

# Upscaling Community Conversations in Ethiopia

2004

Unleashing Capacities of Communities  
for the HIV/AIDS Response





*“In the face of a phenomenon so intricately linked into the fabric of a society and as personally and professionally threatening as the HIV epidemic, it may be that only programmes which penetrate the soul of a community, organization or nation will be effective.”*

*- Campbell, 1997*

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# Foreword



This document is a follow-up to 'Voices of Change, Voices of Action –Transforming the response to HIV/AIDS, An Ethiopian Experience', 2003, which presents the results of UNDP's Leadership for Results Programme and its contribution in responding to HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia in 2002/3.

In 'Upscaling Community Conversations in Ethiopia 2004' we focus on a key component of the programme, Community Conversations, and the powerful results it has brought about in terms of empowering communities at the grass roots level to engage in open discussions about HIV/AIDS and to take innovative steps to reverse the spread of the epidemic, including behavioural change. The results speak for themselves. Given the increasing demand from the communities and partners for the Community Conversations methodology, UNDP is embarking on the next and exiting phase of the programme to up-scale Community Conversations nation-wide. We would like to invite all partners from the Government, NGO and the donor communities to join us in making available this truly remarkable methodology to all Ethiopians.

For supporting us in introducing Community Conversations in Ethiopia, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the following: the Communities of Alaba and Yabello, who have been part of this exciting process of self-discovery and transformation from the beginning. Our partners in SNNPR, Dr. Ersiddo Lendebo, Head of SNNPR HAPCO and Dr. Bogaletch Gebre, Executive Director of KMG (Kembatta Women's Center Ethiopia). Our partners in Oromiya, W/ro Fatuma Abafita, Head of Oromiya HAPCO and Dr Daniel Gidamo, Head of BRUDA. To Ato Negatu Mereke, Head HAPCO, I extend a very special thanks for his strong support and partnership, which has contributed to the success of the methodology so far.

Thanks also to Dr. Monica Sharma, Team Leader, BDP, HIV/AIDS Group, and her team member, Dr. Moustapha Gueye, and Mr. Daouda Diouf for making the methodology available in Ethiopia; and to Ms. Nileema Noble, Deputy Resident Representative and the UNDP Ethiopia HIV/AIDS team for their commitment and effective management and operationalisation of Community Conversations in Ethiopia.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Samuel Nyambi'.

Samuel Nyambi  
UNDP Resident Representative, Ethiopia



## Introduction



In July 2002, a group of 60 individuals met together in a school hall in Alaba Town, Ethiopia, to embark together on an extraordinary process. Among the people present were students, teachers, farmers, government officials, nurses and other members of the Alaba community—both women and men, young and old. Also present were representatives from the SNNPR and Oromiya Regional HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Offices (HAPCO), UNDP and several partner NGOs, including Kembatta Women’s Center (KMG), Bethel Rural & Urban Development Association (BRUDA) and Mekane Yesus. The goal of the meeting was to launch a process in Ethiopia, in which the ability of communities to understand and effectively respond to the deeper causes of their complex challenges in HIV/AIDS is acknowledged and supported.

The process, Community Conversations, is one of UNDP’s core contributions to the HIV/AIDS response. It is a powerful methodology, involving trained local facilitators, who facilitate a process of developing the capacities of communities and the organizations working with them to effectively respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Since that first meeting in Alaba Town, UNDP – together with partner NGOs KMG and BRUDA

– has implemented Community Conversations in communities in Alaba, SNNPR and Yabelo, Oromiya, with remarkable results. The process in Ethiopia has achieved true breakthroughs in providing people with the means of identifying their own problems and finding their own solutions. Aided by skilled facilitators from their own communities, people are openly talking to each other about ‘taboo’ subjects for the first time. While exploring the implications of HIV/AIDS, they are identifying their own cultural norms and values that are fuelling the epidemic and the social capital within the community to overcome them. And in line with UNDP’s mandate, many of the outcomes of Community Conversations are working towards strengthening and enhancing the results of other organizations’ interventions.

The following is just a sample of the areas, in which Community Conversations are driving resounding results (*more detail on these examples are provided in “Results” boxes throughout this document*):

- Communities are taking responsibility for their own prevention, by travelling great distances to utilise VCT centres, and forbidding the use of shared needles and blades
- Communities are discontinuing traditional



practices that they have identified as being harmful in the context of HIV/AIDS, such as female circumcision, widow inheritance and wife sharing

- Communities' voices are feeding into local governance
- Communities are drawing upon their own social capital to provide care and support for children orphaned as a result of AIDS
- Communities are sharing their conversations and wisdoms with neighbouring communities

Although Community Conversations is a core component of UNDP's HIV/AIDS response, the results extend beyond the realm of HIV/AIDS. The process allows for open and frank discussions about otherwise 'taboo' issues, such as gender, harmful traditional practices, and sexual relations. Additionally, the methodology can be applied to other areas, such as poverty or environment. Other questions would be posed, and other solutions would be found, but the fundamental principles of participation, empowerment and transformation would remain central to the process.

Furthermore, as experience has shown, the results are being amplified and multiplied through **resonance**. Resonance occurs when communities transfer and share lessons learned with other communities, and when the changed attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and ways of being begin to be adopted and shared with members not present at Community Conversations.

On account of the extraordinary results generated through UNDP's Community Conversations approach in Ethiopia, demand for Community Conversations has been overwhelming.

## Results

Communities are learning how to prevent infection and making decisions for safer health services.

The practice of 'Festal hakims', traditional healers, or so-called 'plastic bag doctors' who travel from one village to the other, has been forbidden by the Hamata Peasant Association. Community Conversations participants have realised that the shared use of needles and blades might contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS.





## Community Conversations: The Methodology in Brief

Community Conversations involve trained local facilitators, who help the community to generate insights on the underlying factors fuelling the spread of HIV/AIDS in the community.

This is done using a wide range of participatory methodologies, such as story telling, active listening, and strategic questioning, in order to identify shared concerns, observe, reflect, question, explore and make decisions for change together. In these sessions, a cross section of people from the community are invited to participate – men and women, old and young, people living with HIV/AIDS and those who are not infected, religious and traditional leaders, representatives from women's associations, youth groups and members of the community at large.

An environment is fostered, in which all those concerned work together, based on the recognition that people have valuable capacities, perspectives and knowledge, as well as an interest in change. These are validated, built upon and strengthened through community meetings. The approach also acknowledges that people can hold false beliefs, be misinformed or act in bad faith.

### Objectives of Community Conversations

1. To generate a deep and complex understanding of the nature of the epidemic within individuals and communities, and to create social cohesion for an environment that is conducive to political, legal and ethical change.
2. To support the development of self-esteem, self-confidence, tolerance, trust, accountability, introspection and self-management.
3. To empower communities to examine and redefine social contracts between different groups in the community – for example, between women and men, People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) and those that are uninfected or untested, the old and young, and the rich and poor.
4. To build a pool of resource persons with transformative leadership competencies and facilitation skills in community conversations, to scale up community responses to HIV and related development issues.
5. To bring the voices of people into the national response; to integrate community concerns and decisions into national and decentralized plans, thus linking resources to individual and collective needs.
6. To strengthen the capacity of NGOs and CBOs to develop appropriate strategies for a response that places communities and individuals at the center of the response.



Through the process of inclusive interaction, collective or social learning occurs, power relations shift, ownership and responsibility for change is strengthened, changes are initiated and local capacities and resources are mobilized. This is done within a methodological framework with specific steps, matching skills and tools.

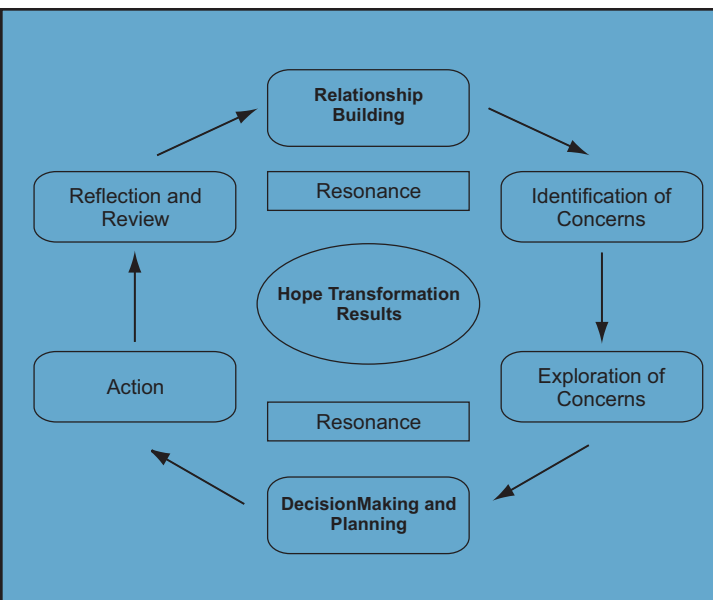
Community Conversations is a facilitated process for dialogue and decision making – for communities to delve into the deep and sometimes uncomfortable causes of the epidemic in their lives and generate their own solutions to address those causes. By facilitating rather than intervening, and by empowering rather than prescribing, Community Conversations stands in contrast to many other approaches seeking to bring about Behaviour Change.



## Results

**Communities are taking action to know their HIV status and protect their loved ones.**

Participants declared that their participation in the community meetings had helped them to take the decision to get tested for HIV. Many individuals reported that they had undertaken the 4 hours ride (one way) on a public bus to the nearest VCT centre in the regional capital. Others reported that they had convinced their partners to get tested before getting married, and that the couples had undergone HIV testing together.





## Leadership for Results



Community Conversations is part of a synergistic package called Leadership for Results. Leadership for Results is UNDP's breakthrough contribution towards supporting a country's overall response to HIV/AIDS. The strategy uses approaches that have a potential impact on all development issues, reaching far beyond HIV/AIDS. Leadership for Results approaches the epidemic at multiple entry points, and it is designed to create an enabling policy, legislative and social environment to achieve measurable and sustainable results in the campaign against HIV/AIDS. Through its core interventions, it addresses the underlying social, cultural, political and economic factors that fuel the epidemic, and supports the goals set by UNGASS and the Millennium General Assembly.

**taking personal and collective responsibility.**

- **Through the transformation of beliefs, attitudes, norms and values that fuel the spread of the epidemic, and**
- **Through action that addresses the underlying causes of the epidemic, such as stigma, discrimination, denial, gender inequality and poverty.**

Leadership for Results seeks to develop leadership capacity at all levels, and in all sectors. The strategy is based on theories and practices of integral transformation such as distinctions, leadership conversations for effectiveness in businesses and government, emotional intelligence competencies, and frameworks for understanding complexities

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