

SHARING, LEARNING AND INSPIRING : SALT VISITS IN KARNATAKA

They came from different parts of the world, from Africa, South America, Europe and Asia. They were interested in understanding the community potential for change, and learning from the communities in Koppal district. And over a period of five days which was transformational, the participants and the communities came together as people, across cultural and linguistic barriers. They shared their stories-their triumphs and their regrets, their determination and their struggles- and together they affirmed their collective commitment that as individuals and communities, they will continue to strive for Life Competence.

This was all part of the SALT visits held in Karnataka, in October 2010. The event was organized by the Constellation for AIDS Competence, a global network of people and communities who share a belief in community potential, jointly with Samraksha whose field programmes gave the learning context for the event. Over this period, the participants were able to witness the potential of communities and also understand the strength-based approach of SALT (Stimulate, Appreciate, Learn and Transfer) which helps in uncovering community strengths and helping communities learn and transfer to each other.

They were numerous stories – of courage, of concern, of prompt action and of determination-of individuals, groups and communities.

A young lady shared about how she gave personal care to her music teacher in his last days at the HIV care centre, despite his family shunning and criticizing her actions.

In the care centre, another lady shared about how, after having been given up for dead, she regained her health and a desire to live in Asha Jyoti care centre, seeing the courage and strong will of the other individuals and families in the centre.

In a village, the young people spoke with extreme satisfaction of how an extremely sick woman wandering in the bus stand had now become healthy and started working after they had between them mobilized some money and taken her to Asha Jyoti centre.

A village community came together and resisted pressure to mine the sand in their village, claiming it as their resource and could not be exploited.

Religious leaders are setting the example in terms of being inclusive and reaching out and supporting people affected by HIV, since they were just like other human beings who needed support.

The groups of women in sex work and sexual minorities, have found companionship and solidarity, and are there for each other, whether it is to oppose police harassment and raids, or celebrate marriages and childbirths, or educate their children, or ensure dignity in death with an appropriate funeral.

A village panchayat leader explains in great detail the need for timely treatment for HIV and how watching people lead positive lives with HIV has motivated him to ensure that all who need services are able to access it without fear or shame.

AIDS Action Committees, a group of concerned citizens in a town, with diverse backgrounds (politics, law, literature, medicine, teaching, government) continue to work as a group and as individuals in their personal and professional capacity. Lawyers give appropriate legal support to people with HIV, doctors refer them to services, writers and teachers are interested in promoting positive messages about them in society. They came together and remained together, because according to them, 'what the government or an organization will come to an end. But what they themselves do will keep going on'.

These and many other stories inspired, still others moved the listeners to tears. At its core, they were all a human response to a problem faced by another or by their community. They affirmed that all of us care about human lives, our own and that of others, and we strive to enhance the quality of that life. And they resonated with the experiences of the participants in their own lives. They were able to learn and change through this process. This can be adequately summed up in this one instance:

A man in the care centre spoke with deep sorrow about the death of his estranged brother due to HIV. He had tried a lot to support his brother, but could not save his brother. Hearing this story moved a participant to share about his own sister back home, who was also living with HIV. She had recently asked him for a favor, and he had not bothered to do it. On hearing this, the man responded with 'Look after your sister, she is alive, and she is precious. You will never get her back'. Immediately the participant called up his sister, apologized for his earlier attitude and assured her that he would definitely help her. The sister responded with "I always knew you would help me eventually!!!"

That is the power of human responses, to comfort and to heal.