

# Preparing civil society for microbicides advocacy in Southeast Asia

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**Societal norms and value systems about sex and sexuality continue to place women and men in different positions of power and self-autonomy. Realizing that gender-power dynamics prevail in sexual relationships to the disadvantage and endangerment of many women, many groups began to advocate for the development of microbicides in the late 1980s. Microbicides include a range of products such as gels, films and sponges that are being researched, developed and tested in various parts of the world, particularly in Africa, North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia (in India and Thailand). Results for the current Phase III trials are expected early 2008 through 2009. However, assuming that one of these proves effective during this period, a microbicide may be available in only a handful of countries within the next five years.**

Microbicides are applied in the vagina, and possibly in the rectum, in a bid to prevent sexual transmission of HIV and other STIs. Microbicides can be contraceptive, but some will also have the potential to allow for pregnancies to occur while protecting against HIV and STIs. They are seen as a potential solution for women who have had difficulty negotiating condom use. However, they should be promoted as part of a comprehensive package of HIV prevention

methods and not as a replacement for male and female condoms.

The success of clinical trials alone will not ensure the use of microbicides. A lot of advocacy work will still be needed to ensure that people are knowledgeable about microbicides and are convinced of the necessity to promote them in ways that would make them culturally acceptable, affordable and practical. There is need for advocacy at society level to address the gender inequalities and power dynamics that arise in sexual relationships and which are likely to affect the use of microbicides. Between October 2005 and March 2006, the Asia Pacific Council of AIDS Service Organizations (APCASO) in partnership with the Global Campaign for Microbicides<sup>1</sup> undertook a mapping of the HIV/AIDS advocacy landscape in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines, to prepare and assess the readiness of civil society organizations in these three countries for microbicides advocacy. The project aimed to: 1) assess positions of NGOs and civil society towards



Photo: Global Campaign for Microbicides

APCASO/GCM microbicides skills building workshop at the 7th International Conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific – Kobe, Japan (2006)

microbicides; 2) identify stakeholders; 3) facilitate discussions within a country context on the merits and disadvantages of microbicides; and 4) prepare organizations to organize and position themselves for effective microbicides advocacy.

Lack of a Southeast Asian voice in the global microbicides movement as well as the possibility of an increase in microbicides clinical trials in Thailand and the potential start of clinical trials in Vietnam acted as an impetus for the project. For instance, before the project ended, in January 2006, Starpharma (a pharmaceutical company) announced that VivaGel's advanced safety trials would begin in Thailand.

## Willingness to accept and use microbicides

Using a combination of activities to achieve its objectives – the main component being a mapping of the HIV/AIDS landscape of the three countries – the project found that Malaysia and the Philippines still needed to conduct awareness on HIV/AIDS issues despite more than ten years of work on the epidemic. The main tool used was a questionnaire focusing on respondents' attitudes to women's prevention methods such as microbicides; their perception on the willingness of their country's population to accept and use microbicides; and civil society's ability to advocate for microbicides. This questionnaire was used in group discussions, face-to-face in-depth interviews and telephone interviews. Respondents were drawn from NGOs, people living with HIV

### Microbicides

Microbicides are substances designed to be applied internally (vaginally or rectally) to reduce the risk of HIV transmission. Not yet available, microbicides are being researched and developed, and could exist in a number of delivery forms including gel, cream, vaginal tablet or timed-release vaginal ring.

Microbicides could be of particular benefit to women in developing countries who are unable to negotiate condom use.



(PLWH), health practitioners, journalists, policymakers and influential leaders.

There were significant differences in the respondent groups approached in the three countries, with Thailand focusing on women's rights and PLWH groups that could take the policy advocacy further. Malaysia relied more on the voices and views of intermediaries (e.g., the Malaysian AIDS Council, family planning associations and medical professionals), while the Philippines faced a high level of reluctance to the face-to-face interviews from key stakeholders, especially government, and so interviewed PLWH and NGOs instead. The challenges that face HIV/AIDS advocates in the three countries are tied to issues of gender inequality, social stigma, social bias towards male sexuality, and unfortunately, religious teachings that are judgemental and which hamper HIV prevention efforts. Access to and affordability of prevention methods and treatment were also seen as critical issues in addition to ethical issues surrounding microbicides research, development and marketing.

### Challenges and concerns

Although most mapping participants felt that microbicides had much to offer women, the following concerns were raised:

- Demand side: Is the use of microbicides easily detectible? When women are still generally the non-initiators of sex, how will they be able to apply microbicides in a timely manner? Are they user-friendly? Do they have side-effects?
- Supply side: Will they be easily accessible on the shelves of pharmacies or multi-purpose convenient stores? Will they be promoted specifically for HIV/STI prevention or as a general women's health product? Will providers receive

proper training to instruct microbicides use?

Questions like these lead to others, such as: will repackaging microbicides as an ordinary vaginal cream for women raise ethical issues? What will this mean in terms of the design of public health education programmes?

The efficacy of the first generation of microbicides is expected to be quite low, between 40 to 60%. This means that the promotion of the male and female condom has to be aggressively intensified from now

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on, and more so after the introduction of a successful and proven microbicide. Further, women will definitely have to be educated on how microbicides work, and how they should apply the product. If microbicides are to empower women effectively, it is important that women exercise the choice of whether to tell their sexual partners if they are using them or not. Thus, it should not be easily detectible to the partner and women should be able to apply the product several hours before sexual intercourse.

### A more conducive environment

The focal point organizations in the project – the Thai Women and HIV/AIDS Task Force, the Malaysian AIDS Council and the Remedios AIDS Foundation in the Philippines – developed action plans for microbicides awareness-raising and advocacy in-country and regionally. For instance, the Thai Women and HIV/AIDS Task Force is nowadays more aware of Starpharma's VivaGel trials and works closely with the Global Campaign for Microbicides to influence and monitor the safety and efficacy of these clinical trials. Groups in other countries continue to monitor discussions surrounding

microbicides research. The action plans were complemented by the call for: 1) research into the integration and application of the CEDAW Convention<sup>2</sup> to advocate for women's rights in the area of HIV/AIDS; and 2) stronger linkages and integration with the advocacies of the women's sexual and reproductive health and rights movement.

Given the barriers identified, APCASO continues to educate others in the region and raise awareness on microbicides in order to ensure a more conducive environment for their promotion and use once successfully developed and marketed. APCASO also continues to maintain a strong working relationship with the Global Campaign for Microbicides through its Civil Society Working Group. Awareness-raising on microbicides in the region remains critical. Except for selected countries where clinical trials are being conducted, the perceived concentrated HIV/AIDS epidemic in other countries works against the obvious need for a sense of urgency. ■

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1. The Global Campaign for Microbicides is a broad-based, international coalition of organizations working to accelerate access to new HIV prevention options. More information: <http://www.global-campaign.org>
2. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. The CEDAW defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.