Bill Gates India’s fight against HIV just got an $80 million push. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) on Thursday increased its funding commitment to Avahan—its initiative to reduce the spread of HIV in India—to $338 million or Rs 1,652 crore.

Prior to the announcement, the foundation had committed $258 million to the programme.

The announcement by Microsoft founder and one of the world’s richest men Bill Gates, who is in India, comes at a time when the foundation has been facing allegations that it failed to make a lasting impact in India’s HIV fight.

It has also faced criticism for deciding to “shut down” Avahan and hand over the programme to government-run National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), which does not want to bear the burden.

However, the officials of the foundation told TOI, “BMGF does not believe in continuous funding. Avahan’s whole purpose was to equip India in its fight against HIV. We were to build the programme, help scale it up, make it sustainable and give it to its natural holders like members of the community or the government. The foundation launched Avahan in 2003 to help fight HIV in India for a decade.”

The foundation said it was inaccurate to suggest that Avahan was about to wind down. Gates told TOI, “In fact, we have already awarded grants that extend into 2014. It’s not that the foundation is leaving India. The amount we spend in India on health and development will actually go up but will focus on other things like nutrition, maternal and child health and vaccines.”

Avahan was helping India to expand effective HIV prevention programmes that target sex workers, injection drug users and other groups at highest risk of infection.

Gates said there was no evidence for the claim that Avahan had failed to make a serious difference in India’s fight against AIDS. “Lot of research is being done on the numbers—effect of
Avahan on HIV, its effect on the community, condom usage, how much has it reduced violence among high risk groups or sexually transmitted diseases,” he said.

The foundation said there was no reason why NACO could not run the programme. “It was always clear to the government that we would build capacity, scale up the programme and then step back. The goal was always about transition,” a foundation official said.

Gates will meet health minister Ghulam Nabi Azad on Friday to discuss India’s response to HIV/AIDS. “Prevention is absolutely essential for fighting HIV, and will ultimately save millions of lives,” Gates said.

Gates and Azad will discuss gradual transition of Avahan to the government. Avahan has already awarded more than $100 million in grants for this transition.

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