspices of the Metta Dhamma Project, LYAP has helped implement a Buddhist Leadership Initiative Program that focuses on building support for engagement by Buddhist monks with vulnerable youth, and youth already engaged in risky behaviors. LYAP has worked with monks to get a better understanding of their views about the causes which lead young people to engage in high risk behaviour. Monks have since been trained in counselling, adolescent violence, drug use, HIV prevention and care and support for people living with HIV, all while using the five precepts of Buddhism as a foundation of the instruction so that the monks can use the lessons they learned within their larger role as the moral and spiritual leaders of their communities.

LYAP also runs several programs providing care and support to people with HIV/AIDS, which are largely managed by HIV positive people. This includes the running of two hospital based self-help groups in Vientiane, undertaking home care visits, providing peer counselling, giving access to education and life skills support for infected and affected children, and offering opportunities for capacity building and income generation for persons living with HIV.

Youth outreach strategies and building up networks of youth to combat HIV

LYAP's interactive peer-led programs educate youth about HIV transmission and promote prevention by empowering youth and women to take responsibility for their own behaviour and health. LYAP aims to develop within youth and women a belief in their own abilities and a desire to participate in civil society by addressing HIV/AIDS and other social issues. Using a network of peer educators, LYAP's programs reach boys and girls in roughly equal numbers, and we also have a specific peer education program for gay, bisexual and transgender youth. These youth rely on LYAP for HIV/AIDS, sexuality and reproductive health information that they cannot find elsewhere.

Since it began its work, LYAP has trained over 500 peer educators and 150 trainers-of-trainers in HIV avoidance, dangers of drug abuse, and importance of learning and employing life skills. LYAP's methodology involves first conducting a survey of the training needs within each of the groups of youth. LYAP recognizes very clearly that there is a need for targeted messages for different age groups. Therefore, different modules have been developed using two age bands, 13-16 years and 16-25 year, and for different audience types, such as school children, college students and out-of-school young people. The major difference between modules is primarily the degree of explicitness used in the teaching on sex education, but there are other variations as well depending on

LYAP's assessments of the situation.¹ With the basic module in place, LYAP then designs the training program covering those needs and to implement them through a network of peer-educators. In practical terms, this means LYAP will use some of its existing peer educators, but also select several volunteers from within the local target groups themselves to be trained (with the aim being to always expand the network both of trainers and trainers-of-trainers). These peer educators will deliver the training so that the messages are delivered in a non-authoritarian, non-judgmental way by the target group's own peers. Since discussion of sexual matters is typically not very open in Laos, which remains socially conservative in many ways, it is difficult for youth to access clear, factual information on HIV and other STDs, or condoms and their use. Information delivered by knowledgeable peers about these subjects is a very powerful way to help young people make judgments that will reduce high-risk behaviors.

In order to undertake their many different projects, LYAP recruits many volunteers from diverse backgrounds who work directly on the projects. These volunteers include not only in-school youth and college students, but also the full gamut of youth in Laos, such as out of school youth, street youths, recovered drug-users, MSM, migrant workers, and persons living with HIV.

LYAP's volunteers conduct outreach education, plan and facilitate forums and events, and write reports, among other tasks, as full project partners. Full-time volunteers² have been recruited and trained because of recognizing their clear, strong commitment towards social development. They are signed to a one-year contract. Village volunteers are another category of volunteer who are picked with the blessing of local community-based organizations, including the Lao Youth Union at the district level, who receive training for engagement and information exchange with other villages. Finally, there are 30 part-time volunteers who provide assistance as needed.

LYAP's strategy involves getting those living with HIV/AIDS to talk with Lao youth because interacting with HIV positive individuals is one of the most effective ways of convincing people that HIV does, in fact, touch the lives of ordinary Lao people.

The youth volunteer group also has a drama troupe which uses theatre³ to spread the message of youth determination of their own lives, the importance of prevention of HIV, and the need for care for people living with HIV. Real-life stories from the lives of HIV+ people and vulnerable groups like MSM and transgender persons are developed for presentation on the stage. The drama troupe project has reached and supported the establishment of a network of youth

¹ The content of the training sessions contain two parts: first, primarily on practical life skills -- such as presentation and public speaking; self-confidence and learning to overcome shyness; participation; teambuilding and communication skills; tools for responsible decision making; and ways to negotiate problematic personal/family situations. Second, participants receive training on sex education: human reproduction, STDs, family spacing, lower risk sex behavior, and HIV.

² Full-time volunteers receive continuous access to additional in-house training and a small volunteer monthly allowance.

³ Recent support for these HIV information and awareness building processes has been provided by the Philippines Education Theatre Association (PETA).

volunteers for mobilisation by using interactive drama and outreach activities. Through this work, over one year LYAP has educated more than 3000 young people from villages and factories. Drama and outreach mobilisation was conducted in 50 villages and 10 factories where no youth volunteer network has been established. HIV/AIDS workplace orientations were conducted by the drama teams for the owners and managers of factories, in order to gain their involvement in and support for addressing issues such as HIV/AIDS and drug use among factory workers. As a result, many owners and managers have become more sensitive to the negative impact of HIV on the productivity of their workers and their business and have become much more co-operative and supportive of LYAP's work in carrying out workplace education on HIV/AIDS for factory workers.

LYAP has further deepened its engagement in youth by forming an alliance with six other youth groups to create the Lao Youth Network (LYN), for which LYAP serves as the umbrella organization. The LYN aims to engage youth in HIV/AIDS prevention, reproductive health issues, environment protection and awareness, education promotion (including informal education and literacy promotion), and promotion of culture and community development. It was established in 2004 by a group of leaders from different organizations who had a desire to work collaboratively to address issues facing youth in the Laos. The six groups analyzed the situation for youth in Laos and began to work together to develop common goals for the network and mutual decision making processes. While not yet legally registered in the Lao system, the LYN has six core member agencies and 21 other youth groups that engage with the network. The LYN also works closely with the Lao Youth Union (LYU) at central, provincial and district levels, and has received support from Lao PDR Government, UN agencies, and INGOs.⁴

Buddhist Life Skills and Engagement of the Buddhist Monks

LYAP works to engage Buddhist monks to play an active role in their communities to educate about the impact of the HIV epidemic and improve the level of care and support provided for people living with HIV and AIDS in the community. The moral and spiritual power of the Buddhist monks stems from their knowledge and application of Buddhist teachings, so LYAP in collaboration with UNICEF and Buddhist monks developed a Buddhist Life Skills Manual. UNICEF Thailand then took the step further to help formally develop a Buddhist Life Skills Program which LYAP quickly adopted. This program is designed to build 'life skills' such as self-esteem, self-awareness, empathy, analytical skills, and informed decision-making - which are all identified as among the key psychosocial competencies young people need to protect themselves - through combining Buddhist principles and social science.

For example, it is worth examining the following section of the Buddhist Life Skills Manual. Buddhism has also been called a 'science.' In fact, many of the teachings of the Buddha are based on analysis and critical thinking. The Buddha

⁴ The Youth Focal Point of the World Bank – Laos office, the Save the Children – Australia, and UNICEF have all funded various components of the LYN's work in the past three years.

taught that we should have *Panya* or wisdom, *Silh* or morality and *Samadthi* or mindfulness. If we look closely, we can see that the modern Life Skills can be grouped as follows:

Panya	Panya	Samadthi	Sinh	Samadthi
Decision making	Critical Thinking	Communications	Interpersonal Relationships	Coping with Stress
Problem solving	Creative Thinking	Self-awareness	Empathy	Coping with emotions

The central idea is that with these concepts, or Buddhist Life Skills, youth in Laos should be able to make better informed life choices and avoid risky behavior to a greater extent. Training has focused on training of trainers for monks to understand HIV and risk vectors for transmission, knowing how to conduct appropriate counseling for persons who are HIV+, and understanding the special vulnerabilities facing women and children regarding HIV. Other trainings focused on interweaving messages on HIV/AIDS into Buddhist teachings, so that the monks could speak on these topics confidently in the future. Since the Buddhist *sangha* is quite hierarchical, it is critical to have the support of the local Temple Abbott. Therefore, LYAP has conducted trainings for 310 Abbots from 310 different temples covering 4 districts in 2 projects, encouraging them to incorporate information on HIV into their teachings. Dhamma outreach mobilization trainings were also conducted in seven widely disparate and geographically distant provinces for monks preparing to work in their communities, ranging from Vientiane and Savannakhet (both big cities with major migration) to Saravanh and Xayabouly.

After receiving their training, the monks have since conducted Buddhist Life Skills trainings in 50 lower and upper secondary schools. The monks have been trained in these methods and now teach students regularly in a number of topics, including HIV/AIDS, life skills, responsible decision making, meditation and prayer, and the five precepts of Buddhism. By end of 2006 and beginning of year 2007, LYAP has set out a goal (which is close to being accomplished) that the project will reach more than 1,000 high schools students in areas with high reported cases of HIV/AIDS. Key areas the project has reached are the Vientiane Capital municipality, and the provinces of Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Champasak and Saravanh. Importantly, the project has been very effective in building enduring links between local temples and government schools, creating avenues for continuing access to new groups of youth to learn Buddhist Life Skills and how risky behaviours and HIV transmission are connected.

Concerning efforts to reduce discrimination against people living with HIV, LYAP and Metta Dhamma Project have created a TV spot which displays Buddhist compassion for people with HIV, and this have been repeatedly shown on Lao National TV. Monks have also appeared on Friday and Saturday talk-shows to discuss matters of HIV. The Buddhist temples have also used their traditional temple festivals and other events to talk publicly with the community about HIV/AIDS and encourage people to show their Buddhist compassion and acceptance towards people living with HIV.

For people living with HIV in the Vientiane, Savannakhet and Champassak, the Metta Dhamma Project team, together with LYAP volunteers, organizes temple meditation sessions for HIV positive people and their families who need psychological support from Buddhist monks. The meditation sessions are organised at the selected temples according to need and sessions are rotated from temple to temple. The sessions feature Buddhist methods to help HIV positive people to reduce their stress levels, gain perspective on their situation, and find ways to live more healthily with the virus.

For many people living with HIV/AIDS, spiritual care is just as important as medical care. With support from UNICEF, LYAP and the Metta Dhamma Project have organized an initiative by Buddhist monks to visit positive people's homes, and provide meditation and prayer sessions for them. These home visits aim to help them deal with their fears and gain confidence to pro-actively combat discrimination they may encounter as a result of their condition. The monks also help fight misinformation about the disease in the community at large. *"The Buddhist clergy in Laos is playing a very important role in communities through the temples, in providing information and knowledge about the problem of HIV and AIDS in their neighborhoods,"* says UNICEF Representative in Laos Olivia Yambi.

LYAP and MDP also have organized the creation and display of 18 posters on the theme of Buddhist compassion and care for people living with HIV/AIDS which are truly exceptional in their quality and themes. The MDP launched the posters in Vientiane during World AIDS week in 2004 as part of a multi-media campaign entitled: "Buddhist Compassion: Hope and help for people with HIV and AIDS". The posters were unveiled by the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch from Laos, and his counterpart, the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch from neighboring Cambodia. *"Loving Kindness (Mettha) is love, sincerity and wishing others well. It is the love that we give to people with HIV and AIDS so they can feel happy. It is the opposite of hate that causes misery. It would be a wonderful thing if society could offer love and goodwill to people with HIV/AIDS,"* said the Most Venerable Tep Vong, Cambodia's Supreme Patriarch of the Mahanikaya sect at the launch. *"I hope the art we see here today will inspire people to want to help those less fortunate than themselves, particularly people with HIV/ and AIDS,"* he added.

Lao National Television ran a parallel television spot campaign based on the inspirational posters. Since then, the posters have been exhibited during the Wat Phu culture festival in Champasak province, the Lao New Year festival in Luang Prabang City, and many other public venues, drawing widespread public attention and admiration. The posters (and calendars produced from the posters) are regularly used by LYAP and MDP trainers in their work.

Education for 'internal' migrant workers and those going abroad

Many Lao youth are migrating as "internal migrants" from rural areas to Lao cities, such as Vientiane and Savannakhet, to seek wage employment in garment factories and other enterprises, while other youth are going abroad to Thailand and other neighboring countries. The profound lack of awareness of HIV/AIDS among migrants means that many only learn they are infected with HIV when

their health problems become too severe to ignore, which can make recovery and treatment, when sought, much more difficult.

LYAP works on HIV/AIDS prevention targeting both internal and external migrants through a peer-to-peer approach for outreach at popular cross-border transit points (usually unofficial, reflecting ease of crossing border) as well as in bus stations, at worksites where 'internal migrants' are employed such as construction sites and garment factories, and villages which border with Vietnam and Thailand. Supported by the Global Fund, LYAP's migrants program has placed 4 peers outreach workers in each of 9 border provinces (mostly on Lao borders with Thailand, and with China) who operate with the support of the Lao Youth Union. During the past year, LYAP's migrant peer educators reached more than 19,000 migrant/mobile workers and their family members.

Outreach activities for migrants (many of whom are youth) parallel the LYAP outreach efforts for youth, and consist of the following: games to introduce the outreach work and establish rapport; evaluating existing knowledge on STIs and HIV/AIDS; group discussions, covering who the risk groups are, factors of transmission and more; using games to learn about how HIV can be transmitted; how to get tested for HIV, including pre- and post-test counseling; who should get tested for HIV; and prevention methods, including demonstration of how to use condoms. Outreach focuses on games and participation of the audience; very little consists of lecture-style presentations. IEC materials and condoms are also distributed during the peer-to-peer sessions, and migrants and other youth who are having health problems are referred for services.

Support for livelihoods for people living with HIV and affected families

In Laos, as in many other countries, there is often a connection between HIV positive status and impoverishment of the family. Meager family savings are often depleted by the costs of care for the HIV positive person and the loss of an income earner due to poor health, and stigma and discrimination by society can shut off economic opportunities for the family and cut them off from traditional village/community support mechanisms. Often it is the husband whose health fails first – reducing a two-income family to a one-income one, and leaving a weakened, often HIV positive spouse to care for the children by herself.

LYAP provides direct support through reimbursing some travel costs for HIV positive persons and their families to travel to provincial hospitals for health treatments, and to Savannakhet provincial hospital or Setthathirat hospital in Vientiane Capital when CD4 testing, ARV treatment and more complex treatment of opportunistic infections (OIs) is required. Other direct support is provided for affected children, such as purchasing school books and uniforms, and supplementing milk and food for young children. However, while such direct support is urgently needed, it is not a sustainable economic strategy for people living with HIV.

Self-help groups organized by LYAP and Setthathirat and Mahosot hospitals in Vientiane serve as the starting point for addressing the issues HIV positive people are facing in terms of earning an income. The self-help groups were originally set

up to increase treatment literacy during the early stages of diagnosis and provide a supportive environment for people as they come to terms with their status. The need for HIV positive persons and their families to find sources of income crept into the discussions of these self-help groups, reflecting the very immediate needs to deal with difficult economic circumstances.

LYAP therefore responded by bringing together interested persons living with HIV to find ways to support themselves economically. In the Vientiane area, women-led HIV positive families were requested to develop ideas about income generating projects, come up with plans to implement their ideas, and explain the financial resources that will be required to carry them out. Micro-loans (in the range of \$US 100 to 200, depending on the kind of project being proposed by the person living with HIV) were then requested, and the requests were reviewed by a committee composed of LYAP, officials of the Provincial Committee on the Control of AIDS, and doctors from Vientiane hospitals treating HIV/AIDS patients. Rules for re-payment were set, and consistent monitoring of the loans and the families' enterprises has been done. While there have been some difficulties in some cases, the key is to empower these families to increasingly take control of their own economic destiny, and find a way out of the HIV+ impoverishment trap.

LYAP has also supported the creation of a sewing group in Vientiane, composed of HIV+ women, and arranged for training to teach them to sew shirts and trousers. Because of health issues that the group members face, many are unable to work for long hours in a factory or in other low-skilled, labour-intensive employment. The self-help group offers the opportunity for the members to control their working hours and rest when needed, whilst investing in their families' future.

Original plans to sew these garments for sale to garment factories and markets in Vientiane encountered difficulties, so the focus was changed to producing goods that can be sold to visiting foreign tourists, and additional training (with support from UNICEF New Zealand) was provided. The self-help group members now make many different sized handbags, as well as calendars, cushion covers, bags to hold mobile phones, name-card folders and wallets. These items are produced for sale directly to shops catering to tourists, and are also sold through the LYAP office, with all income being returned to members of the group. However, it has been a difficult learning process and many challenges have been encountered as the members work to make their micro-enterprise economically successful. Recent trainings have helped the self-help group members improve the quality of the products, and enabled them to request higher prices for their goods.

LYAP has also offered the members additional incentives in the form of career development sessions and training to build their capacity in income generation and group management. These training efforts are aimed at both strengthening the group as well as assisting members to earn an adequate income so they can support their family.

Project Impact and Best Practice

The work of LYAP has taken youth understanding about HIV/AIDS and care and support for HIV positive people in Laos from a very low beginning point, and created a strong network of committed staff and volunteers that are undertaking all aspects of HIV prevention, care and social protection. Essentially the project impact is that where there was little previously being done to focus on youth and HIV/AIDS, despite the fact that the majority of the population of Laos are young people, now there are networks, structures, initiatives, and activities to stem the spread of HIV/AIDS, and build support for compassionate treatment of persons living with HIV and suffering from AIDS.

Among the areas of best practice that LYAP wishes to highlight are:

- (1) Leadership and involvement of HIV positive people in all aspects of the response to HIV in the country.
- (2) Use of an empowerment model to bring youth into leadership, and peer-to-peer approaches to reach youth in terms and ways that resonate with them.
- (3) Building a network among the Buddhist clergy for interventions with youth to promote mindful, self-aware behavior through interactions with school children, youth who are in and out of school, street children, and other high risk groups such as IDUs and MSM. Connecting youth to monks and maintaining that engagement is a powerful force for the future of Laos.
- (4) Building a network of Buddhist clergy who are using their moral and spiritual authority to turn back attitudes of stigma and discrimination against persons living with HIV, and provide support for home-based care for people with HIV and AIDS.
- (5) Recognizing the important role that internal (domestic) and external (cross-border) migration play in the HIV epidemic in Laos, and devising interventions which reach these highly mobile populations in an effort to at least prompt awareness and encourage safe behaviors among these youthful, high risk populations.
- (6) Recognizing and seeking a way forward to build sustainable livelihoods for persons living with HIV/AIDS through use of micro-loans and other income generation support. While it is still early days in this area of work, it is critical if persons living with HIV are going to break out of the impoverishment trap to which they often find themselves as a result of their positive status.

Appendix 1: Biography of Vieng Akhone Souriyo

Vieng Akhone Souriyo is the founder of LYAP and has been the organization's Executive Director of LYAP since 2000. Initially, he was LYAP's first outreach coordinator. Before coming to LYAP, he worked as the AIDS Education Mobile Team Leader for ACCESS Lao, where he managed a team of outreach educators teaching HIV/AIDS prevention, transmission and care for youth and infected women in over fifty villages. Vieng Akhone is currently the deputy chair of Pan-Asia and Pacific Youth for the MDGs. He oversees the youth outreach project and all other LYAP activities.

LYAP received the United National Development Achievement Award for the country of Lao PDR in 2004.