



Indigenous knowledge - a key weapon in fighting HIV/AIDS



Women are the backbone of food production in Africa, especially since HIV/AIDS has decimated the rural population.
(FAO/17559/G.Diana)

The impact of HIV/AIDS is usually considered in terms of health costs and losses of skilled labour. But its impact on the agricultural sector, particularly in Africa, is having a devastating effect on food security. One reason is because hundreds of thousands of people in rural areas, many of whom work as unskilled labour in the cities, have become HIV-infected and are too ill to work. The other reason is that as generations die off prematurely, they cannot pass on what they know about crops and wild plants and their uses as food sources or natural medicine.

FAO is hosting a conference in Rome from 5 to 7 December to draw up an HIV/AIDS strategy for agricultural policy makers. The meeting, which follows World AIDS Day on 1 December, is being jointly organized by FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNAIDS. Among the topics to be discussed by technical experts from these agencies is how biodiversity and indigenous knowledge can be used to mitigate the impact of the epidemic on food security, and also how the infection undermines efforts to preserve diversity and traditional knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge and biodiversity are the most important, and often the only, assets in many poor, rural societies, and their significance increases as other resources dwindle or disappear. But HIV/AIDS threatens even this fragile legacy, blocking the transmission of traditional agricultural knowledge and practices to children and eroding the basis of food security. "Innovation often dies with the farmers," explains Marcela Villarreal, FAO's focal point for HIV/AIDS. "They have developed ways to adapt their crops to the environment and when they die, so does their knowledge. Biodiversity is also threatened because in times of acute labour shortages, people plant fewer varieties of crops to save time and money."

Africa is especially hard hit because of the sheer number of people who are infected with HIV. "In Kenya, for example," continues Dr Villarreal, "only 7 percent of orphan-headed households reported that they had enough agricultural knowledge to carry on farming." Of the 13.2 million AIDS orphans worldwide, more than 12 million are in Africa, according to

UNAIDS.

Biodiversity and indigenous knowledge: the foundations of rural development

"The fundamental roles of biodiversity and indigenous knowledge in sustaining the agriculture of Africa's poorest people have often been neglected in the agricultural and rural development sector," says Josep-Antoni Garí, a consultant with FAO's Sustainable Development Department. "They represent local resources with enormous potential in the fight against food insecurity and the devastating impacts of HIV/AIDS." He cites the resilience of many traditional, yet neglected, crops that require less attention than cash crops and are therefore valuable additions to households where able-bodied people are already under extreme stress. These plants also require fewer material inputs, such as fertilizer, as they are adapted to the local environment. This allows people to save what money they have for medicines or other essential supplies.

Dr Garí is currently working with grassroots rural organizations in Tanzania and Uganda in an innovative research initiative exploring the potential role of biodiversity and indigenous knowledge in alleviating food insecurity and health problems in HIV/AIDS-affected households.

Tanzania and Uganda represent different ends of the AIDS spectrum -- the rate of new infections is decreasing in Uganda, but HIV/AIDS in Tanzania is a relatively new phenomenon and infection rates are on the increase. The two countries also represent different ecological zones and each contains areas of significant biodiversity. This will allow Dr Garí to compare the well-established agricultural mitigation strategies adopted by different HIV/AIDS-affected communities in Uganda with those being set up by the people of rural Tanzania.

"Where labour is short, it is important to spread the agricultural workload throughout the year," says Dr Garí. "This way, the farmer is not overwhelmed at harvest time." Agricultural diversification is essential to this as different crops ripen at different times. Growing a variety of crops also provides a wider range of nutrients and strengthens food security because a single pest will not attack all of someone's crops.

Women's role is central to the issue

One of the grassroots organizations that Dr Garí is working with is the Tanzanian Association of Women Leaders in Agriculture and Environment (TAWLAE), in Dodoma region. "Rural women are the dominant actors in small-scale agriculture in Africa," he says. "But today they suffer enormous vulnerability, discrimination and increasing workloads, and



HIV/AIDS threatens the food security of rural Tanzania by destroying the indigenous knowledge base.
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this has been aggravated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic."

Women conserve and manage seed stocks, select the most nutritious plants to feed their children, look after the home gardens and take on post-harvest food processing and preservation. Their knowledge, passed on to their children through songs, myths and other oral media, contains the basis for food security and nutrition in their communities. Because of this, continues Dr Garí, "we have to make sure that the work done by women to preserve biodiversity and indigenous knowledge is recognized and appreciated."

When FAO commissioned its first paper on the impact of HIV/AIDS on food security in 1988, the estimated number of infected people worldwide was set at 5 million. This figure was a challenge to the health and agriculture sectors, but one with which they could cope. Just over a decade later, the prognosis is much more gloomy. "In the beginning, none of us realized the magnitude of the problem and how it would evolve," says Dr Villarreal. "We now realize that unless there is an integrated multisector strategy, we will get nowhere."

According to Dr Garí, "If we do not act now to promote the indigenous resource and knowledge base, many poor rural communities risk being left with nothing but despair in the face of HIV/AIDS-related food insecurity." Despair and an empty garden.

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