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Interview with Gautam Yadav, LGBT and HIV activist and spokesperson of the Global Fund Advocates Network, October 2021 with Action against AIDS Germany for the conference on the occasion of World AIDS Day on 01.12.2021 [*"Global Health Champion Germany?! From HIV to SARS-CoV-2 - What have we (not) learned?"*](#)

"Many important projects could not have been realized without the support of the Global Fund"

When Gautam Yadav was diagnosed with HIV at the age of 18, all optimism for life had left him. A few years later, he is not only one of India's best-known LGBT and HIV activists, but also an example of how important it is to build community projects.

Article written by Axel Schock, Fotos: Gautam Yadav

As a teenager, Gautam would have desperately needed help, or at least a trustworthy person to whom he could have confided his needs. For example, his uncertainties and fears that accompanied him in his search for his sexual identity. But there was no one. Worse still, some in his school identified the gay classmate as the ideal bullying victim, making life even harder for Gautam than it already was for him. He saw no other way out than to drop out of school. He found his first contacts with other gay men via the internet - and tested HIV-positive at the age of 18.

"It was difficult for me to accept my HIV status and deal with it because I didn't know who to turn to," Gautam Yadav, who grew up in New Delhi, remembers this time. He didn't dare tell his parents, and he couldn't expect acceptance or even support from his schoolmates anyway.

These experiences and above all the associated hopelessness had plunged Gautam Yadav into a depression at that time, from which he only found his way out again with the help of community organizations - and at the same time also gained new self-confidence and self-acceptance.

"These experiences were why I decided to dedicate myself to social work and do my bit to help others in a similar situation find the help they need," says Yadav. "I don't want other Gautams to suffer like I did when I was 15 or 16. I want to help people understand their situation." And also that - unlike him - they are educated early on about HIV and how to protect themselves from infection.

Gautam was 19 years old when he decided to become an advocate for other young people living with HIV. Now, over a decade later, his commitment has not waned.

Advocate for LGBT rights and people living with HIV

Through his many interviews and public appearances, Gautam Yadav has not only become an example for people living with HIV and the LGBT community, but also a well-known advocate for their rights. Time and again, he has experienced the immediate impact he has on the lives of other queer or HIV-positive people. They contact him, for example, after watching a video with him or reading an interview, and find the courage to tell him their own story. Others seek advice or simply want to tell him that his confident, open occurrence made them feel less alone or bad.

Over the years, Gautam Yadav has taken on a number of responsible and important posts as part of his commitment, such as that of Program Officer of the Humsafar Trust, the oldest LGTIQ organization in India. He is also a board member of the UNAIDS Youth Advisory Forum and a member of the Global Fund Advocates Network (GFAN).

Many of the projects he has worked on could not have been implemented in this form and with this result without the support of the Global Fund, says Yadav - whether these are projects to prevent mother-to-child transmission or to minimize harm among drug users, or the first nationwide networking of LGBT organizations, through which the community and people living with HIV can better find counselling and support.

For Gautam Yadav, a central aspect of the work with the Global Fund is that the communities have the opportunity to implement projects more or less on their own.

This makes sense not only because the communities themselves know best what the problems are and what solutions are appropriate. It is also an enormously productive form of self-empowerment. "When people work for their own community and also become publicly visible as HIV-positive, this also empowers the community itself."

Human rights are part of the global fight against HIV/AIDS

"Working for people with HIV is also automatically linked to working for basic human rights," says Yadav. One result of this work was the Supreme Court of India's decision in 2018 to repeal Section 377 of the Penal Code, which dates back to colonial times. Until then, "sexual acts against nature" could be punished with imprisonment. "It was only through the support of the Global Fund that we had the opportunity to fight for our rights," explains Gautam Yadav.

The verdict has had far-reaching consequences for LGBTs in India: "Now they speak more openly about their sexuality, they dare to come out and no longer hide – and they take advantage of the opportunities for HIV testing."

But as in many parts of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has hampered, if not set back, the fight against other diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis in India.

The pandemic had caught Gautam Yadav by surprise in Nepal in 2019, where he was on a year-long exchange program. "I was dismayed and depressed," he recalls. "The borders were closed, everything went into lockdown. I thought: If I die of Covid-19 now, my body will stay in a foreign country. And if any of my friends or relatives die at home, I won't be able to see them. This has put a lot of emotional stress on me."

Covid-19 pandemic has eclipsed HIV, tuberculosis and malaria

When he returned to India, he found a terrible situation: There was a lack of oxygen, people were suffering terrible agony and far too many people were dying because they simply could not be treated.

However, the situation – medically and for the communities affected by the pandemic in various ways – has improved considerably in the meantime. The Covid-19 Relief Fund of the Global Fund has also been a great help in this regard – even if, as Yadav complains, due to the complex bureaucratic process, the urgently needed aid only arrived with great delay. "Things went much better and faster with the second wave of COVID-19."

However, the current trend in tuberculosis deaths is a cause for concern. As the WHO's current Global Tuberculosis Report shows, their number rose again in 2020 for the first time in more than a decade, reaching up to 1.5 million. A trend that is expected to intensify in 2021. To make matters worse, only 5.8 million people were diagnosed and treated with tuberculosis in 2020. In the previous year, there were still 7.1 million.

Also in India the COVID-19 pandemic made treatment options much more difficult. As a result of the lockdown, day labourers in particular found little work and had to move back to their home villages or to other regions.

As a result, explains Gautam Yadav, contact with migrant workers who were receiving tuberculosis treatment in Delhi was lost. The treatments were thus probably less or even completely discontinued. Nevertheless, those who came forward to the aid agencies were able to find the nearest treatment facility in their new place of residence and helped to continue the treatment.

"The positive effect of this exceptional situation was that the individual communities, such as sex workers, LGBT or drug users, dedicated themselves to this great task together," says Gautam Yadav. This was made possible not only by the commitment of many people in the organizations, but also by the structures and networks that proved themselves in this emergency. It was possible to develop this over the years, not at least thanks to the support of the Global Fund.

Register for the conference "Global Health Champion Germany?! From HIV to SARS-CoV-2 - What have we (not) learned?" [here](#)