

HIV/AIDS, Food Security And Rural Livelihoods in Malawi

Conclusions of the Preparatory Process

August – December 2001

**MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE AND IRRIGATION
Lilongwe, and**

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The Hague, Netherlands**

**With the support of the
SOUTHERN AFRICA AIDS TRAINING PROGRAMME (SAT)
Funded by CIDA**

January 2002

Introduction

It is now widely accepted that AIDS is not just a health issue. Malawi's recently developed Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper identifies HIV/AIDS as a key crosscutting issue, and the National HIV/AIDS Strategic Framework 2000-2004 calls for "an expanded, multi-sectoral national response to the epidemic." However the capacity to respond to these calls lags behind. In many sectors, policy making still proceeds as if HIV/AIDS never happened. Despite growing efforts, organizations involved in agricultural research and development generally have limited understanding of how AIDS affects agricultural systems, and even less of how agricultural development may contribute to the spread of HIV. Weakest of all is often their appreciation of what they can do, feasibly, to contribute to more effective HIV-prevention and mitigation of AIDS impacts.

This report describes the outcome of a process aimed at preparing Malawi's participation in and joint ownership of a regional project that addresses these issues. This 3-year project seeks to enable agricultural R&D organizations in Malawi and Uganda (Tanzania and Zambia are likely to join in a year or so) to respond effectively to HIV/AIDS, in collaboration with organizations in social development and public health. This preparatory process in Malawi has been conducted under the aegis of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, with the support of the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR) and the Southern Africa AIDS Training Programme (SAT). It has had three main elements:

- A background paper¹, prepared by a team of researchers, critically reviewed what is known about the links in both directions between HIV/AIDS on one side and food security, rural livelihoods and agricultural systems in Malawi on the other. Through interviews with a range of organizations in the sector, the paper also assessed how the institutions are responding and highlighted opportunities for further efforts.
- A Think Tank (Mangochi, November 7-9, 2001) brought together 14 researchers and development workers from key Malawian organizations, public and private and with both AIDS/public health and agriculture/rural development orientations. Six researchers from international and regional organizations also contributed. Drawing on the background paper and wide-ranging discussion, the participants identified priorities for action-research in Malawi and made recommendations for the organization and governance of the project in the country.
- Twenty-four Stakeholders, including senior managers of the organizations involved in the Think Tank, met in Lilongwe on November 12. They examined, modified slightly and endorsed the Think Tank's recommendations. They also agreed on the next steps to set the project on its feet².

¹ Ngwira, N., S. Bota and M.E. Loevinsohn, 2001. HIV/AIDS, Agriculture And Food Security In Malawi: Background to Action. Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, Lilongwe, 28 pp.

² Similar processes will be followed in Uganda early in 2002 and in other countries of the region within a year or so.

The background paper is enclosed with this Report and the list of participants in the two meetings can be found in the Annex. The following sections outline the key elements of the initiative that the Think Tank participants and Stakeholders agreed.

The Shape of the Project

The project's **purpose** is:

To support innovation contributing to the prevention and mitigation of AIDS' impacts on agricultural systems and livelihoods based on them.

Its more specific **objectives** are:

- 1) To fill critical gaps in understanding of the links, in both directions, between HIV/AIDS on one side, and agricultural systems, food security and rural livelihoods on the other.
- 2) To fill critical gaps in understanding of how agricultural policies and programs can contribute to prevention and/or mitigation of AIDS impact and how this knowledge can be used to support local responses.
- 3) To enable agricultural R&D institutions to act on realistic priorities for responding to HIV/AIDS epidemics in partnership with at-risk and affected communities and institutions in other sectors.

The project will enhance the capacity of agricultural research, development and extension (RD&E) organizations - governmental, non-governmental and private - to contribute to the struggle against HIV/AIDS. It will support their current and planned efforts to mainstream AIDS in their plans and actions.

The hallmark of the project will be **action-research**. This means that it will carry out research that is critical to informing more effective action, and it will do this with the participation of those who are implementing action. It will seek to close the loop between the findings of research and evaluation and the planning and revision of actions of all kinds.

The project will strike a balance between work whose benefits will likely begin to be felt in the short (within 2 years) and medium terms (3-5 years). The former involves evaluation of and research on actions themselves, the latter research on issues that, if better understood, would allow more effective action to be mounted.

The project will support innovation in local and national organizations, state and non-state. It will help them to establish partnerships with others that have complementary skills and experience. It will also encourage mutual learning within the national network and with others in the evolving regional network.

Strategy

In order to involve a wide range of agricultural RD&E organizations in the struggle with HIV/AIDS and to ensure that their efforts are aimed at priority themes, the project will establish an Action Research Fund and encourage organizations to submit proposals for its use. Proposals can be submitted by national organizations and may include international partners. Proposals will be assessed by A Steering Committee with multi-partite membership will assess proposals using criteria that are clearly described and widely communicated.

Among these criteria are that proposals address one or more priority themes (see below). They will also describe a “theory of action” i.e. a logical connection between the action proposed and the impacts expected, and the means and indicators that will be used to verify progress towards those impacts.

A National Coordinator will be named. A principal task will be to stimulate and support proposal development and partnership formation, especially involving local organizations. Together with the partners in the network, the Coordinator will also identify gaps in the skills needed to carry out the work and locate sources of expertise and draw on a variety of means to bring the two together. Priority will be given to in-country and regional sources of expertise.

Two Monitoring and Evaluation Researchers will be named. They will work with projects on monitoring and evaluating their work in the field, assist the organizations involved to integrate the insights in review and further planning and help to make lessons widely available.

International partners in the Project will work beside Malawians. They will contribute directly to the action-research and to the enhancement of skills.

Outputs

The Project will strengthen the capacity of staff in a range of organizations to review their policies and programs in the light of what is known about the links between HIV/AIDS and rural livelihoods and food security. The evaluated, field-based evidence that the Project generates will provide a surer basis for them to plan and revise policies and programs so as to enhance beneficial effects and reduce detrimental ones. Policies and programs that contribute more effectively to HIV prevention and AIDS mitigation, and the capacity to continue the process, will be the principal outputs of the Project. They are also the essence of “mainstreaming”.

A refined “HIV/AIDS lens” will be an important element in this process. The lens comprises what is known, generally and locally, about the links between agricultural systems and HIV/AIDS, and how policy and program interventions can modify them, in a positive or negative sense. The lens is “engendered” i.e. takes into account the differential risks and consequences experienced by women and men, as well as other groups. Action-research that the Project will carry out will help to refine the lens and will make it widely known and available.

A variety of means will be used to ensure that Project's findings are widely shared among partners within Malawi and in the emerging regional network. The Project will also help partners to better access international sources of information.

Innovative approaches will be used to communicate findings to decision makers at grass roots and policy levels. These will include encouraging direct experience.

Impacts

Rural people in Malawi facing a reduced risk of HIV infection. Farming households already affected by AIDS provided with a broader range of options in their struggles to survive. More widely, consumers and others dependent on agricultural production better protected from the disruptions and shifts in output that AIDS and related diseases would otherwise cause. Agricultural R&D institutions and their personnel more aware of what they can do to prevent and mitigate HIV/AIDS' impacts and taking this into account in their decision making. These institutions and their staff also more aware of how they themselves are affected by, and possibly also affect, the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Priorities for Action Research

The project will focus on research critical to informing action that contributes to the prevention and mitigation of HIV/AIDS' impacts on rural livelihoods and food security. These actions can be grouped into those that are likely to begin to yield benefits in the short term (within 2 years) and those whose benefits are likely to be felt in the medium term (3-5 years). The Think Tank participants deliberated and decided that slightly more resources should be allocated to the former than the latter (55/45). They also discussed the relative priority to be given to the different themes that have been proposed within these two groups, based on the extent to which they were deemed critical to more effective action. These rankings or weights (summing to 100) are indicated in the list that follows. It bears emphasizing that this is intended only as an initial guide for those deciding the allocation of resources; other factors, such as the quality of proposals, will also have to be weighed. The rankings will also have to be revisited in the light of experience gained.

I. Activities likely to begin to yield benefits in the short term

1) Assessing existing policies and programs (67)

On-going and planned processes of mainstreaming i.e. review by staff of programs and policies with the aids of the "HIV/AIDS lens" will be supported through action-research. This will extend to policies and programs of all kinds: technology generation and diffusion, natural resource management, nutrition, marketing and trade and pricing. This process will likely reveal that some are having unintended effects, positive or negative, on prevention of HIV infection or mitigation of AIDS' impacts. To verify whether these effects are actually experienced, a certain number of these programs and policies will be followed intensively in the field by those involved in carrying them out, assisted by the evaluation researchers and using agreed indicators. They will also carry out pilot trials aimed at enhancing the positive benefits or

reducing the negative effects. This will result in better policies and programs as well as enhanced understanding among staff.

2) Identifying and supporting innovation in AIDS-affected farm households (33)

There are as yet only scattered anecdotes concerning the innovations that AIDS affected households and communities have made in technology and social organization. There is bound to be much more that has not yet come to wider attention, and much that could be of use to others similarly affected. A concerted effort might be made to identify such innovations, especially those by women and young farmers, assess them and promote the most promising. Media like radio might be drawn on and means might be sought to increase the incentives for innovation.

II. Activities likely to begin to yield benefits in the medium term

1) Local institutions and social organization (38)

- **Exploring new forms, including cooperative arrangements.** What scope is there for new approaches to pooling labour and resources in communities where mortality has hit many households hard, but where young adults may also be underemployed? Can win-win approaches be found?
- **Assessing the contribution of enhanced livelihood and food security to HIV prevention.** Can efforts aimed at enhancing food security and livelihood options of susceptible groups make a cost-effective and timely contribution to preventing the spread of HIV? Can we identify options that are economically and environmentally sustainable, that make use of local opportunities?
- **Assessing the contribution of new livelihood and food security options to mitigation of AIDS' impacts.** Can we identify new options that allow the most vulnerable groups to make optimal use of their limited resources? Again, the challenge is to find options that are economically and environmentally sustainable, and that are accessible to a large number of people.

2) Is targeting actions at the system level feasible? (24)

- **Can we identify agricultural systems that make people particularly vulnerable to AIDS?** People who depend on certain agricultural systems may be particularly vulnerable to the indirect consequences of AIDS-linked mortality because, for example, of pre-existing labour scarcity or the absence of low labour-demanding crops in these systems. These ideas have never been rigorously tested.
- **Can we identify agricultural systems that make people particularly susceptible to HIV?** It is also likely, though it has not been well established that people who depend on certain agricultural systems may be particularly susceptible to HIV. This might be due, for example, to the absence of livelihood opportunities within them or to their proximity to major trade routes. In both cases, should identifying these systems prove feasible, efforts to reduce vulnerability and/or susceptibility could be targeted at the systems where the risks are the greatest, thus making more efficient use of scarce resources.

3) Impacts at the household level (22)

- **Quantifying labour availability in AIDS-affected households.** Understanding how much labour and of what kind is available to AIDS-affected households is critical to the development of appropriate technical or social options.
- **AIDS and non-farm economic activities: how do they affect each other?** Non-farm employment is often crucial to rural households and to sustaining their farm enterprises. The effects of AIDS on these links have hardly been investigated. It is also not understood to what extent non-farm livelihoods contribute to households' resilience to AIDS' consequences.

4) AIDS and agricultural knowledge among the young and other vulnerable groups (11)

Children and young adults in AIDS-affected households may be cut off from the usual apprenticeship in agriculture, though they may be heading households. They may also be obliged to drop out of school. New approaches to agricultural education will have to take account of these realities, and of the needs of women heading households who are not well served by extension.

5) HIV/AIDS and property/land issues (3)

- **Tenure and inheritance.** Knowledge is lacking about how marriage systems and customary land tenure system influence widows' rights to land. These would be important for policy decisions and the formulation of area-specific strategies to mitigate suffering among AIDS affected families.
- **Access to and management of common property resources.** Little is known about the access of AIDS-affected households to common property resources such as grazing land, forests and aquatic resources that are often crucial to food security and livelihoods. The benefits derived from the resource may be diminished for everyone if illness and death become so common that upkeep becomes a major problem.

6) What are the aggregate effects of AIDS on the agricultural economy and its structure? (3)

Surprisingly little is known about the overall impact of AIDS on communities and districts, and those dependent on agricultural production, in processing and trade, who reside in and around towns and cities.

A further theme, suggested by the Stakeholders, was not prioritised:

7) Impacts and responses in the workplace.

Several Malawian R&D organizations are implementing programs to enhance understanding among staff of their own susceptibility to HIV and vulnerability to AIDS and of the workplace factors that contribute to this. Some are also considering changes in institutional policies and practices that would reduce the risks staff face

and improve security. However, much more could be learned from these efforts if they were implemented as action-research i.e. with clear objectives and well-described methods, and with adequate provision for monitoring and evaluation.

Methods, Skills and Ethics

Methods

Proposals supported by the Project and its Action Research Fund will detail the methods to be used in addressing specific themes. In reviewing proposals, the Steering Committee will ensure that the methods proposed are adequate and appropriate. Among the criteria they will apply:

- Research will address issues and questions that are locally relevant;
- Research will be gender sensitive and conducted in a manner that assures maximum participation of the population meant to benefit from the research;
- Research will be based on a clearly described “theory of action” i.e. a logical connection between the action proposed and the impacts expected, and the means and indicators that will be used to verify progress towards them.
- Research will include an element of capacity building and skills transfer from experienced researchers to less experienced researchers, from national and international research organisations to community-based organisations, and from strong and well organised communities to communities that have difficulties in coping with the impact of AIDS;
- Researchers will have access to necessary skills and experience. Partnerships e.g. between agricultural and public health or between public sector and NGO/CBO institutions may be an effective way to ensure this.

Work on several of the priority topics will be coordinated among the countries participating in the regional network. In general, research supported by the Project will use appropriate qualitative or quantitative methods, likely in combination. These may include:

- Longitudinal studies drawing on social, agricultural, or epidemiological information and if possible triangulating information obtained by different methods (for instance, studying the relationship between changes in agricultural practices and social organisation on one side and changes in adult mortality in a community on the other).
- Cross-sectional studies using quantitative or qualitative methodologies including nutrition surveys, HIV prevalence surveys, behavioural surveys, social mapping, focus group interviews, and other participatory methods of obtaining information on the current status of issues related to AIDS and agriculture.

- Retrospective or historical studies to establish events and trends in a community, including verbal autopsies, constructions of memory books, and other participatory methods to help communities reconstruct their past. These methods can also provide greater spatial and temporal resolution than existing monitoring e.g. at HIV sentinel sites.
- Field trials that develop and assess specific interventions, usually through comparison among communities. Interventions may involve technology (e.g. disease-tolerant cassava varieties or low labour-demanding agroforestry practices), enhancement of local management capacity (e.g. innovative extension/adult education approaches) and/or support to local institutions (e.g. improving access to information and skills).
- Trials of technology in controlled environments (“on-station” trials) focusing on the development of agricultural technology with potential benefit for AIDS affected communities.
- Evaluative research. This is research that uses a variety of methods to ascertain the benefits of a given policy or programme.
- Gender analysis, economic analysis, environmental impact analysis, and similar specialised methods to examine specific aspects of a programme or policy.

Required Skills

The type of research to be supported by the project requires a variety of different types of expertise. These skill sets can be achieved through the collaboration of professional experts from different fields. Each research will have its own distinct skill requirements. The main sources of skills will be drawn from the following academic and professional fields:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| • Agricultural sciences | • Economics |
| • Epidemiology and Public Health | • Nutrition |
| • Sociology | • Counselling and Psychology |
| • Community Development | • Statistics |
| • Anthropology | • Gender and Development |

Ethical Considerations

Internationally accepted standards of ethical conduct in research will be applied to the research supported under the project. These include reviews of research protocols and publications to prevent research fraud and plagiarism and to ensure the respect for the three main principles of ethics in research: autonomy, beneficence, and justice. In practice this means that all research protocols will be reviewed to ensure that:

- All study participants are fully informed about the nature and implication of the research, and voluntarily consent to participate and to disclose information in the form specified in the research protocol. Confidentiality will be respected.

- The research must have the primary goal to improve the well-being of study participants and their communities, and should not cause harm to the participants. Stigmatisation of individuals, families, or communities is the most common form of harm caused by research in AIDS, but even the energy and time required to participate in research may be a form of harm as it may prevent the pursuit of other means of gaining a livelihood. All research protocols must include a strategy of feedback of information to the study participants and their communities as one means to ensure that benefits of the research can be realised by research participants.
- According to the principle of justice, the benefits of the research must be made available to the persons or communities being researched. This cannot always be fully realised, but in general, it is expected that the researchers will assure that priority needs in essential health, social, and agricultural support services uncovered by their research will be met by appropriate institutions and organisations.

Organization and Governance

It is recommended that the project be based in the Ministry of Agriculture, Department of Agriculture Extension. Over the past years, the Ministry has shown leadership in spearheading HIV/AIDS-Gender-Agriculture efforts and has lent crucial support to the development of the Regional Project. However, the project will be accessible to all Research and Development institutions interested in carrying out action research into issues of HIV/AIDS, Food Security, and Livelihood.

Since the project is multi-sectoral, it needs to be accountable to a body or committee that represents a wide range of stakeholders. These include public sector bodies (Ministries of Agriculture and Irrigation, Health and Population, Gender, Youth and Community Services, National AIDS Commission), NGOs (CARE, OXFAM, Action AID, MANET, NASFAM) parastatals (ADMARC), Community Based Organisations (YONECO, NASO) and Tertiary Institutions (Bunda, Chancellor and other Colleges of the University of Malawi, Natural Resources College). A specified and representative number of these institutions will form the Steering Committee. This Committee will guide the implementation of the project and ensure equity, transparency and accountability. The Committee will act as a clearinghouse for all research proposals and will regularly review the progress of funded projects. The international lead organizations (ISNAR, IFPRI and FAO) will advise the Steering Committee and ensure information flows efficient among countries within the emerging regional network.

The project will employ a National Coordinator who will have overall responsibility for the proper functioning of the Project and be accountable for the use of its funds. Encouraging and supporting the development of quality proposals will also be a principal task. The Coordinator will be answerable to the Steering Committee, but will work closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation through the Director of Agricultural Extension Services. The National Coordinator will be in charge of processing project proposals and allocating funds to those accepted by the Steering

Committee. An Administrative Assistant, responsible for the day-to-day functioning of the office and financial accounting, will work with the Coordinator.

The project will also employ two Monitoring and Evaluation Researchers, answerable to the National Coordinator. Their main task will be to work with institutions engaged in activities supported by the Project, ensuring that progress is monitored and evaluated using agreed indicators, that the results are fed back into on-going planning processes and that insights are made widely available in-country and in the regional network.

For proper implementation, each action-research activity supported by the Project should be the direct responsibility of a Principal Investigator, identified in the proposal and assisted possibly by Research Associates. Apart from designing the research proposal, the Principal Investigator will be responsible for documenting issues and lessons from the research initiative.

In line with Malawi's decentralisation policy, research involving local communities will be developed in consultation with district and local level structures. These will help further to ensure accountability and relevance of the research to rural people.

Information and Communication

The Project will develop a communication strategy aimed at improving the flow of information among the different institutions that work within it ("horizontal" flows) and with other stakeholders ("vertical" flows). The strategy will identify the critical information needs of the institutions involved and the opportunities for communication among them. It will also take account of the informatics capabilities of these different organizations, their differing levels of connectivity and of possibilities for improving on these.

Among the means that will be used to enhance horizontal flows, are:

- Periodic meetings at Project level (including with Network partners);
- Smaller meetings and study visits among institutions working on related areas;
- Newsletters and reports diffused by mail, e-mail and the internet and at local resource centres e.g. community libraries and
- Directories/catalogues describing who is doing what and where.

Vertical flows of information, between Project institutions and stakeholders, at different levels, who are not directly involved in the action-research, will draw on several means including:

- Field Agriculture shows;
- Drama and other evocative means to convey information and promote reflection, live and on radio and television;
- Local and national workshops for dissemination and feedback;
- Visits by key decision makers to Project activities;
- Strategic campaigns and
- Material for college, secondary and primary school curricula.

The effectiveness and impact of information and communication efforts will be monitored and evaluated for purposes of improving the system.

Next steps

A five-person Interim Executive Committee³ was named and requested by the Stakeholders to oversee implementation of the Workshop's decisions. The Committee met immediately following the Workshop. They agreed:

- A list of candidate Steering Committee members drawn from representative stakeholder organizations. Members would be invited to serve by the Minister.
- Draft criteria for assessing proposals submitted to the Action Research Fund;
- Responsibility for discussing staffing and establishment of the Project's office with the Ministry. These discussions are continuing (early January 2002).

The Action Research Fund will be established and be initially endowed with recently received grants from IDRC and Norway.

Additional support for the Fund and other Project costs is being sought from the National AIDS Commission (draft proposal circulated early January 2002).

A Call for Proposals will go out once the Steering Committee has been named and procedures put in place for receiving and assessing proposals.

³ Sam Bota (Bunda College), Howard Kasiya (SAT), Michael Loevinsohn (ISNAR), Grace Malindi (MAI), Naomi Ngwira (Chancellor College)

ANNEX: HIV/AIDS, AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY

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Comments:
Creation Date: 3/24/2003 12:54 PM
Change Number: 2
Last Saved On: 3/24/2003 12:54 PM
Last Saved By: Astrid Oosterling
Total Editing Time: 2 Minutes
Last Printed On: 3/24/2003 3:18 PM
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 16
Number of Words: 5,364 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 30,576 (approx.)