

The Indian Express

17, August 2005 (Wednesday)

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The business of fighting HIV/AIDS

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THE involvement of civil society in combating HIV/AIDS in India is crucial to its success. While almost 1,000 NGOs are working with the National Aids Control Organisation (NACO) to control the disease, the involvement of business is less well-known and just as critical.

There are good reasons for corporates to be involved in restraining spread of the disease. ADB estimates that the loss due to HIV/AIDS in 2001 was \$7 billion, and could touch \$17 billion by 2010 if current trends continue. At the macro-level, greater exposure to the virus influences economic growth, global competitiveness, workforce demographics and consumer base, as has been witnessed in high-prevalence countries. It may even prove to be a factor in investment decisions of overseas companies. At the firm-level, the environment in which businesses operate, produce and market is distorted. Productivity losses may be reflected through higher absenteeism, greater turnover, and increased healthcare costs. Training and recruitment costs go up, and staff morale suffers.

In India, the number of people with the virus is 5.134 million according to the NACO estimate of 2005. Nearly 90 per cent of cases are in the 15-49 year age-group, which translates into 1 of every

100 workers of this group being affected. Six states — Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland — are high-prevalence states where incidence in the high-risk group is over 5 per cent. The first four of these are also among India's fastest growing states. Other states, such as UP and Bihar with large migrant populations, are highly vulnerable as well.

The corporate sector is particularly well-positioned to control spread of HIV/AIDS. It has access to a large population of workers, as well as to their families and the wider community.

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Moreover, corporate management skills, including capacity building and information-dissemination, make them an effective and efficient partner in the struggle. Advocacy and awareness building are two crucial components for prevention of the disease. Corporates with their particular talents and access can therefore be critical partners in prevention campaigns.

The WEF Global Business Survey on Business and HIV/AIDS covered 8,700 business executives in 104 countries in the early half of 2004 for tracking

business response. It found that 71 per cent of the companies did not have policies to address the disease; 66 per cent could provide no estimates of HIV-positive employees on their payroll. On the other hand, in the hardest hit countries, the proportion of firms with policies for HIV/AIDS increased to 47 per cent.

Indian industry has not lagged behind in efforts to combat the virus. Companies in sectors that are particularly vulnerable are attuned to its potential dangers. Tata Steel has a large HIV/AIDS prevention and control programme and regularly conducts

database of best practices, for providing support to smaller companies and for gathering industry-wide information. An industry organisation also helps in consolidating business response and forming effective partnerships with other organisations.

There is much that individual firms, large and small, can do to play their role in awareness generation and advocacy. Companies must develop programmes for tackling HIV/AIDS for welfare of employees as well as corporate reputation. They may conduct sensitisation sessions for all levels of staff, put up posters and distribute leaflets for information and education, and establish contacts with local clinics for health care and insurance cover. Publicised policies against discrimination should be instituted and voluntary testing encouraged with no fear of consequences. Free condoms could be distributed, and counseling centers set up. Larger companies could also engage with surrounding communities and extend their services to NGOs and volunteers.

Private sector participation and public-private partnerships can together supply effective and sustained efforts to combat the HIV scourge, enabling infected people to lead a productive life and preventing the spread of the disease to the population at large.