actionplus

A COALITION FOR RIGHTS, EDUCATION AND CARE IN HIV/AIDS

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Mission Statement

HIV/AIDS is a complex issue that affects our lives at multiple levels. Action Plus is a coalition that is committed to strengthening effective responses to HIV/AIDS. We do this by :

- *Advocating for rights*
- *Working on prevention and care*
- *Decreasing stigma and discrimination*
- *Building skills and capacities*

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What it is

Action Plus was born in 1997 as a coalition (then called Networks), out of the vision of grantee organisations of the Ford Foundation working on HIV/AIDS, exploring common pathways for social action through exchange and mutual learning to effectively mount a joint response to the growing HIV pandemic. The coalition aimed to confront the evolving and complex challenges by developing strategic leadership and promoting linkages between organizations that work on common interests. Action Plus fosters an environment in which its member organisations share with each other their experiences and learn together to operate more strategically to address issues of HIV and AIDS.

Currently, Action Plus comprises of 15 NGOs that work on HIV/AIDS issues encompassing sexuality, gender issues, prostitution and sex work, and reproductive health. Member organisations aim to prevent the spread of HIV through a range of interventions, such as advocacy, peer education, counselling, training, community mobilisation, care and support, information on sexuality, and educational materials. They work with diverse constituencies, including the rural and urban poor, the middle

class, truckers, people in prostitution, drug users, blood donors, men having sex with men, adolescents, community groups, health providers, the military and the police.

Action Plus is :

- An effective learning forum
- A policy advocacy forum
- A capacity building forum
- A regional resource pool on HIV/AIDS

Objectives

Effective learning forum

Facilitate the aggregation of members and facilitate the sharing of information, ideas, experiences and resources through meetings, workshops, seminars and conferences

Policy advocacy forum

Promote cooperation and collaboration between members to pursue a common goal of building a better, improved response in India and Nepal to the HIV pandemic

Increase the visibility of the members through special projects, to articulate the needs for enhanced response to HIV and pronounce joint policy statements and action plans on HIV/AIDS

Capacity building forum

Build capacities among program staff of member organisations

Achieve a "synergy effect" i.e. of a greater total effect of things done together than the sum of individual activities.

Regional Resource pool on HIV/AIDS

Create linkages with the networks of people living with HIV/AIDS to better understand the impact of the HIV pandemic on the lives of people, and share this understanding in other forums; Liaise closely with the national programmes on HIV/AIDS

Develop a common pool of resource persons and experts who will make themselves available to other forums in their pursuit of HIV/AIDS interventions, care and support projects

How it works

Fifteen organizations with fifteen different ways of functioning and fifteen leaders with fifteen opinions informed by their experience in the field of HIV/AIDS in the country. How does it work?

The strength of Action Plus lies in the flexibility and freedom it provides to members to function within the coalition. A coalition cannot function in the same way as a hierarchical organization; Action Plus functions through a consensus building approach, which is harder to sustain than an organization based on hierarchy.

Some other elements contributing to its functioning are:

Trust building and a consensus-oriented approach are essential components for this coalition to function effe

Learning and Capacity Building

Action Plus serves as a strong learning forum for pioneering organisations in the field of HIV/AIDS to share and learn from each other and ensure a process by which these learnings filter through the organisations. Each member organisation takes on a dual responsibility as a facilitator and as a learner, resulting in enhanced capacity building.

With the HIV/AIDS scenario shifting at an accelerated pace, Action Plus has enabled the decision-makers of member organisations to keep pace with new developments and plan appropriately by learning about the technical aspects and the human/organizational aspects of HIV/AIDS and related issues to strengthen programs and conceptualize work on HIV/AIDS from different angles.

As a coalition, Action Plus has benefited from using five approaches to learning. They are :

1. Thematic director-level annual skills building workshops through three or four day long workshops providing in-depth coverage of specific and specialized topics, usually organized by one member organization, calling in expert resource people for one or more sessions. Topics addressed have been as varied as Counselling and Training, NGO-Government interactions, Sexuality and Rights, and Gender and HIV, to mention a few. Through these workshops the members' learning and views about issues have changed, especially around sexuality, sex workers' rights, the continuum of prevention and care, and the importance of being non-judgmental. Most importantly, these workshops have brought home the understanding that human rights is an organising principle for working on HIV/AIDS.

2. Second-level staff training workshops to build the skills of other staff (of the member organisations). Topics included: HIV and related issues- Basics; Project Planning &

Implementation; Rights, Responsibilities and Ethics; and, Sex Work and Rights. These workshops also provided the staff of different organisations an opportunity to interact and learn from each other, as they do not get as many opportunities for networking and sharing information as do more senior staff. This also led to closer networking at different levels amongst the organisations, making it easier to do more collaborative work, based on a common understanding of rights.

3. Learning from participating in international conferences. Action Plus members have participated in the regional and international AIDS conferences as a coalition under the banner of Action Plus. Not only do members learn from the conferences, but Action Plus has also designed and put up an exhibition booth at these conferences where it has disseminated material produced by Action Plus and by member organisations. The material displayed and disseminated through the booths has provided international exposure for some organisations. Not only were the materials well received and appreciated, and in some instances replicated, but so was the methodology behind producing the material. Participating in these conferences also gives Action Plus a

platform where the Government of India sees Action Plus as a coalition that advocates on rights issues related to HIV/AIDS. Consequently, Action Plus members are also requested to NACO and other meetings that impact policy in the country.

4. Member-organised workshops for other non-Action Plus organisations. Many Action Plus members run independent training programs for other organizations. YRG Care, INSA, Nalamdana, CREA, NAZ, TARSHI, SANGRAM all have regular training programs into which they have incorporated their learning from Action Plus. The rich pool of resource persons from within Action Plus is used in trainings offered by member organizations. These trainings reach out to a local, national and regional audience.

5. Lateral spontaneous learning amongst members through a group email account on which they share, discuss and debate topical issues. Events such as The People's Panchayat on Stigma and Discrimination organized by Action Plus members jointly to advocate against stigma and discrimination was also a strong learning forum at which member organisations greatly increased their understanding of these issues (report available).

Advocacy

Advocacy is a powerful tool in supporting prevention and treatment efforts and reducing the stigmatization of people living with HIV/AIDS. In India, people living with HIV still do not enjoy equal rights to education, livelihood and health care. Neither do they, in practice, enjoy the right to information, treatment, support, confidentiality, privacy, dignity or the right to form full and fulfilling relationships. Women who are infected and affected by HIV face additional barriers in claiming these citizenship rights.

Advocacy at Action Plus is carried out at local, state, national and international levels, and is one of two kinds: special planned projects, or responding to crises (unplanned, ongoing).

Special Advocacy Project

People's Panchayat on Resisting Stigma and Discrimination

On 8 April 2004, Action Plus organized a landmark public hearing in New Delhi, at

has been widely circulated among media, HIV/AIDS advocates, researchers, donors and policy makers.

This collective action effectively conveyed Action Plus' concerns around stigma and discrimination to the highest policy levels. After attending this hearing as a judge, Syeda Hameed, a women's rights activist and former member of the National Commission for Women, and a member of the Government of India's Planning Commission, hosted a meeting at the Planning Commission to better understand HIV/AIDS.

Suniti Solomon (YRG Care), Meena Seshu (SANGRAM), and Anjali Gopalan (Naz) were invited, among others, to attend this meeting. At this meeting, and in a subsequent presentation she made to high-ranking government officials, Syeda Hameed explicitly acknowledged that her interest in HIV/AIDS had been triggered off by the people's panchayat organized by Action Plus.

Syeda Hameed has since then also become a spokesperson for the rights of homosexuals to live with dignity and is a supporter in the move to repeal Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, the so-called 'Sodomy Law'. Policy suggestions made by Action Plus have been incorporated in her presentation to the Prime Minister's Office.

Ms. Hameed who has recommended the de-criminalisation of sex work in her presentation to the prime minister has also taken up the issue of sex worker's rights. She has been very supportive of the sex workers movement and is an ally of Action Plus in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Ongoing Advocacy

Action Plus is often at its most effective as an advocacy forum when it comes together to support member or other organizations around specific HIV-related crises or issues. Such advocacy actions are need-based, specific, and ongoing; some of these are outlined here.

Advocating for condom supplies

In February 1998, when HIV/AIDS organizations in Maharashtra experienced a shortage of free life-saving condoms, Action Plus members wrote letters to the Directorate of Health Services, Maharashtra. Condom supplies immediately re-started.

Advocating against discriminatory laws

In 2000, member organizations fiercely fought a Maharashtra government proposal to 'brand' HIV-positive sex workers as 'positive' with indelible ink on their parts, ostensibly in the interest of promoting 'public health'. Member organizations pointed out that far from preventing HIV, such proposals only violate human rights and spread stigma. Members wrote articles against it in leading Marathi publications, such as the Maharashtra Times, that influence the opinions of policy makers. The provision was eventually dropped.

In 2001, when the Andhra Pradesh government proposed mandatory HIV/AIDS testing before marriage, Action Plus members wrote to the state government, opposing this provision, which has since been dropped.

Advocating in crisis situations

In 2002, women in prostitution who are peer educators of SANGRAM were prevented from holding their weekly meetings in Nippani and threatened with rape when they complained about this to the police. Action Plus members participated in all the protest actions that followed from email campaigns to street marches. Similarly, in 2005, when SANGRAM was the target of a vicious media campaign (in the wake of the 'anti-prostitution' USAID provision) member organizations signed on in its support.

Many member groups point to this solidarity as one of the most important contributions of Action Plus. A coalition can often provide strength to individual organizations and often has the clout to push for policy changes that an individual organization cannot effect.

Advocating at international conferences

Action Plus activities at many international HIV/AIDS conferences (Kuala Lumpur, Melbourne, Barcelona, Bangkok, Kobe) are planned as public education, and to advocate the coalition's key concerns at the international level. An exhibition booth at Melbourne and a CD distributed at Barcelona advocated the rights of people with HIV including the right to marry. The issue of sex worker rights being violated at Baina, Goa (then a current issue) were advocated through posters and handouts at the 15th World Conference on HIV/AIDS held in Bangkok in 2004. Action Plus members advocated against stigma and discrimination while distributing copies of the People's Panchayat report at the same conference. The Action Plus exhibition booth at the International Conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific held in Kobe, Japan in July 2005 was on the issue of living positively.

Action Plus's participation at international conferences is an avenue for public education and advocacy and also provides visibility for the coalition and strength and credibility for member organizations.

Protesting the PEPFAR conditionalities

Action Plus members wrote a letter to the Planning Commission and the Prime Minister's Office in January 2006, protesting the conditionalities imposed by the US Government policy PEPFAR (Presidential Emergency Program for AIDS Relief) that affects our work on HIV/AIDS in India. PEPFAR funding is associated with all HIV/AIDS expenditure and activities that the U.S. government provides outside of the U.S. There are four focus areas of PEPFAR funding:
1) treatment for HIV/AIDS; 2) palliative care (care for the terminally ill) for HIV/AIDS patients; 3) prevention of HIV/AIDS; and 4) care of orphans and vulnerable children.
The conditions attached to PEPFAR adversely affect the purchase of drugs for treatment (can buy only FDA approved drugs), prevention activities (abstinence-only programs are favoured), work with sex workers (because of the 'anti-prostitution clause'), and the eligibility of non faith-based organizations to receive funds.

Actionplus at Toronto, AIDS 2006

Action Plus was represented at the XVI International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2006) held at the Metropolitan Toronto Convention Center in Toronto, Canada from 13-18 August 2006.

Action plus members took part in a huge demonstration against big pharmacies entitled- `Big Pharma Quit India.' Later, Anjali Gopalan of Action Plus took the initiative and led the protest demonstration to the media center where she addressed the media on the issue of generic drugs and the total lack of pediatric formulations. Action Plus members also took a very active part in the demonstrations against human rights violations faced by sex workers all over the world.

INSA, SANGRAM, YRG Care, Point of View, were some of the organizations involved in organizing/ co- organizing skills building workshops or satellite sessions at the conference. Almost all members presented papers in both abstract and non-abstract sessions. Radhika Chandiramani of TARSHI and Meena Saraswathi Seshu of SANGRAM were on the Social Sciences and the Policy Track Committees of the conference.

The advocacy secretariat at CASAM

Sexuality and sexual relationships have come under tremendous public scrutiny in the age of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The epidemic has pushed societies to acknowledge and confront the myriad and complex world inhabited by people who are in monogamous relationships within and outside marriage, and people who are in multiple sex partnerships within a commercial context, as well as outside of a commercial context. Sexuality minorities, sex workers and now increasingly, people living with HIV especially women and orphans affected by HIV/AIDS are being pushed to the margins by a society that has condemned their very existence. This marginalization has led to a total denial of the right to lead a life free of discrimination, inequality and violence.

CASAM, the Center for Advocacy on Stigma and Marginalisation is a project of SANGRAM and is envisaged as a resource that will advocate for the reduction of stigma, violence and harassment of marginalized communities. The center will advocate for the sexual and reproductive health and rights of people who have been marginalized because they have challenged the dominant norm. The center will also collect, document and process information on various issues that affect people who are in multiple sex partnerships within and outside a commercial context. The multi- tiered model will try and connect the lessons learnt from the grassroots work of Action Plus members to policy advocacy at both the national and international level.

The advocacy secretariat of Action Plus is situated at CASAM and the core group members of this secretariat are Anjali Gopalan of NAZ Foundation [India] Trust, Dr. Vinay Kulkarni of Prayas, Dr. Brinelle D' Souza of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Meena Seshu of SANGRAM.

Action Plus has

- Brought member organisations together and broadened their understanding of issues around HIV/AIDS prevention and care
- Served as a forum for sharing work and learning
- Optimised the use of learning resources and enabled the replication of best practices
- Provided a much-needed sense of solidarity and linkages of moral and psychological support for challenges faced by member organisations
- Enabled fifteen agencies advocate for policy changes and on issues of rights relating to HIV/AIDS more effectively than any one individual organization

Action Plus is composed of the following organisations:

1. Centre for Development Initiatives, Mumbai
2. Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore
3. Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA), New Delhi
4. International Services Association, India (INSA), Bangalore
5. Nalamdana, Chennai
6. National Addiction Research Centre (NARC), Mumbai
7. Point of View (POV), Mumbai
8. PRAYAS, Pune
9. Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM), Sangli
10. The Naz Foundation (India) Trust (Naz), New Delhi
11. The Service of Society Medical and Educational Foundation (SOS), Nasik
12. Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues (TARSHI), New Delhi
13. Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai
14. Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad [VAMP], Sangli
15. YR Gaitonde Medical, Educational and Research Foundation (YRG CARE), Chennai

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