



The Trishaw Club: pedalling against HIV/AIDS in Myanmar

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A trishaw is a slow vehicle with three wheels which Burmese people mainly use for short distance transport. It is cheaper compared to other public transport. It is also convenient in carrying goods in the narrow lanes where cars cannot manoeuvre. Trishaws are a common feature and can be easily spotted parked together at termini, stations or markets ready for passengers. They are operated by pedallers who rent them for a fee from the owners. A business called *The Trishaw Club* was established for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in Myanmar under the auspices of the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC).

The idea was born in early 2003 when a Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) team – one of the donor agencies of MCC – met one PLWHA who earned a living by riding trishaws and realized that trishaw rental might be an ideal income-generation programme to support its existing PLWHA project. NCA later discussed the issue with MCC with the aim of establishing this new project. The broader objective of the project is to provide materials and technical assistance and gradually strengthening the financial security of the target group – vulnerable PLWHA who cannot find any job for a living – by means of income-generating activities.

Before the start of the project, a needs assessment was done and information was gathered on the need for a trishaw business. The project is managed by local church committees, which select vulnerable PLWHA, some of them widows, to become trishaw ‘owners’. The trishaw pedallers are all HIV-negative people who work for the HIV-positive owners. Each committee meets every three months and is attended by the committee members, trishaw owners and sometimes pedallers.

Using pedallers as peer educators

One requirement is that trishaw pedallers should be in good health as their work is physically demanding. They work under conditions that expose them to factors that

can lead to ill health. The pedallers are trained by the committees and the owners to become HIV/AIDS peer educators. They are expected to initiate discussions with their clients by distributing IEC materials. Their

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trishaws are also decorated with HIV/AIDS stickers and sometimes they wear T-shirts or hats with HIV/AIDS messages. The initiative therefore benefits pedallers as well as trishaw users. It is an income earner for the pedallers and the owners, while it is an avenue for trishaw users to access information on HIV/AIDS.

On average, each trishaw is shared by two families, the HIV-positive owner and his/her family and the pedaller and his family. The pedallers pay a daily rental fee, which is collected by the Trishaw Club. The club keeps 40% of the income and gives the rest to the owners. The 40% is kept as a saving fund to cover PLWHA’s future needs. For instance, the PLWHA can take a loan to start a home business or buy a trishaw and become a real owner. Also, health expenses, children’s education and other emergency needs can be paid from the fund.

Strengthening the livelihoods of former drug users

In May 2003 this small project was implemented in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State – located in the northernmost part of the country – starting with five trishaws. The choice of the location was based on the high HIV infection rate. Myitkyina has a big population of immigrants who move to the city with the aim of making a living. The high rate of infection can be partly attributed to the use of injecting drugs, which is often done via needle sharing. The majority of drug addicts are males who are sexually active. Most immigrants get infected while in Myitkyina and later infect their spouses when they return to their homes.

Partly as a result of this, there are many HIV-positive pregnant women and widows in Kachin State. The number of children orphaned by AIDS is on the increase. Given this background, it was imperative to start the project in Myitkyina in order to address the needs of PLWHA and their families. Almost all of the male beneficiaries (trishaw owners) in Myitkyina are former drug users. More importantly, awareness is raised on the current HIV/AIDS situation in the community by using the trishaw pedallers.

After initiation, the project got a boost with funds from Norway which enabled it to expand in the capital, Yangon, particularly in Oakkalapa Township. This area was selected because it mainly depends on trishaw transportation and the demand from PLWHA for less demanding work was high. Yangon area also formed a committee which became responsible for the supervision of the project activities.

Economic and mental security

The fruits of the project include PLWHA improving their lives through regular income earning, as one Yangon trishaw owner who is living with HIV/AIDS expressed:

"Thanks to the donors and related organizations for providing this trishaw to me. Before, I couldn't find any job and wasn't in good health to be an employee. My life is better since I have a regular income through the trishaw."

The project is also beneficial for the pedallers in several ways, including social and economic benefits and the opportunity for pedallers to receive education on HIV/AIDS. A grateful trishaw pedaller in Myitkyina stated: *"Compared to other trishaw owners, renting a trishaw from the PLWHA project is convenient as I need to pay less fees compared to others who rent them out. It is easy to communicate with the club members as well. They are very kind and understanding. I'm also glad that I'm part of the fight against HIV/AIDS."*

Overall, the income-generating project has been successful except for some minor challenges regarding acquisition of licenses for the trishaws. However, this was overcome. This project has contributed immensely towards the economic improvement of the PLWHA who have been participating. It has also brought about mental security for its beneficiaries. This initiative, although small in scope, has changed the lives of PLWHA for the better and can be easily replicated to benefit other impoverished PLWHA in other areas. Such initiatives can be made sustainable through injection of further funds. ■



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Some websites on poverty, livelihoods, food insecurity and HIV/AIDS

- Southern African Regional Poverty Network HIV/AIDS page: www.sarpn.org.za/rpp/hiv.php
- Livelihoods Connect: www.livelihoods.org
- DFID Key Sheets for Sustainable Livelihoods: www.keysheets.org/red_21_hiv_and_development.html
- Eldis HIV and AIDS and livelihoods pages: www.eldis.org/hivaids/livelihoods.htm



- FAO HIV/AIDS Programme fact sheets: www.fao.org/waicent/faoinfo/sustdev/dim_pe3/pe3_041201_en.htm



- KIT Special HIV/AIDS & Livelihoods: www.kit.nl/specials/html/al_aids__livelihoods.asp
- International Food Policy Research Institute: www.ifpri.org/themes/hiv/hiv.htm