

# HIV/AIDS, Gender, and Household Food Security: The Rural Dimension

July 2006



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## Agriculture: An anchor for household food security in rural areas

Agriculture is the backbone of household food and livelihood security for millions of rural men, women, boys, and girls. People whose agricultural livelihoods are secure are able to engage further in agriculture as well as diversify into other activities.

At the same time, agriculture is susceptible to various shocks – including the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that AIDS has killed seven million agricultural workers in Africa since 1985.<sup>1</sup> It also suggests that another 16 million more may disappear from rural communities within the next 20 years.

HIV/AIDS affects rural household food security by impacting people’s ability to produce adequate and nutritious food and/or engage in waged labour to purchase

### **Growing rural prevalence and impacts**

*While HIV/AIDS was once predominantly an urban issue, it has increasingly moved into rural areas*

*Growing rural-urban linkages, expanding road systems, trade routes and market centres all contribute to the increase in HIV prevalence in rural areas. Daily and seasonal migration for employment and trade also contribute to increased prevalence rates.*

food. Food insecurity increases people’s vulnerability. Poor nutrition contributes to poor health, low labour productivity, low income, and livelihood insecurity. These factors, among others, put people, particularly women and girls, at risk of HIV infection as they are forced to migrate for waged labour or to engage in transactional sex work for income.

## Gender inequality: A key driver of HIV/AIDS

The causes and consequences of the HIV epidemic are closely associated with a number of development issues: poverty, food and livelihood insecurity, and gender inequality.<sup>2</sup> It is



widely recognised that gender inequality is one of the key driving forces of the epidemic, putting women and girls at greater risk of being infected by HIV and

increasing their vulnerability to the impacts of AIDS. As women draw their labour away from production because of their own or others’ ill health, there can be a profound impact on a household’s agricultural production, food and livelihood security, and overall well-being.

In many areas, infection rates in young women are far higher than in young men, in part because of biological factors, and in great part because of the unequal power relations that prevail between men and women. Early marriage of girls to older men and relationships between older men and younger women and girls are factors that play into the higher rates for women. Harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, widow inheritance, and sexual cleansing<sup>3</sup> also contribute to higher rates of infection in women and girls<sup>4</sup>. Many widows (and increasingly children) are left landless and without property or have their assets and property “stripped” by their husband’s relatives, making them more vulnerable and susceptible to risky behaviour such as engaging in transactional sex in exchange for labour, or money.

## Some of the potential impacts of HIV/AIDS on food security

- Decrease in land under cultivation, crop varieties cultivated, and livestock breeds raised
- Decline in yields due to labour and input shortages
- Increase in distress sales of livestock and other assets for treatment costs and/or burial
- Decline in soil fertility over time; long-term conservation practices diminish
- Loss of parent-to-child transmission of agricultural and livestock knowledge and skills
- Decrease in capacity of men, women, boys, and girls to manage livestock resources
- Loss of productive time to care-giving, funeral attendance and mourning periods
- Break down in labour-sharing practices
- Decline in quantity and quality of food as productive members become sick or die and decline in nutrition
- Rise in intake of orphans and others who cannot participate in productive activities
- Increase in number of school-leavers, especially orphans taken in by guardians
- Increase in financial burdens, e.g. reduced incomes, increase in medical costs, debts
- Reduction in remittances as workers return to their home village for care
- Increase in grandparent and child-headed households – agricultural and extension services need to be adapted
- Increase in dependency ratios (number of dependent family members increases in comparison with productive members); children from cities are sent to extended family in rural area for care
- Increase in pressure on food reserves and decline in storage quality

*Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the majority of people affected by HIV/AIDS around the world.*

Source: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). *HIV/AIDS and Food and Nutrition Security: From Evidence to Action*, 2005.

- Rise in risky responses and coping strategies, e.g. women and girls engage in commercial sex work

## Acting on the challenges: The role of agricultural policy and programming

While HIV/AIDS impacts household food security and livelihoods in many ways, the agricultural sector can also help mitigate against these and other impacts. Agriculture can help rural women and men out of poverty and food insecurity through income generation and sustainable production practices. It can provide nutritious foods to support anti-retroviral therapies (ARTs) and food for replacement or complementary feeding to breastfeeding that is key in preventing transmission of the virus from mother to child.

The causes and effects of HIV/AIDS are complex and interconnected.

### **Millennium Development Goals**

*With the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the world set itself the challenge of reaffirming its commitment to, and taking action on, improving the lives of people everywhere. Like the other goals, MDG 6, which focuses on combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, requires the efforts of all sectors and all levels of society.*

For more, see <http://www.un.org/millennium>

Multi-sectoral approaches that include development policies supporting poverty alleviation, food and livelihood security, and the empowerment of women can mitigate against the impacts of HIV/AIDS.

Agricultural policies have a particular role to play by reducing the vulnerability of rural households. Policies that protect and promote farmers' incomes can help families build resilience and cope with the effects of AIDS. To see how agricultural policies and programmes can support multi-sectoral efforts, it is important to look at them through an "HIV/AIDS lens".<sup>5</sup> Policies and programmes

should be assessed to see if they respond to the needs of a changing demographic base in rural areas, including widow-, child-, and grandmother-headed households.

## How agricultural policies and programmes can mitigate against the impacts of HIV/AIDS

- **Women in focus:** Improve women's access to, benefits from, agricultural extension and income-generating programs. Similarly target child-headed households.
- **Policy-making:** Guarantee human rights and freedom from discrimination of people living with HIV/AIDS.
- **Institutional frameworks:** Promote women and men's participation in decision-making; improve property and inheritance rights legislation for women and children.
- **Organizational policies:** Develop and promote organisational policies related to HIV/AIDS. Address concerns of staff and families, access to antiretroviral therapies and other support. Reassess expectations of programming productivity and develop program deadlines, budgets, and objectives to allow for HIV/AIDS impacts.
- **Institutional strengthening:** Support institutional strengthening for government and civil society to ensure democratic and participatory decision-making and practical, appropriate responses to the issues of poverty, inequality, and HIV/AIDS.
- **Preventive education:** Provide organisational staff, communities with HIV/AIDS education, particularly in terms of prevention, anti-discrimination, de-stigmatization, and care. Schools, religious groups, women's groups, and farmers' groups also require support, including educational materials, training, and advice.
- **Extension services:** Support women and men's awareness-raising on HIV/AIDS in extension services; adapt extension and other agricultural services to meet needs of changing population, including child- and grandparent-headed households.
- **Labour saving techniques:** Assess labour intensive systems. Consider conservation farming approaches, e.g. crop blending, low tillage techniques and labour-saving food processing system, e.g. grinding mills and de-huskers, to reduce women's work burdens. Alternative cooking technologies or fuel sources can help reduce women's time searching for firewood.
- **Improved crop varieties:** Promote drought, disease, pest-resistant crop that could reduce demand for labour.
- **Livestock diversification:** Promote small livestock (e.g. goats, poultry, guinea pigs, rabbits). Cattle might be sold or require intensive labour. Small livestock require less care and can provide small amounts of income quickly.
- **Alternative income sources:** Consider alternative income-generating activities for vulnerable groups and HIV positive people to ease financial burdens.
- **Nutrition and health:** Disseminate information on diet, nutrition, and health, particularly in communities affected by HIV/AIDS to increase people's years of productivity and reduce their vulnerability to the disease. Programs that support local production of nutritious foods sold at local market prices are useful.
- **Storage facilities infrastructure:** Ensure effective storage facilities for surplus production. When demand and prices are high, this can favourably impact the income of rural households and reduce seasonal vulnerability between crops. Target post-harvest protection measures to women and youth.
- **Food imports and labour:** Consider the potential impacts of policy decisions on food imports and the stimulation of labour migration away from rural areas and identify mitigation strategies if necessary.
- **Market-related policies:** Support minimum wages for women and men; establish interest rates and prices for

agricultural goods that can contribute to a minimum income for poor households.

## Useful references

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FAO. *HIV/AIDS Extension Fact Sheets*, 2005 [http://www.fao.org/sd/dim\\_pe3/pe3\\_050201\\_en.htm](http://www.fao.org/sd/dim_pe3/pe3_050201_en.htm)

FAO. *SEAGA Livestock Guide: Planning with a Gender and HIV/AIDS Lens*, Rome, 2005 <http://www.fao.org/sd/seaga/downloads/En/livestocken.pdf>

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## Useful websites

Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) (HIV/AIDS and food security) <http://www.fao.org/hiv aids>; (Gender) [www.fao.org/sd/](http://www.fao.org/sd/)

Eldis/HRC HIV and AIDS Resource Guide (excellent source of resources on HIV/AIDS and gender, food security) <http://www.eldis.org/hiv aids/index.htm>

Inter-Agency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD) (host of valuable information on HIV/AIDS including toolkits, reports, and the guidelines on gender, HIV/AIDS and agriculture) <http://www.icad-cisd.com/>

International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) [www.ifpri.org](http://www.ifpri.org)

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (HIV/AIDS and children) [http://www.unicef.org/voy/explore/aids/explore\\_aids.php](http://www.unicef.org/voy/explore/aids/explore_aids.php)

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) [www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/equality](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/equality)

Development Gateway (The Gender Development Page) <http://www.developmentgateway.org/node/130625>

Global Coalition on Women and AIDS <http://womenandaids.unaids.org>

UN Division for the Advancement for Women (portal) <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw>

UNIFEM/UNAIDS (portal on gender and HIV/AIDS) [www.genderandaids.org](http://www.genderandaids.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). *HIV/AIDS A threat to rural development*. [www.fao.org/sd/hiv aids/](http://www.fao.org/sd/hiv aids/)

<sup>2</sup> Graphic: Catherine Hill based on gender, food security and HIV/AIDS training conducted with various groups in numerous regions.

<sup>3</sup> Sexual cleansing is a practice whereby a widow has sex with another man following the death of her husband.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the impacts of HIV/AIDS, see FAO. *HIV/AIDS, food security and rural livelihoods*. Fact sheet,

<http://www.fao.org/hiv aids/publications/hiv aids.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Loevinsohn, Michael E. and Stuart Gillespie. *HIV/AIDS, Food Security and Rural Livelihoods: Understanding and Responding*, International Food Policy Research Institute FCND Paper No. 157, September 2003.

<http://www.ifpri.org/divs/fcnd/dp/papers/fcndp157.pdf>

*ICAD's mission is to lessen the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS in resource-poor communities and countries by providing leadership and actively contributing to the Canadian and international response. Funding for this publication was provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors/researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Public Health Agency of Canada. Ce feuillet est également disponible en français.*