

THE ROLE OF FIELD WORKERS IN SUPPORTING AIDS-AFFECTED FAMILIES



Families living with AIDS face a series of problems which increase as the disease evolves. Field workers have a key role to play in assisting families in finding solutions and in supporting them as their livelihoods change.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF FIELD WORKERS IN ADDRESSING HIV/AIDS



In areas affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, field workers can no longer ignore the disease and its impacts. Families living with the disease:

- are often the households which were already poor and vulnerable; and
- have difficulties in accessing existing services due to lack of resources or time and often through fear of discrimination

The daily work of field workers is also affected by HIV/AIDS. Farmers from affected households cannot carry on with all their farming activities due to a lack of time or resources. Field workers may have to work with new partners such as the elderly, women, youth and children who have different needs from traditional farmers. Services provided by field workers can also be affected due to staff shortages.

UNDERSTANDING DATA

You may have been told that your area has a moderate or serious HIV/AIDS problem. What is the basis for this claim and what should be done about it?

HOW ARE DATA COLLECTED?

- anonymous blood samples are taken at selected hospitals, maternity clinics, voluntary counselling and testing centres and are tested for HIV
- the results provide an indication of the number and age of women and men who are infected with HIV
- the results are often presented as an HIV prevalence. Prevalence means the number of HIV infections in population.

WHAT DOES A MEDIUM TO HIGH HIV

PREVALENCE MEAN?

- HIV prevalence rates may be high but people can live with HIV for a number of years, so it will take some time before large numbers of people start dying from AIDS-related illnesses
- this means that communities only become aware of the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS when the disease is already well established
- communities must be encouraged to avoid, and prepare for, the disease before prevalence rates become very high

WHAT KIND OF PROBLEMS WILL AIDS-AFFECTED FAMILIES HAVE?

Unlike other diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS is mainly transmitted through having sexual intercourse with someone who has the HIV virus. This means that most people who are living with HIV/AIDS are not the youngest or the elderly in the household, but are adults.

Farming households have to manage with the following:

- a sick person is often unable to do all his or her usual farming and household activities
- other family members have to take on additional activities as well as care for the sick
- with fewer people to assist with farming, production falls and there is less food available to eat and/or sell
- money spent on health care increases
- less money is available to buy households goods or agricultural inputs
- savings are used and household assets are sold to cover increasing expenses
- community and extended family support systems start to breakdown as more people need assistance, or the fear and stigma associated with HIV/AIDS means that fewer people co-operate
- when families have no support, no food and no money, they may migrate to towns to find employment or become involved in exchanging sex for food and money.



IDENTIFYING AND WORKING WITH HOUSEHOLDS AFFECTED BY AIDS



It is important to be sensitive when dealing with affected families as having HIV/AIDS is often considered as shameful.

In order to work effectively with these households you need to:

- contact local home-based care and social welfare organizations who are already working with vulnerable and HIV/AIDS-affected households. They may be able to assist you and even accompany you on your first visit
- remember that it takes time for a good relationship to develop, so listen to their needs and avoid being too assertive
- all families with chronically ill persons whether HIV/AIDS affected or not face similar problems. If you identify a family which is not receiving support, notify the relevant health and social welfare organizations and let the family know what assistance is available.

FIELD WORKERS CAN ASSIST FAMILIES AFFECTED BY HIV/AIDS BY:

Supporting food security

Health eating will assist the body in fighting disease and will help individuals pursue an active life as long as possible. It is important for field workers to:

- provide relevant and interesting information on how families can utilize local nutritious products
- investigate the suitability of home gardens for nutritional and medicinal plants
- encourage the sustainable use of, and equitable access to, land, water and forest resources. If access to resources is an issue, contact organizations providing legal support.



Managing time and labour

- assess which agricultural activities are most labour intensive during different seasons and see if alternatives can be found
- propose labour-saving and time-saving techniques for use in the household and in the farm
- encourage people to form support groups for activities such as farming, caring for children, the sick and the elderly

... and money

- contact relevant local organizations to assist communities in developing income generating activities, such as food-processing, poultry, tree nurseries and fish ponds
- propose appropriate low-input production systems
- advise how inputs purchased at the market can be substituted with home-produced products

EFFECTIVE TEAM WORK

Given the extent of the needs of HIV/AIDS-affected families it is important that you:

- work as a team with colleagues from other sectors, such as nurses, teachers, those involved in home-based care, para-legal services and succession planning and leaders within communities such as local chiefs and church leaders.
- ensure that you are familiar with local organizations, services and resources in order to: convey relevant information to families; and ensure that activities are not duplicated.
- ensure that information is shared with colleagues, supervisors and communities so that the specific needs of HIV/AIDS affected households can be effectively incorporated into projects, programmes and policies.

INCLUDE AFFECTED INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

- assist the household in staying accepted within the community, through invitations to training sessions
- ensure women and children participate in training in order to build capacity at the household level.

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- AIDS and your food
- HIV/AIDS in daily life