
COMMUNITIES MEET, CONNECT, APPRECIATE, LEARN AND ENJOY

In the picturesque Kumta taluk in Uttara Kannada district, sandwiched between the Arabian Sea and the Sahyadri mountains, different people came together from around the country. They were from different backgrounds, a few were working in the development sector, a few represented communities most at risk of HIV or affected by HIV. A few of them were volunteers who, deeply involved in responding to the issue of HIV. But what they all shared was a deep belief in community potential. They came to Kumta with their own stories and experiences to share. They came to listen to the stories shared by other participants, by the communities of Kumta and by the community based organizations of women in sex work from the neighboring districts. And they all went back with a deeper appreciation of communities' strengths, capacities and potential.

This was the Festival of Inspiration, organized by Samraksha and India Competence, from February 1 to 3, 2011. The participants came from all over the country, from Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Uttaranchal, Mizoram and Nagaland. As one of the participants from Nagaland remarked, 'We have come from the eastern border of the country, right across the breadth of India to the coast of the Arabian Sea'.

Over two days, they interacted with various village communities in Kumta, with community volunteers, with people affected by HIV and with CBOs of women in sex work from Uttara Kannada and neighboring districts. They heard stories of how communities had come forward to support people with HIV. They heard about how communities got inspired by other communities supporting people with HIV. They heard young people in the community speak of what they were doing to prevent HIV transmission. They heard individuals speak of how their attitudes towards affected people changed, and how they were able to overcome their fears and prejudices, and reverse the discriminatory actions. From the people affected by HIV, they heard stories of courage and survival. From the women in sex work, they heard about their vision and their aspirations, they shared the pride of the women who had moved from being disparate, marginalized individuals, to a strong group who were committed to each other's well-being.

Frequently, the stories they heard resonated with their own experiences. There was mutual appreciation, and a learning which came from the ability to identify and appreciate other's achievement and use it to deepen one's own understanding and actions.

The event concluded on Feb 3, at the beautiful site, perched close to the sea. The event was hosted by the Devagiri Youth Club, who took responsibility for providing the perfect ambience, where the participants and the community members could once more share their appreciation for each other and affirm their commitment to continue their work of stimulating community actions, appreciating and learning from communities, and transferring the learnings to others.