

THE AVAHAN KNOWLEDGE OLYMPICS



Knowledge Olympics 2008 Celebration Event

The Knowledge Olympics is an effort supported by Avahan – the India AIDS Initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation – to galvanize cross-sharing of knowledge and experiences by communities themselves.

The heart of the Knowledge Olympics embraced community-led visual storytelling, that is, through powerful films and digital essays which amplified community voices, including their issues and solutions, which were produced by communities themselves. Avahan's Knowledge Olympics was implemented across its six high-prevalence project states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Manipur, Nagaland and Tamil Nadu during the course of a year in 2008.

Avahan's HIV prevention efforts with vulnerable groups, such as sex workers, Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) and Injecting Drug Users (IDU), since 2004 have been grounded in core principles of community mobilization, ownership and empowerment. The Knowledge Olympics takes these principles even further, by placing the tools of communication and technology into the **hands of those who are at the very heart of the program**, thus **unlocking their power to dialogue, share, network and advocate.**

Rationale

Recognizing the significant experience and knowledge generated by the program's 15-plus partners over the last 4 years, there was widespread consensus that a dynamic and interactive forum was critical to ensure cross-sharing among Avahan's wide web of partners. These include State Lead Partners (SLPs) who are lead NGO grantees for state programs, Implementing Partners (IPs) who are local NGOs supported by the SLPs, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and national capacity-building partners.

This led to the development of *e-avahan*, an electronic knowledge-sharing platform, in August 2007 to facilitate the dynamic and rich exchange of program experiences, technical tools and aids among a wide cross-section of the program's stakeholders. Recognizing that the community, which is the very *raison d'être* for Avahan, was unable to fully participate in the existing platform, Avahan launched, as part of its community cross-sharing efforts, the Knowledge Olympics.

Knowledge Olympics Goals

The Knowledge Olympics had three goals:

1. Amplifying community voices through community-led documentation of Avahan best practices
2. Building community networks
3. Supporting capacity-building of communities

These three goals corresponded with the objectives of the second phase of Avahan's program (2009-2014) to document best practices and strengthen community-led networks.

Fundamental to the concept of the Knowledge Olympics is the recognition that the knowledge of the community has a crucial value and salience for which there is no substitute. The broader sharing of such knowledge is not only empowering for the community, but also serves to enhance program effectiveness. Providing the community with the relevant skills and resources, Avahan recognized, would facilitate the recording and sharing of experiences by the communities themselves, regular interactions with peers and important stakeholders across geographical borders, and dialogue and learning on possible solutions to common issues confronting them.

The Process

The idea of the Knowledge Olympics germinated over the course of two national consultations aimed at facilitating discussions on possible processes and mechanisms for community cross-sharing (see *Figure 1* below).

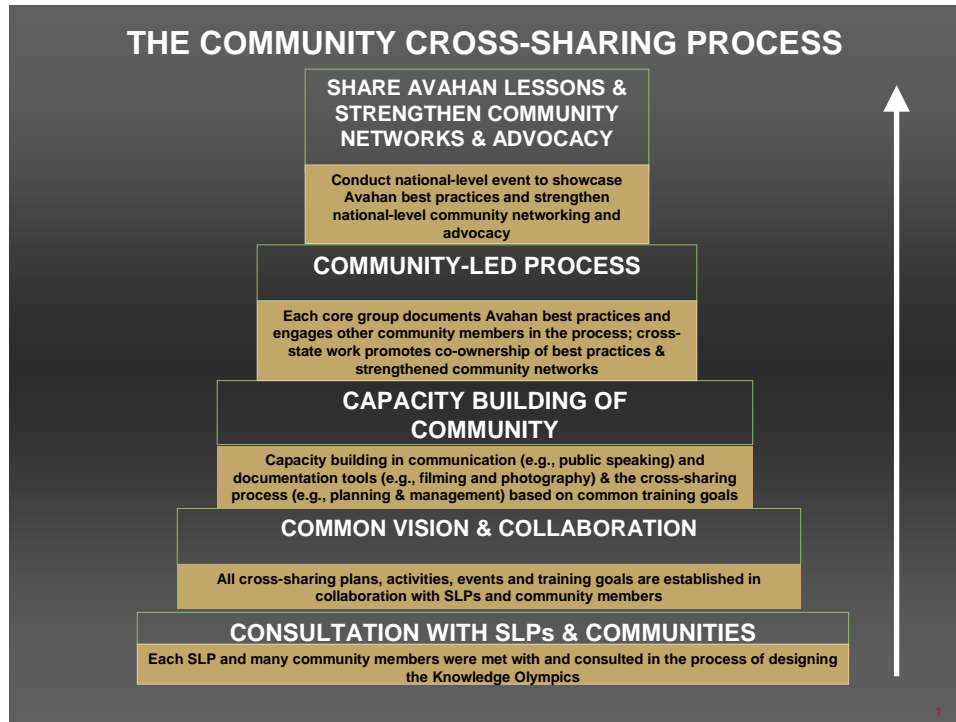


Figure 1

At these consultations, live demonstrations using computers and webcams, internet and video cameras, triggered the imagination of hundreds of community members present. A visibly enthused community deliberated on key issues: how can these communication tools be used? What are the skills and resources necessary to use them? What are the issues and knowledge that should be shared with program partners, and with the wider world? What are some of the important processes and mechanisms that would ensure that the entire initiative is community owned and driven?

Once the idea of the Knowledge Olympics took firm root in March 2008, a series of local consultations followed quickly. These involved representatives of Avahan’s SLPs, IPs, and CBOs representing all typologies of communities within the program. About 150 community members were nominated by their respective communities to represent one or more districts each, and to lead the community cross-sharing process which was the foundation for the Knowledge Olympics. Another much smaller, core group of national “community leaders” would review and feedback on content generated by the communities, while also sharing these with wider and larger networks, thus



Web-based Community Video Conference

ensuring that communities voices had far-reaching impact.

What Followed

In the months that followed, community representatives from nearly every Avahan project district participated in the Knowledge Olympics. Ten teams of approximately 15 community members each from 9 SLPs were trained in basic visual documentation (i.e., film and photography) communication (public speaking), and planning and management skills. These skills areas were identified by the community themselves, through a needs assessment survey conducted by Avahan, as capacity-building critical for cross-sharing.

While the training was conducted at the state-level, the training goals, curricula and Knowledge Olympics calendar were common across the states, and were developed through intensive consultative processes with SLPs and communities themselves.

Each community team engaged several peers in the field in the process of identifying and documenting real stories of challenges and triumph, as well as gathering critical feedback on their experiences with different prevention strategies and technical tools. Several visual stories and digital essays were produced by communities that found resonance across several and wide-ranging groups of stakeholders across the country and internationally (see Box 1 for an example of a story which the community documented).

Finally, the Knowledge Olympics 2008 culminated in a national-level event. This event consolidated cross-sharing activities, showcased and disseminated Avahan best practices, and supported community networking and advocacy at the national level. Subsequently, several events were conducted by community members themselves (e.g., Project 19 nationally, Knowledge FAN in the north east) to showcase their learning, tell their stories, and amplify their voices at the state- and national-levels.

Box 1

Accepting Our Sexuality and Reaching Out to the MSM Community

This documentary film by the community reveals the lives of MSM and the struggle to accept their own sexuality. The film tells the story of how overcoming many fears, the community courageously fights stigma and comes together, inspiring other community members to support each other and celebrate their strength.