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Several Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies joined the gathering in Bangkok, which included a gathering to a detention centre and time learning from the Thai Red Cross HIV/AIDS centre. Photo Credit: IFRC

By Kate Roux, IFRC

In 2012, Mr. Tee, a resident of Bangkok, was addicted to amphetamines and heroin. He was also living with HIV. When a friend told him about a help centre for drug users located at the Thai Red Cross Society, he paid a visit. Two years later, Mr. Tee is part of the Red Cross Harm Reduction Programme, which treats more than 100 drug users in Thailand every month.

Mr. Tee's story is not an unfamiliar one. Around the world there are some 201 million people who use illicit drugs each year, and almost 200,000 of them die from drug use. Globally, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are taking action to address the issue by supporting evidence-based public health policies that reduce the health risks of drug users, and promote their social inclusion. In order to maximize the respective experience of each National Society, the Thai Red Cross Society led a gathering of experts in Bangkok last November.

"Drug users should not be considered criminals," said Dr. Massimo Barra, Former President of the Italian Red Cross and founder of the Villa Maraini Therapeutic Community in Rome. "The Red Cross wants to bridge the gap within society, helping those that are hard to reach. It is important that we treat drug use as an illness, and push people to have a better life," he continued while describing the work of Villa Maraini.

The Italian Red Cross was one of several National Societies to join the gathering in Bangkok, which included a visit to a detention centre and time learning from the Thai Red Cross HIV/AIDS research centre. Representatives from the Red Cross Red Crescent of Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Kenya, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Uruguay, and Viet Nam also contributed their experiences during the workshop.

"It is an excellent opportunity for us to learn more on the current trends, initiatives and interventions for harm reduction," said Mark Alvin Lim Abrigo, National Field Representative from the Philippine Red Cross.

One day of the week-long event included a discussion with government officials, UNAIDS, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to discuss how to scale up programming and advocate among policy makers for effective interventions.

"It was inspiring to learn from each other," said Dr. Praphan, head of the Thai Red Cross Society HIV/AIDS Centre. "This is a health challenge in communities worldwide. Drug abuse does not discriminate, or differentiate. It is a wonderful thing when our own Red Cross Red Crescent network can come together from all parts of the world to discuss our success and challenges - all in the interest of helping some of the most vulnerable in our society," he continued.

To learn more about the IFRC's harm reduction approach click here or please visit <http://www.ifrc.org/what-we-do/health/harm-reduction/>