

Waking a sleeping giant: Internews helps Hindi journalists give voice to the silent HIV epidemics in Uttar Pradesh

Journalists in Uttar Pradesh are giving a wake up call to policymakers to urgently respond to the growing threat of HIV/AIDS in this state of 166 million people. Their enthusiasm was inspired by an intensive training initiative – *Voice of U.P.* – conducted by Internews Network in partnership with the *Dainik Jagran*, India's largest circulated Hindi daily.

The *Voice of U.P.* training initiative is part of a series of activities in a comprehensive training package on Health and HIV reporting for journalists from Uttar Pradesh. Supported by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the training has been implemented by Internews Network with the support of Washington, DC based staff.

The overall aim of the series is to equip the local media to raise the profile of HIV/AIDS and health in U.P. in a way that will create awareness, help set the social and political agenda, and ultimately spur an effective response to public health challenges such as HIV.

The *Voice of U.P.* initiative reached 34 reporters with HIV related information and focused on a core group of the six most interested in continuing to report on the topic. More than 50 stories appeared on issues covered in the training: HIV surveillance, HIV counseling and testing, ethical/legal issues in HIV/AIDS, the TB/HIV co-epidemic, access to treatment, preventing mother to child transmission and the work of networks of people living with HIV (PLHIV), in prevention, care and treatment.

The journalists also upgraded their knowledge and reporting skills on human sexual behaviors, human trafficking, migration and HIV, the links between gender, reproductive health and HIV, funding for health and HIV in India and the upcoming National AIDS Control Program Phase-3.

Building on the commitment of media owners to give more quality coverage to HIV/AIDS issues at the Media Summit

hosted by Manmohan Singh, the Indian Prime Minister in January 2005, *Voice of U.P.*

equipped urban and rural reporters from the state with practical tools to produce sensitive, balanced and accurate reportage on the epidemic. The journalists were able to devote time to the training because of the unstinting support of their editors, particularly those from the *Dainik Jagran* and *Hindustan*.

"We must stop regarding the issue as a problem of the state, state-run agencies like UPSACS or foreign agencies like the UNICEF, USAID, Care and other associations," said Mr. Vinod Shukla, Resident Editor of the *Dainik Jagran* in Lucknow. "While the funding is important, we must remember that these are our people, our children which we are talking of. We have a commitment to our readers to ensure their wellbeing and health. Thus there must be no prejudice or bias when it comes to joining hands on the issue of HIV/AIDS."

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS EXPLORED

Poverty, a low literacy rate, gender related inequities, poor understanding of HIV/AIDS and the virtual lack of information, STI treatment and condoms for vulnerable groups make U.P. — the most populous state in India — a sitting target for HIV.

The rising toll of AIDS related deaths in U.P.'s villages, particularly in the eastern region, tell an ominous story: the state ac-



Journalists from the *Dainik Jagran* and other newspapers in Uttar Pradesh at the end of a *Voice of U.P.* workshop in Lucknow. In front, from left to right are Kaushik Das (Naz Foundation), Tripti Tandon (Lawyers Collective), Beena Kuttiparambil (UNICEF), Jaya Shreedhar (Internews Network), Neha Shukla (*Dainik Jagran*) and Rebika Laishram (Internews Network).

counts for nearly one-fourth of all interstate migrants in India and more than 20% of U.P. migrants work in HIV hotspots like Mumbai. Many are villagers and a growing number are now returning to their villages with HIV, infecting their spouses, and propelling the epidemic into U.P.'s rural heartland.

A tiny community of PLHIV groups, NGOs and doctors struggle to meet these challenges with little manpower and few resources, even as the need for their expertise and services escalates.

LOCAL MEDIA ENLISTED TO SET AGENDA

Voice of U.P. tapped the potential of the local media to highlight this situation and set the agenda for immediate action. Dr. Jaya Shreedhar, technical health advisor for Internews and an experienced health journalist, led reporting trips to rural areas of UP, helping journalist-trainees to directly interact with affected communities, enabling their voices to be heard.

"The trips to the field were useful because I was able to see for myself the actual condition of PLHIV and how much help they need. This is a real learning experience," said Dhananjay Varma, the Varanasi correspondent for the *Dainik Jagran*.



INTERACTION INCREASES UNDERSTANDING AND REDUCES STIGMA

PLHIV leaders themselves mentored the journalists along with Internews trainers, helping trainees overcome fear, stigma and prejudice. Many trainees met people living with HIV and AIDS for the first time through the *Voice of U.P.* Trainees learned to make the distinction between HIV and AIDS and became sensitive to the potential impact of negative and positive tone and language in their reporting on HIV. They worked to substitute negative terms with positive ones and PLHIV concerns began to get media space — a first for Uttar Pradesh.

“This training is good because PLHIV are included. It is the PLHIV who can deliver the real picture or the scene close to reality,” said Deepak Mishra, the Faizabad correspondent of the *Dainik Jagran*.

The U.P. Network of PLHIV also kept a watch on the articles published by the trainees, providing constant feedback that helped reporters improve their language skills.

“Our PLHA Community congratulates Internews for your sincere and hard work to train Uttar Pradesh journalists. The last article published in the *Dainik Jagran* was very sensitive reporting,” wrote Naresh Yadav, the President of the U.P. Network of Positive People or UPNP+.

TAMIL NADU VISIT RESULTS IN FRONT-PAGE STORIES ON HIV/AIDS

Three of the trainees visited the southern state of Tamil Nadu — a high prevalence

“The visit to Bharosa (an MSM drop-in center) was a very good experience for me. I was very touched to hear their problems regarding so many social taboos attached to them. They need to speak out for themselves and media can come out and fight for their rights like the other common people.”

— Neha Shukla, trainee-correspondent, *Dainik Jagran*, Lucknow

state for HIV — to report on the lessons learned there over many years of responding to the epidemic. When they returned, they produced front-page stories that identified political commitment, adequate funding and the non discriminatory attitude of policy makers and service providers towards vulnerable groups as critical factors to an effective response to HIV/AIDS. They also returned to U.P. with the realization that mutual trust and access between policy makers and the media was essential for effective reporting on the epidemic that has an impact.

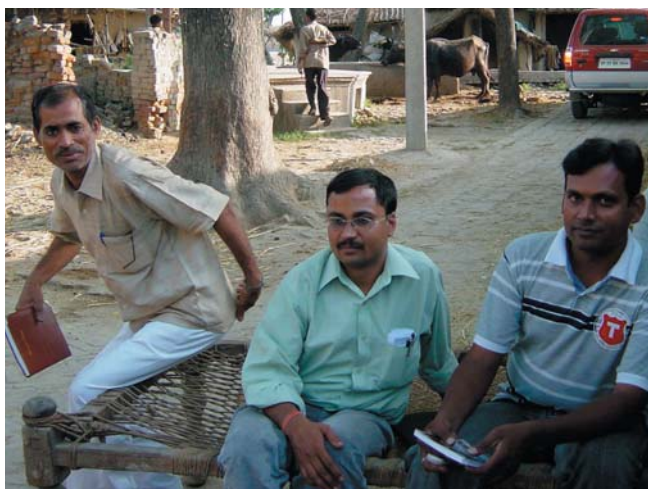
Voice of U.P. began providing a forum for the trainees and representatives from UPSACS, UNICEF and the health sector to jointly share their concerns and vent feelings about the inadequate governmental response to HIV and the destructive coverage by the media. It helped lower the defenses of the officials and helped the trainees to lose some of the distrust of the bureaucracy. The relationships became so relaxed that the journalists enjoyed the role-play of mock interviews with the resource people through non-confrontational interviewing techniques.

“The U.P. SACS representative is not protecting U.P. SACS... it feels [as though] she is talking as a media person. The interview techniques learnt in the workshop are very useful for us, in future I will follow these guidelines before interviewing anybody,” said Manish Srivastav, a senior correspondent from the Lucknow *Jagran*. The media now enjoys greater access to the NGOs and local officials dealing with HIV/AIDS.

HEALTH AND HIV LINKED TO WIDER ISSUES

The trainees said that as a result of the training program, they have developed an interest in reporting on health and HIV, mainly because they are now able to see beyond the medical aspects of health and understand its links to deeper challenges such as societal inequities, marginalization, poverty, poor governance and poor management of funds and programs. They also said they felt better equipped to report on HIV surveillance data

“In this session I learn a lot of things about HIV reports. As I work on the desk, I regularly work on some national/inter-



On a rural reporting trip, Rakesh from the Uttar Pradesh Network of PLHIV, sits with *Dainik Jagran* correspondents Manish Srivastav and Dhananjay Varma.

national/local reports. First thing is now I know about a difference between incidence and prevalence. I learnt that at the desk there is lot of confusion in press release on HIV/AIDS data. Now I think ... I will work more comfortably in these type of stories/releases.” said Bhartendu Trivedi, copy editor at *Hindustan*.

VOICE OF U.P. ARMS JOURNALISTS FOR THEIR VITAL ROLE IN HIV RESPONSE

The journalist-trainees also said that it was time to put aside their cynicism and hostility towards the stakeholders working in HIV/AIDS and re-dedicate themselves to the role they could play to motivate NGO and governmental responses, reduce HIV related stigma and connect the public to HIV information and services.

Voice of U.P. has had a significant, immediate and positive impact on the journalists as illustrated by the much higher quality of discussions on HIV/AIDS they are now able to hold, the keen questions they have begun to ask interviewees, the angles explored in their stories and the greater sensitivity in the overall tone and terminology they adopt.

Thanks to sponsorship from the Kaiser Family Foundation, one of the trainees from *Voice of U.P.* will travel to Toronto in August to attend the International AIDS Conference 2006 and report from the international frontlines for the *Dainik Jagran*.

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Internews Network Administrative Headquarters

P.O. Box 4448 • Arcata, CA 95518 USA • Telephone: +1 707 826-2030 • Fax: +1 707 826-2136

Email: info@internews.org • Website: www.internews.org