

Support Centre for Voluntary Agencies Working with Sexual Minorities and People Living with HIV/AIDS in Eastern India

(Continuation Project – Final 18-Month Phase)

Executive Summary

This report describes the progress of the **HIV/AIDS Support Centre Project** of [SAATHII, Calcutta Office](#) from November 2006 to April 2008. This period was the final phase of a four-year continuation project that was one of the first to provide **capacity building** assistance specifically to voluntary and government agencies working with sexual minorities and people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in eastern and north-eastern India.

Both populations needed urgent support to tackle highly stigmatized social and legal environments and scale up their response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The project addressed this gap through provision of evidence-based and customized information dissemination, networking, advocacy, research, training and other technical assistance.

The project started in March 2004 and received funding support from [Elton John AIDS Foundation, London](#) three consecutive times (in March 2004, June 2005 and November 2006)¹. The value of funding for the final phase was £59,838 (Rs.49.80 lakh), which enabled the project to expand its services to the largest scale ever in its lifetime.

Having begun with only five partner agencies in 2004, the project served 35-40 voluntary and government agencies in the final phase, and broadened its mandate to serve diverse populations. Thus even though the primary beneficiaries were **14,000-15,000** MSM, (male-to-female) transgender people and PLWHA in Manipur, Orissa and West Bengal, other vulnerable populations and influencer groups like children; youth and women in rural and urban areas; survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse; legal aid and medical personnel; and the uniformed forces also benefited.

The Support Centre provided **knowledge building** support in gender, sexuality, human rights, sexual health and HIV/AIDS. It also specialized in provision of technical assistance and other capacity building services in relation to a variety of **skills sets** crucial to tackling the HIV/AIDS epidemic:

- Leadership; networking; community mobilization; organizational development and programme management; human resources policy development; fund raising; financial management
- HIV/AIDS prevention, care, support and treatment

¹ In this four-year period, on a relatively smaller scale and with funding support mainly from other sources, SAATHII's Chennai Office also functioned as an HIV/AIDS Support Centre for voluntary agencies working with sexual minorities in Tamil Nadu.

- Behaviour change communication (BCC) strategy and material development; outreach; counseling; advocacy for decriminalization of sexual minorities and access to affordable medicines and treatment for PLWHA; media advocacy
- Livelihood and non-formal education programmes
- Documentation; abstract writing; research; monitoring and evaluation

Technical assistance was provided through organizational and programme planning support; employment and funding support; information provision (library, web-based, helpline services); training (workshops, seminars, conferences, courses, assignments); mentoring; handholding; learning from doing; exposure and exchange visits.

Most of the partner agencies were located in eastern and north-eastern India, while a few had national presence. The **main partner agencies** served were:

a) In West Bengal: Amitié, Chandannagar; Bengal Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (BNP+), Calcutta; Koshish, Calcutta; MANAS Bangla, Calcutta; SPARSHA and AASHA, Calcutta; Swikriti, Calcutta; and Sangram, Beherampur;

b) In Manipur: Aasha and Social Awareness Service Organization (SASO), Imphal; Manipur Network of Positive People (MNP+), Imphal;

c) In Orissa: Fellowship, Bhadrak; Santi Seva, Bhadrak; Saraswati, Betaligaon; and Orissa North Zone Network of MSM-Transgender Targeted Intervention Programmes.

The Support Centre also worked with several secondary partners in Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. Key among them were Legal AIDS Services West Bengal (LASWEB) and School of Tropical Medicine, both based in Calcutta. The Support Centre partnered the Integrated Network for Sexual Minorities (INFOSEM) in providing technical assistance to community based organizations (CBOs) of MSM and transgender people across India. SAATHII represented INFOSEM in an international capacity building programme for CBOs of sexual minorities organized by SIDA, Stockholm, Sweden.

Senior project staff and external resource persons developed a range of print, audio-visual, photographic and theatre based BCC material to train the Support Centre's partners and support them in advocacy efforts. The project also facilitated opening of a [SAATHII Field Office in Bhubaneswar](#) to focus on activities in Orissa.

Key successes achieved collectively and individually by the partners and SAATHII:

- Nearly 350 partner agency representatives / beneficiaries provided training through more than 50 workshops and related activities; more than 50 module sets developed (used also in other programmes of SAATHII); one in-depth training course on process documentation conducted by SAATHII and MNP+ in Manipur
- Santi Seva became first CBO for transgender communities in Orissa to receive international funding for its development through a grant submitted by SAATHII to [American Jewish World Service, New York, USA](#); SPARSHA developed its first ever human resources policy with technical assistance from SAATHII

- Aasha became one of the few registered CBOs for MSM in Manipur; Swikriti received empanelment from West Bengal State AIDS Prevention & Control Society (WBSAP&CS), Calcutta as their partner agency
- Public endorsements received from legal, political and academic functionaries to: (a) Change discriminatory laws that criminalize sexual minorities (Section 377, Indian Penal Code), and (b) Ensure access to affordable medicines and treatment for PLWHA
- In 2007, SAATHII, Amitié, Fellowship, Koshish, Sangram and Swikriti expanded Rainbow Pride Week activities and Siddhartha Gautam Film Festival (named after one of India's first HIV and sexuality activists, 1964-92) well beyond Calcutta to several districts of West Bengal and for the first time Orissa
- Drishtikone media advocacy collective completed two years, acquired new member agencies, and gained acknowledgement from leading health and development journalists in West Bengal
- SAATHII's research on role of sensuality in making male-to-male sex safer **and** pleasurable in Indian contexts received international recognition; SAATHII's research and pilot projects on income generation prospects for MSM and transgender beneficiaries of partner agencies completed successfully
- Reference library in Calcutta completed three years, received visitors from National AIDS Control Organisation ([NACO](#)), New Delhi and Manipur Legislative Forum for AIDS, Imphal; complementary mobile library service launched; branch library opened in Bhadrak in partnership with Fellowship
- Individuals employed by SAATHII on behalf of five of the main partners visibly improved documentation, coordination and public speaking skills; 50% of them now employed directly by their respective agencies
- Approximate value of grant writing, infrastructure, social marketing and skills building support provided by SAATHII to its partner agencies in 2007-08 (till March 2008): ₹10,812 (Rs.9 lakh)
- Project staff presented Support Centre's work in Asia-Pacific and international AIDS conferences in 2007, and would also participate in 17th International AIDS Conference in Mexico this year. They also represented SAATHII in sexuality and development conferences in India and UK
- Support Centre activities in Manipur paved way for extension of SAATHII's other HIV/AIDS care, support and treatment programmes in north-eastern India.

The final phase of the project emphasized on **sustainability** for main partners through intensive organizational planning and fund raising. Additionally, the partners were linked up with consultative processes for formulation of the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) – Phase III (2007-2012) policy, and educated about the role of UNAIDS Three Ones Principles in NACP – Phase III. The new phase started in mid-2007. Funding support for the Support Centre



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Project from [Elton John AIDS Foundation](#) right since 2004 was extremely timely as it facilitated SAATHII and its partners' participation in the run up to and roll-out of NACP – Phase III.

In 2008, SAATHII would commence **new projects** to orient all its partners agencies on operational guidelines for NACP – Phase III and other national health policies and programmes, train them to take on leadership roles in their implementation, and mobilize them to form watchdog coalitions to ensure that the policies and programmes are implemented as promised and in a transparent manner. Towards these goals, SAATHII has received provisional acceptance of grants submitted to UNAIDS India, New Delhi and [DFID Civil Society Challenge Fund, Glasgow](#), UK. Funding received from these grants would also ensure sustainability of crucial capacity building work initiated with support from [Elton John AIDS Foundation](#).