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HIV/AIDS, Food Security, and Rural Livelihoods: Understanding and Responding

Michael Loevinsohn and Stuart Gillespie

There is hardly need to point out that HIV/AIDS is devastating African societies and economies, threatening the hard-won human development gains of the past several decades. Without decisive action, other developing and transitional societies are at equal risk.

That AIDS is a development problem, not just a health issue, has become a mantra in recent times, but what does it mean in practice? The changes to the development landscape wrought by AIDS demand a review of existing development actions at many levels—from households seeking to secure viable livelihoods to policymakers attempting to better understand the implications of AIDS for their own sectoral goals and strategies. It is increasingly clear that unless AIDS is brought under control, achievement of most, if not all, of the Millennium Development Goals is in jeopardy.

Purpose and Background of This Paper

This paper describes the kinds of understanding and response needed for agriculture-, food-, and nutrition-relevant organizations to effectively confront HIV/AIDS. It outlines some underlying principles needed to understand the variable and changing nature of AIDS epidemics. While HIV/AIDS is now global in its spread, it is important not to forget that it is not a single, unicausal epidemic, but many differentiated ones. The determinants of HIV's spread are rooted in poverty and in inequality, and these create local situations of risk. Infection rates and trends are sometimes found to vary dramatically, often over quite short distances.

Access to food and livelihoods are often fundamental to people's choices. Similarly, the consequences of AIDS-linked illness and death, which reverberate through households, extended families, communities, and beyond, are shaped by features of agricultural and livelihood systems and by preexisting patterns of food insecurity.

The paper also introduces the notions of susceptibility, vulnerability, resistance, and resilience. *Susceptibility* relates to the chance of an individual becoming infected by HIV and has two components: the chance of being exposed to the virus, and the chance of being infected with the virus once exposed. *Resistance* is the ability of an individual, household, or community to avoid infection by HIV, either by escaping exposure or, if exposed, by escaping infection. *Vulnerability* differs from susceptibility; it refers to the likelihood of significant impacts occurring at a certain level (e.g., individual, household, community). These impacts are not one-time events, but rather *processes*, often hidden, slow-moving, and destructive. Finally, *resilience*

refers to the active responses that enable people to avoid the worst effects of AIDS at different levels or to recover faster to an acceptable level.

These concepts are illustrated through descriptions of the particular interactions between food and nutrition insecurity and HIV/AIDS. The discussion then turns to the implications of this understanding for the ways in which different people—in affected households, communities, and sectors—may best respond. The authors focus on the particular importance of food and nutrition for the four conventional aspects of response—prevention, care, treatment, and mitigation—and explain why it is a mistake to compartmentalize these approaches. The imperative and different rationales for multisectoral mainstreaming are then discussed.

Using an HIV/AIDS Lens

Finally, the paper describes a flexible and evolving aid, the HIV/AIDS lens, and the processes through which agricultural and other professionals can employ it to respond more effectively. The HIV/AIDS lens is a conceptual tool intended to help decisionmakers in agriculture and allied fields—from farmers to policymakers—to review situations and actions in the light of HIV/AIDS. The lens is designed to support reflection on how the situation may be increasing or reducing the risks, either of contracting HIV or of suffering severe consequences flowing from AIDS-linked illness and death, and how the action, actual or planned, might contribute to these effects.

The lens is bifocal: it may look at HIV-related susceptibility and/or AIDS-related vulnerability. It may reveal the way in which a particular program affects the interaction between HIV/AIDS and other sectoral concerns.

The lens may be applied internally (within institutions) and externally (within policy and programming), and throughout the entire programming cycle.

Use of an HIV/AIDS lens will facilitate the development of more HIV-relevant policies and programs in more sectors—and ultimately in larger-scale, sustained progress in responding to AIDS.

There are many different types of lens users at different social and spatial locales. The lens can be applied to grass-roots situations, programs, and it can be applied at the level of policy planning. The type of lens a policymaker will use to review agricultural policy will be different from

the implicit lens a family member will use when deciding how to respond to reduced family labor power.

The lens should not be conceived as a prescription or a product—or at least not a static one. It is dynamic, evolving, and will be refined as knowledge of what is happening is

updated. Using and refining the lens is an iterative learning and doing process.

The use of the lens, particularly in a social context, can help to identify new possibilities that may not otherwise have been obvious. It may reveal new or hidden costs and benefits, and thus some new trade-offs, which need to be resolved. One recurrent issue will be how to weigh up the costs and benefits of short- versus long-term responses.

Finally, in addition to applying an HIV lens to development policy, there is a need to promote the use of a developmental lens to the design of specific HIV policy and programs, whether these are related to prevention, care, or treatment. Any new program aimed at risk-reducing behavioral change, for example, needs to fully take account of what, in addition to information, influences or constrains choices and behaviors. Better communications between sectors will permit the findings of such basic analyses to be channeled to those who can act on them.

In one example of how this lens is being applied, the Regional Network on HIV/AIDS, Rural Livelihoods and Food Security (RENEWAL), currently active in eastern and southern Africa, is developing processes through which decisionmakers at different levels and in different contexts can learn to use the lens. These processes are linked and currently include (1) the formation of sector-wide national networks that advance practical understanding through action research and forums for exchange and policy dialogue; (2) the review of national agricultural policies and programs; and (3) the development of community-led action on food security and livelihoods to advance prevention, mitigation, care, and/or treatment.

Conclusion

In a situation where HIV/AIDS is seriously eroding, and often tearing apart, the social and economic fabric of countries, the required responses are not only multisectoral but multilevel—from the rural farmer adopting and adapting livelihoods to reduce risk to national policymakers embarking on a comprehensive review of the AIDS-relevance of existing development policy.

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The linked concepts of resistance and resilience need to become grounded in processes of understanding and responding at all levels. Ultimately, a better understanding of what determines resistance and resilience at different levels and for different people will point to clear options. One major set of responses is required from the agriculture sector, as the need to secure and provision food for populations affected by HIV/AIDS is rapidly increasing as the impact waves hit. We are also beginning to learn more about the crucial role of nutritional status—both in terms of susceptibility to HIV infection and transmission and in terms of the quality and quantity of life of HIV-positive individuals.

A sea change is required—in attitudes and consciousness of what HIV/AIDS is doing at different levels and the pathways through which it moves through societies. Such a new awareness may be facilitated by the use of an HIV/AIDS lens—essentially a tool for reviewing situations and development actions from the perspective of our evolving knowledge of AIDS interactions. The lens will facilitate the development of more HIV-relevant policies and programs of more sectors—and ultimately in larger scale, sustained progress in responding to AIDS. While the specifics will become clear through use of the lens, external support will likely be most effective in the long run where it is directed to preserving and developing institutional capacities to strengthen resistance and resilience.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, food security, rural livelihoods, resistance, resilience, HIV/AIDS lens

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