

HIV/AIDS: A Development Issue



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Background

HIV/AIDS was initially conceived of as a health issue, and was separated from the general development context — it was a problem to be dealt with by health professionals. It is now clear that the HIV epidemic is closely associated with, and exacerbated by, the wider challenges to development: poverty, food and livelihood insecurity, and gender inequality. The systemic effects of the disease are inarguable. A holistic approach to programming is needed in order to address the effects of the pandemic, particularly on marginalized communities.

If individuals are unaware of the methods of transmission and the mechanisms to reduce vulnerability to HIV, infection rates increase. Lack of access to health care, the need to generate income — which sometimes results in engaging in unsafe commercial sex — as well as an inability to negotiate power relations with respect to sexual practice also contribute to rise in infection.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is closely linked to the availability of basic social services, such as health care and education, and to economic infrastructures — such as the capacity to earn sufficient income through traditional means, including agriculture — and to the empowerment of women and girls.

Politics and Economy

External debt and structural adjustment policies imposed by the IMF and World Bank often have negative impacts on developing countries due to the need to reduce state spending, manage inflation, and reform their economies. This leads to a reduction in provision of basic social services, such as education, health care and rural extension services, leaving poor people particularly affected. Education is fundamental to the struggle against the HIV epidemic, and individuals are significantly more vulnerable if they are unaware of the methods of transmission or the mechanisms to reduce contraction of HIV. Poor health services result in a lack of treatment for sexually

transmitted diseases, which in turn increases opportunities for transmission, and ultimately lack of treatment for AIDS-related illness. The constriction of basic social services as a response to structural adjustment policies has serious implications for communities vulnerable to HIV infection.

Globalization can impact on a developing country's competitiveness in the international market. Demands to remove trade barriers and lift tariffs can seriously affect prices for primary produce, and impact on the livelihood of small farmers who may depend on the sale of surplus production for their family's survival. Income insecurity may encourage labour migration in search of income or alternative coping strategies — such as prostitution — and other activities which can further the spread of infection.

Environmental and marginal land issues mean marginalized farmers often experience lower yields and fewer opportunities for commercialization of surplus production. Lack of income restricts access to medical assistance and leads some to unhealthy coping strategies to source additional funds which, in turn, increases vulnerability to HIV infection.

Infrastructure

Poor access to markets, transport, and communications results in livelihood challenges for marginalized communities. Lack of transport systems, good roads, and communication often translate into farmers accepting unfair prices for their surplus production, due to a lack of alternatives. Many farmers cannot access regional trading markets which could increase their opportunities for a decent return on their production, and instead must sell to middle men who buy produce at a reduced rate.

Labour migration is often a response to the effects of poor infrastructure in rural areas. Lack of secure livelihoods encourages the migration of family members (predominantly to urban centres) in search of paid work. Generally, male family members migrate and are then vulnerable to related social issues such as multiple sexual partners or engaging prostitutes,

increasing their chances of HIV infection — and, ultimately, increasing the risk that they will transmit the disease to their wives, who have remained in the rural community.

Social & Cultural Issues

Gender inequality leaves women and girls particularly vulnerable to HIV infection due to unequal power relations between men and women. It is exceedingly difficult for women or girls to negotiate safe sex with resisting males — on both physical and cultural levels. Women who propose the use of condoms are often suspected by their husbands of adultery, further exacerbating their vulnerability to physical or economic abuse. The traditional distribution of labour means that women's work burden will increase as they are required to care for sick family members as well as continue to work in the fields, carry water, and search for cooking fuel.

Inheritance rights differ with geography, but women are often left landless and without assets should their husbands die. This lack of security could invoke other coping strategies such as prostitution, increasing their vulnerability to, and transmission of, HIV infection. Frequently, widows are married by their husband's brother, to consolidate the family's assets and retain control of land and children. This can compound the destruction of families, should the widow be HIV positive, as she may pass the infection to the brother and, ultimately, his other wives.

HIV/AIDS & Poverty

In both the developing world and industrialized countries, those who are marginalized are most vulnerable to HIV infection; the impact of AIDS on their livelihoods and families is severe. Poverty is not restricted to developing countries: it is a global problem, experienced in both urban and rural communities of the industrialized world. Similar issues,

such as lack of access to basic social services including education and healthcare, and issues of income insecurity, discrimination, and feelings of powerlessness, are faced by all marginalized populations. When faced with the perception of limited options, many turn to high-risk coping mechanisms.

Programs aimed at securing the livelihood of marginalized communities in industrialized countries will also prove beneficial in the struggle against HIV/AIDS.

The Rural/Urban Issue

HIV/AIDS was initially considered an urban issue: transmission was at its highest in densely populated regions. It is now clear that rural areas have rates of infection equaling those of the urban centres.

Transmission rates are exacerbated when rural-urban linkages are strengthened through improved transport, road systems, trade and marketing centres, and the migration of family members for work.

Rarely is farming mechanized in developing countries — communities depend on the availability of local labour for their survival. Household food security in rural areas is therefore particularly vulnerable to the effects of HIV/AIDS, especially with respect to the supply of labour.

Web Sites

www.fao.org

www.usaid.gov/regions/afr/hhrra

www.caa.org.au/world/health/hiv

www.unaids.org/fact_sheets

www.unaids.org/publications/documents/sectors

ICAD's aim is to lessen the impact of HIV/AIDS in resource-poor communities and countries. We are a coalition of Canadian international development organizations, AIDS service organizations and other interested organizations and individuals.

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Le feuillet "Le VIH/sida : un enjeu pertinent pour le développement" est disponible en français.