

Migration, AIDS, and Urban Food Security in Southern and Eastern Africa

Case Studies in Namibia, South Africa, and Ethiopia¹

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Introduction

Migration, AIDS epidemics, and urban food security, interact in complex ways that are little researched and understood in the Southern and Eastern African context. To date, research on urban food security has been concerned with urban systems of acquisition and production, with an emphasis on the informal sector and more recently on urban agriculture. Much less attention has been paid to linkages and food chains between rural and urban areas and the degree to which they are embedded within systems of migration.

Recent studies from Namibia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Kenya show that where urban and rural links are strong, it is the resources associated with these connections that dominate urban households' coping strategies, rather than the intra-urban household relationships suggested by the current literature on urban livelihoods among the poor. While urban-to-rural remittances have been the predominant direction of commodity and cash transfers, benefiting the rural household economy, this dynamic is changing, with direct food transfers from rural households to urban households on the rise, as part of the migration process and urbanization process.

However, while migration itself fuels the rapid spread of HIV in the region, the disease may be undermining this new social economy and urban food security through its impacts on rural production for the towns. In addition, AIDS may be diminishing the capacity of migrants to pursue other food security strategies in town, too, including urban agriculture. The virus' long-wave epidemiology creates impacts in both the short and long terms, simultaneously changing the development context while creating intergenerational impacts that call for a "next generation" approach to the challenge of developing proactive, future-oriented policy and programming.

Major Issues

The current literature on rural-urban linkages emphasizes the remittance of urban resources (mostly cash) to the rural areas, with little attention paid to social linkages or to reverse (rural-urban) remittance flows. This conceptualization of migration that has dominated the past 30 years is largely an economic one. However, as Todaro explained in a 1997 publication,

Three decades of African experience has made it clear that rates of rural-urban migration have greatly exceeded rates of urban job creation and swamped the absorptive capacity of both informal-sector industry and urban social services. Migration can no longer be casually viewed by economists as a beneficent process necessary to solve problems of growing urban labour demand.

Attention should therefore focus on the nature of both rural and urban livelihoods, and the relationship between rural and urban households, in order to help explain why migration is able to continue in the face of high unemployment. From the perspective of rural livelihoods, the argument is made that environmental stress, evidenced by declining *per capita* agricultural output through much of the Southern African region as a result of high population growth rates, contributes to this continued rural-urban migration. Migration therefore remains one strategy available to rural households as a means of diversifying their economic base. So while deteriorating urban environments should dissuade potential migrants from leaving their rural areas, the increasing economic pressures on rural livelihoods make migration a necessity.

However, this argument does not explain the urban context, and how migrants survive within that context. What is important is the socioeconomic relationship between the rural and urban components of the same household, which appears to be central to understanding the migration phenomenon in the region. Recent research in Southern and Eastern Africa suggests that it is no longer appropriate to conceptualize rural-urban migration as a unilinear process. Rather, the evidence is that a form of urbanization that reflects complex demographic, social, and commodity exchanges, based on reciprocity and facilitated by migration, is entrenching itself as the *modus operandi* of the regional social economy. Most important, recent research undertaken in Namibia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Kenya shows that direct food transfers from rural households to urban households significantly contribute to urban food security at the household level.

Migration and AIDS

Research undertaken by the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) over the past decade has demonstrated

¹ This brief has been adapted from the research proposal "Migration, AIDS, and Urban Food Security in Southern and Eastern Africa: Case Studies in Namibia, South Africa, and Ethiopia," written by Frayne, Ashton, Crush, Drimie, Grant, and Zeleke in February 2007. The proposal was based on a comprehensive review of the literature on migration, HIV and AIDS and urban food security, and attempted to draw the links between these three powerful dynamics which are at play in Southern and Eastern Africa.

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both the complexity and centrality of migration in the evolving social economy of the region. Both domestic and cross-border migration is increasing, not only in response to globalization and the urbanization process, but also to widespread poverty, political instability, and endemic environmental shocks. Migration therefore forms an important component of household livelihood strategies in response to dynamic and often difficult economic conditions in rural and urban areas. Migration is both a poverty alleviation and accumulation strategy leading to increasingly complex forms of migration, including skilled migrants, contract workers, other legal migrants, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, and small entrepreneurs. Although not fully recognized in the national or regional poverty reduction strategies, migration dynamics are central to the conditions in which people live and are a major poverty mitigation strategy at household and community levels. Given the cross-cutting nature of the migration phenomenon, policy and development programming will need to take cognizance of the role of migration in the development process.

However, just as migration provides an important, cross-sectoral development opportunity in the region, AIDS poses a major threat to the development process. It is now well understood that population mobility and the spread of HIV are directly linked. Not only does mobility contribute to the spread of the virus, but AIDS-related illness creates new challenges for those living with the virus, thus also acting as a driver for migration. Yet with migration now a major feature

of the region, the negative interactions between mobility and HIV are deepening and eroding the livelihood opportunities of poor households, both rural and urban. Pro-poor development policy and programming will have to take into account the outcomes of the interplay between HIV and migration and their combined impacts on livelihoods as both phenomena are now central features of Southern and Eastern African society.

Policy Implications

Both migration and AIDS have short-term impacts, but also have in common long-term consequences that call for an intergenerational approach to the challenges posed. In particular, the impact of AIDS on young people is significant, with a rise in vulnerability and orphanhood throughout the region. With the social and economic breakdown precipitated by the epidemic, young people are increasingly involved in distress migration, usually from rural areas to urban areas. While research demonstrates that urban agriculture is playing an increasingly important role in meeting household food needs as a direct response to poverty, the extent to which this increase can be directly attributed to AIDS has not been investigated. What is certain is that urban food and nutrition insecurity is rising and that AIDS is creating a new class of destitute within the major urban areas of the region. This places urban food security high on the research and policy agenda and it must form a critical element of the broader HIV, migration, and food security development debate.



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About RENEWAL

Facilitated by the International Food Policy Research Institute, RENEWAL is a regional “network-of-networks” in Sub-Saharan Africa. Currently active in five “hub” countries (Malawi, Uganda, Zambia, South Africa, and Kenya), RENEWAL comprises national networks of food and nutrition-relevant organizations (public, private, and nongovernmental) together with partners in AIDS and public health research. RENEWAL aims to enhance understanding of the worsening interactions between HIV, food security, and nutrition, and facilitate a comprehensive response to these interactions. RENEWAL is grateful for support, at present, from Irish Aid, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

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