

Impact of demand reduction intervention on drug abuse and dependence among the hill tribes in opium producing areas of northern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The major opium producing areas in the upper part of Northern Thailand lie within 4 Provinces. Six major tribes of different ethnic, social and cultural background inhabited these areas. According to the last census conducted between 1985-1987, the hill tribal population in these 4 provinces were 399501, about 69% of the total. Historical opium cultivation tradition involved during the last 50 years or so. Opium was the principal and sometimes the only cash crop of the communities and played many roles in society such as wages for labour, paying medium for commodities and debts and medicine for many common illnesses etc. The Government launched intervention programmes on reduction of opium supply and demand in limited tribal areas in early 1960s. Large scale programmes began at the beginning of 1970s as multisectoral community development projects supported by international agencies. The objectives of these projects consistently focused on economic and social development with ultimate goal of eradication of opium production. Medicinal use was one of the main causes of opium use and dependence due to lack of appropriate modern health care services and the prevalence high availability. Most studies were naturally oriented along community development objectives. While opium use and dependence per se were relegated to second priority. Prevalence rate of opium use and dependence was frequently the beginning and the end of many studies in this respect. Long term studies demonstrated many significant findings. First of all successful economic and social development could decrease the prevalence of opium use and dependence. The rate of becoming dependent after first use also dropped considerably. The profile of the causes of opium use and dependence remained unchanged. Prevalence rates in a community over time had to be interpreted with great care because of influence from migration and changes in pattern of drug use. The most contentious changes were the appearance of heroin smoke and intravenous administration of opium and heroin. All the changes in pattern of drug use and dependence had to be examined within the greater changes of cultural, social and economic environment which might carried long term counterproductive impact beyond the

project short term objectives. The impact of community development on drug use and dependence were multidimensional. A narrow and short term evaluation may not be the appropriate approach.

Key words : Hill tribes, Opium producing area, Drug abuse, Opium

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