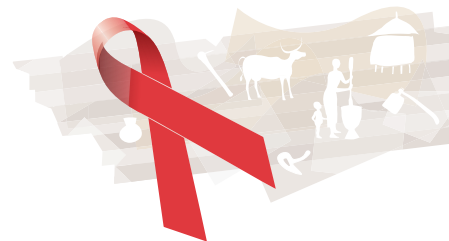


THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURE IN PREVENTING AND MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF HIV/AIDS



In its earlier stages, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was predominantly an urban problem, affecting more men than women, and those with relatively higher incomes. Now the epidemic has rapidly moved into the rural areas, hitting those who are least equipped to deal with its consequences. Today, 95% of people living with - and dying of - HIV/AIDS are in developing countries. The majority of them are the rural poor.

The impacts of HIV/AIDS on poor rural populations are many and intertwined. The impacts can be felt most dramatically in entrenched poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition, in the reduction of the labour force, and in the loss of essential knowledge that is transmitted from generation to generation. And the impacts are felt disproportionately among women. The epidemic is undoing decades of economic and social development and causing rural disintegration.

What's more, these same consequences of HIV/AIDS - poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, reduced labour force and loss of knowledge - contribute to making the rural poor more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection. This devastating cycle must be broken, and the agricultural sector has a critical role to play.

It is estimated that 37,8 million people in the world are infected with the HIV virus. Assuming that each HIV/AIDS case directly influences the lives of four other individuals, at least 151,2 million people are likely to be directly affected by the epidemic.

In spite of the fact that up to 80% of the people in the most affected countries depend on agriculture for their subsistence, most of the response to the epidemic has come from the health sector. The agricultural sector cannot continue with "business as usual" in communities where vast numbers of adults are dead, leaving only the elderly and children. It has to revise the content and delivery of its services, as well as the process of transferring agricultural knowledge.

Effective solutions rely on the agricultural sector and its capacity to reduce people's vulnerability to acquire the disease. The agricultural sector is in a strong position to assist in both the prevention and mitigation of the consequences of HIV/AIDS. Moreover, it has a responsibility to those people who depend on agriculture for their survival.

FAO recognizes the urgent need for action to be able to respond effectively to the impacts of HIV/AIDS on food security and rural livelihoods and is currently developing a comprehensive HIV/AIDS strategy for the agriculture sector. Within the UN system, FAO has a special responsibility for food security and rural development. Its main mandate is to raise levels of nutrition and standards of living, to improve agricultural productivity and to better the condition of rural populations. HIV/AIDS has a severe impact on food security, affecting all of its dimensions - availability, stability, access, utilization.

FAO's focus on HIV/AIDS is on the prevention of the further spread of the epidemic and on the mitigation of its effects through a concerted response from the agricultural sector. Since 1988 FAO has been studying the impact of HIV/AIDS on agriculture, food security, nutrition and farming systems. In recent years, FAO's role in combatting AIDS has become even more critical due to the fact that the epidemic creates a significant institutional capacity gap in the affected countries, especially as regards agricultural staff and service organizations, national agricultural research organizations and institutions in higher education and training, as well as local informal institutions.

FAO has been mandated by its main governing bodies to monitor the impact of HIV/AIDS on food security as well as to support member countries in their efforts to prevent the worsening of the epidemic and to mitigate its negative effects on food security and nutrition. All technical departments, as well as some regional and sub-regional offices, are developing relevant activities in their own areas of work. In its normative work, FAO is developing an integrated policy to ensure a more effective food-security-based response. Focus areas include:

- improving food security and nutrition;
- enhancing labour-saving practices and technologies;
- addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities, needs and interests;
- ensuring that agricultural knowledge, practice and skills are preserved and transmitted;
- building the capacity of formal and informal rural institutions;
- influencing policy at local, national and international levels; and
- inserting an HIV/AIDS “lens” in emergency situations.



The briefs that are contained in this kit describe some of the initiatives supported by FAO to date in its drive to mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS on food security and rural poverty. If left unchecked, the epidemic risks undermining all other efforts aimed at achieving the Millennium Development and World Food Summit Goals of halving the number of poor and hungry in the world by 2015.

USEFUL REFERENCES

FAO HIV/AIDS programme
<http://www.fao.org/hiv aids>

Mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on food security and rural poverty
<http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/Y8331E/Y8331E00.htm>

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<http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/007/J1418e.htm>

