

Workshop - A : Strategies in the care and support of HIV/AIDS orphans and other vulnerable children : The Role of Parliamentarians.

Hon'ble Chairman;

Hon'ble Representatives of the Civil Society;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

India world's largest democracy, is a young nation on the move; on the march to prosperity and growth. Our economy is growing at an impressive rate of 8 percent and we have been leading the world community in information technology. However, as we have seen in other parts of the world, HIV has the potential to wipe out the dream of an economic miracle. Though HIV prevalence is still under one percent nationally, given the large population base of India, a rise of fraction of a percent can push up the number of those living with HIV into big numbers. The virus as we understand has the potential to devastate families, destabilize communities and shatter our economy.

My state Bihar has spearheaded the formation of a multi-party legislators forum on HIV/AIDS. From ancient times, Bihar has been the cradle of Indian civilization and thought. In this context, it is appropriate that it is the first

state to formally adopt a constitution outlining the role of the legislators' forum on AIDS.

We recognize that members of the legislative assembly can play a crucial role in building an exceptional response to the epidemic, besides amplifying the voice of the AIDS movement in this state.

- * As men and women of influence : bring knowledge to the people as AIDS thrives on ignorance and fear;
- * As Law makers : Help draft and pass legislation to guarantee universal access to information, prevention, treatment and services and to safeguard equity, confidentiality and dignity;
- * As the Link between the people and the government : Engage communities, opinion leaders and PRI institutions to create groundswell for AIDS awareness and action;
- * As the Custodian of the Constituency : Make plans, budgets and monitor mechanisms to strengthen local responses at the community level;
- * As the Champion of the People : Fight Stigma & Discrimination-Ensure access to human rights for all.

Through the Legislators' Forum we have already started conducting public inquires with officials in charge of implementation of the AIDS programme. We have written to Chief Medical Officers in each district asking them the status of treatment and care provided to the people living with HIV. My office is engaged in public dialogue to redress grievances of people affected by HIV, including AIDS orphans. There have been instances in the country of discrimination against children infected and affected by HIV where children have been thrown out of school. Direct intervention by parliamentarians has forced the schools to reinstate these children, indicating the importance of political leadership in the AIDS response.

We have also undertaken leader to leader advocacy with neighboring states and I have personally met speakers of other legislative assemblies and have advocated with them to put the AIDS agenda on the top. And the results are promising.

The legislators' forum plays centre-stage in the AIDS response in the state. It has organic linkages with the AIDS governance structure with the Chief Minister's office at the top and the Zilla Parishad in the districts and Bihar State

AIDS Control Society at the state levels. As representatives of the people and the communities, it is integrally linked with the civil society working towards advocating for the cause of the affected.

The fight against AIDS can be won only at the district and community level. As part of the strategy of the Bihar Forum we are in the process of forming Constituency level monitoring units that would lead community level campaigns in the state.

In conclusion, I would like to say that we have a lot to learn from the countries that have inexorably negotiated with the epidemic. Our brethren in Africa have a lot to share with us; we have a lot to take back home to be able to protect our youth and future generations to make them AIDS resilient. We are committed to do whatever it takes !!



(Uday Narain Choudhary)

Speaker

Bihar Legislative Assembly