

EMPOWERING YOUTH PEER RESEARCHERS TO STRENGTHEN HARM REDUCTION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS IN MYANMAR AND THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

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Background:

Young people who use drugs in Myanmar and neighbouring Greater Mekong countries face elevated risks of HIV, viral hepatitis, overdose, and criminalisation, while youth-specific harm reduction and leadership opportunities remain limited. Youth-led and peer-driven approaches are increasingly recognised as critical to improving access, trust, and relevance of services for marginalised young people, yet evidence from low- and middle-income and conflict-affected settings in the Mekong region remains scarce. This project aimed to generate youth-led evidence on service gaps and co-develop recommendations for youth-friendly harm reduction in Myanmar and the wider Mekong context.

Description of model of care/intervention/program:

We implemented a youth-led mixed-methods harm reduction initiative in selected urban and border communities in Myanmar and two neighbouring Mekong countries between 2023 and 2025. Youth peer researchers (aged 18–29) were trained to co-design tools, conduct surveys, and facilitate qualitative interviews and dialogues with young people who use drugs. The program combined community-based data collection, peer-delivered safer-use education, facilitated referral to HIV, HCV, and mental health services, and youth-led community dialogues with service providers and local authorities to co-design practical improvements to existing models of care

Effectiveness:

The initiative demonstrated that youth-led peer research and programming are feasible and acceptable in fragile, under-resourced settings. Youth involvement increased disclosure of risk behaviours, improved engagement with community-based services, and strengthened relationships between young people, harm reduction providers, and local decision-makers. The process generated concrete, locally grounded recommendations, including integrating youth peer educators into outreach teams, expanding mobile and online harm reduction, and tailoring services for young women, LGBTQI youth, and mobile or migrant young people who use drugs.

Conclusion and next steps:

Youth-led models can enhance the design, reach, and effectiveness of harm reduction services for young people who use drugs in Myanmar and across the Greater Mekong Subregion. Next steps include formalising youth peer roles within service delivery, securing flexible and sustainable funding for youth-driven initiatives, and supporting cross-border learning platforms so young leaders can adapt and scale these approaches regionally.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The conference collaborators recognise the considerable contribution that industry partners make to professional and research activities. We also recognise the need for transparency of disclosure of potential conflicts of interest by acknowledging these relationships in publications and presentations. If this abstract is accepted, any relevant interests or relationships will be disclosed in the presentation or poster in accordance with conference requirements.