

**HIV prevention program for mobile workers at the construction site and  
surrounding communities in the cross border area**  
**- AIDS program for the JBIC's Second Mekong International Bridge Construction -**

1. JBIC's Assistance for Second Mekong International Bridge

The Second Mekong International Bridge will connect Mukdahan, Thailand and Savannakhet, Lao PDR and is scheduled for completion in December 2006. This is the first Japanese ODA loan through the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) provided for a cross border project connecting two countries. The bridge will establish a 1450-kilometer-long East-West Economic Corridor linking Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Viet Nam. The bridge is expected to make land transport easier in the region and to contribute to the local and regional economies.

2. Rationale for the AIDS Program in the Cross Border Area

New infrastructure brings economic and social benefits along with it. However, improved access brought about by new traffic routes, increased personnel mobility, and in-flows of workers mobilized for infrastructure construction can bring about the transmission of communicable diseases. Extended or repeated travel away from their homes and communities can also increase high-risk behavior leading to the contraction of HIV. Insufficient knowledge and poor access to information and health services also serves to increase vulnerability to HIV infection. The risk of transmission is higher in the cross border area due to the different infection rates between the countries, the anonymous movement of people, and less attention on the part of the administrative services delivered by each country.

3. AIDS Program for the Project

To counter the potential negative social impacts, the project "Bridge of Hope," an HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) awareness program, was initiated as part of this construction project in March 2003 for the construction workers and the residents inhabiting the surrounding communities of the construction sites. It was funded by the Japan Trust Fund for HIV/AIDS (JTF) through the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). The program aims at promoting knowledge and understanding of HIV/AIDS and highlighting behavior change communication (BCC) through various activities such as talk shows, video shows, and small group discussions. Policy dialogue sessions on HIV/AIDS were organized with the management staff of the relevant companies and local agencies. Encouragement has been given to the development of universal precautionary guidelines such as workplace policy guidelines. Furthermore, it was ensured that volunteer counseling and testing (VCT) and the treatment of STIs were provided, and that referral

arrangements with local health facilities were also available. Joint action through the relevant local social groups was coordinated and carried out. In the first year, nearly 1,300 project construction workers/personnel and 90,000 community people were covered by this project, and the capacity of concerned parties for conducting AIDS programs was strengthened.

#### 4. A Challenge Spanning National Borders

An IPPF-affiliated NGO in Thailand called the Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand (PPAT) which has experience in AIDS programs took responsibility in initiating the overall program. PPAT first negotiated the Provincial Health Office of Mukdahan (Thailand) and the Provincial Committee for Control of AIDS of Lao PDR. Through dialogue, these authorities understood their responsibility to provide an AIDS program to workers and community people. Program plans were made by the concerned parties who gathered together and discussed what implementation mechanism would be effective and what activities should be conducted. Existing HIV prevention initiatives and health service systems were regarded as the basis to stand on since national systems and local needs in each country are important for designing effective projects.

#### 5. A Challenge for a Multi-sector Collaboration

Activities supported by the PPAT have been implemented through the collaboration of various social groups that span multiple sectors. As the executing agencies of the project, the Department of Highways (Thailand), the Ministry of Transport and Communication (MTC) (Thailand), and the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction (MCTPC) (Lao PDR) understood the necessity in the AIDS programs. To coordinate stakeholders related to this program a Task Group consisting of people from transport and health sectors, NGOs, and private enterprises was formed, with the group providing a secretariat function by meeting monthly to discuss program progress and activity monitoring. PPAT coordinated so that stakeholders work together. The Task Group and construction progress review members jointly presented a progress report to the Provincial AIDS Secretariat which was attended by multi-sector provincial representatives including the Lao Women Union (gender), the Lao Youth Union (education), and the Lao Radio Bureau (communication), border police, immigration, and customs office. The program also benefited from the guidance and technical advice of the Thai and Lao Border Communicable Disease Committee which provides disease surveillance. This program required good coordination not only with the counterpart ministries of Lao PDR and Thailand, but also between the two countries' multi-sector stakeholders.

#### 6. Commitment from the Private Sector

PPAT supported contractors and consultants of the bridge construction familiarizing themselves with the AIDS program activities. The private sector has gradually become committed to ensuring quality and timely implementation for both the AIDS program as well as the construction work. In terms of the time and place for the AIDS program, contractors are to ensure that the AIDS program is available to workers during working hours. Despite the early challenges in establishing the program it has been successful and gained the support of various community groups and members who understand the goal of the program: minimizing HIV vulnerability. The construction company management fully embraced the Bridge of Hope project, which demonstrates that they recognize that the project activities benefit their workers. They explained it by saying, “We feel honored when workers turn to us with their problems. Whether it’s their health, family situation, or other worries, we try our best to improve their health and well-being.”

#### 7. Outcome

The bridge became a great symbol of successful cross-border collaboration in fighting HIV/AIDS. It became an exciting project which provided an opportunity to work through the collaboration of multi-sector stakeholders based on both countries’ location on either side of the bridge. Lively video-shows and information sessions for workers have been conducted twice a month. Trained peer-educators provided HIV education on a daily basis, and the number of workers requesting VCT has been increasing. Positive behavior changes have been observed among workers, who say “Now I know where I can get condoms, and I always use them.” Since people living with HIV have joined this program, the BCC volunteers, workers, and community members have come to understand and become more accepting of people living with the disease. Through the spreading of understanding, the stigma of and discrimination against those affected by AIDS have been reduced.

#### 8. To the Future

The lessons from this project show that infrastructure projects can make a significant contribution to the community and national AIDS response if the necessary HIV prevention measures are taken. Several new initiatives have appeared through this project. The executing agencies behind the bridge construction realized the necessity of including an AIDS programs in infrastructure projects and have planned to include similar programs in other projects. Similar cross border projects have been planned in Viet Nam side which will focus primarily on truck drivers who travel along the east-west corridor by PPAT. Some stakeholders such as the Lao Women’s Union increased their interest in tackling HIV/AIDS, expanded their AIDS program to other target people and PPAT agreed to provide technical support.

**(Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC))**