

## **Cao Bang Festival (Vietnam, 2007)**

### **Introduction**

Between 2006 and 2009 Iris Honderdos and Arno Peeters have worked extensively in Vietnam in commission of the Medical Committee Netherlands Vietnam (MCNV) with young women who are infected and affected by illegal drugs and HIV/AIDS. They are organized in the Sunflower and Cactus Blossom groups.

Throughout the north the artists have given creative communication trainings followed by performances and audiovisual presentations. Their work finally resulted in setting up a local training-program and the production of an accompanying handbook, based on their trainings.

In 2007 they visited Vietnam for the third time to work in Cao Bang, a rural city in the far north that suffers from large-scale drug abuse due to its location near the Chinese border. Especially young males run the risk of getting involved with heroin and all consequences involved.

Together with the local Sunflowergroup Arno and Iris have created a performance in which the audience can learn about the lives of these women, their sorrow and pain, their fear of being rejected by society and their families and the discrimination they suffer. And, on a more positive side, also what society can do to help them.

Almost all women in the group got infected through their husbands of whom at least 60% to 70% are drug users and some of them have died of AIDS already. Some have children that also are infected.

These women want to help to prevent more of these painful situations, in which sometimes an entire family gets infected.

### **Prevention is the best cure**

Simply warning the youth of the risks of unsafe sex and more particular of hard drugs might not be enough: teenagers are curious and they have the tendency to ignore rules like “wear a helmet” or “don’t play with fire” or think that they might try something just for once without a clear understanding of all the risks involved.

One other reason for sexual experimentation and drug abuse is boredom; if there’s nothing to do kids will be more eager to try something exciting.

### **A festival**

The artists want to connect the painful stories of the Sunflower-members to the sources of this grief, in particular drug abuse. In order to be able to really educate young people about HIV in a way that they’ll be impressed and remember, the first need is to reach out to them with activities that they like and thus finding a way to attract them: by sport matches, musical performances, breakdance and even a singing-contest.

Once their attention is caught and they see the performance, they have a better view on the disastrous consequences drug use can have, not only one’s own health, but also on family life. So the idea was to organize a large-scale festival to attract as many youngsters as possible, especially young males and ‘lure’ them into the evening program to see the Sunflower performance.

It was a great success.