



Promoting Agricultural Innovation in AIDS-Affected Households: An Action-Research Project in Msinga, South Africa

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Food and nutrition insecurity are increasingly intertwined with HIV and AIDS. The linkages between malnutrition, on one hand, and HIV infection and AIDS impact, on the other, drives people and their households in a downwards spiral of impoverishment. As many people in rural and semi-urban areas partly depend on small scale agriculture, the need for ‘innovations’ in farming for mitigating AIDS impacts is increasingly acknowledged. Too often, however, innovations are introduced from outside, without taking sustainability into account. An interactive, process-oriented approach has high potential to develop appropriate innovations with farmers, though sustainable implementation is not easy. Practical experience in the context of AIDS is urgently needed to come to a mature practice. In this endeavor, the Farmer Support Group, a NGO working on sustainable agriculture in South Africa, the Sinozwelo Drop-in-Centre, a community managed organization, and the Athena Institute of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, initiated an action-research project in South Africa, with support from RENEWAL, to address this challenge.

The project brought together multiple role players in agriculture and health to explore options for securing access to food, and improve the health and well-being of participating households in three villages in Msinga, in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal. Designing generic interactive approaches to development of farming innovations is impossible. Literature has shown remarkable similarity in principles for success: a central role of farmers, commitment to a shared vision,

enhancing trust, facilitating social and experiential learning, integration of knowledge, enhancing coalition building, capacity building, scaling out, scaling up, and institutionalization. The approach selected for the project consisted of an initial phase, in which the current situation was analyzed, ideas generated, prioritized and exchanged. In the second phase, action plans were developed, tested and evaluated in an iterative and continuous cycle. The project was facilitated by a project team under supervision of a project coordinator.

A base-line study among participating households confirmed food insecurity as one of the main problems. Although it was difficult to differentiate the impact of AIDS from other shocks and stresses, the study revealed how HIV and AIDS exacerbate poverty and malnutrition. The AIDS epidemic touches not only on ‘human resources’ (health), but all aspects of the lives of those infected and affected. It impacts on financial, social and, to a lesser extent, on natural and physical resources. It negatively affects people’s psychosocial well-being, and it makes them more vulnerable to the impact of other shocks and stresses. Farming, especially when targeted at women who are responsible for home consumption, was identified as an important strategy to restore a household’s resource base, while serving as an entry point to talk about HIV and mitigate psychosocial effects

The Farmer Life School (FLS), an innovative modification of group-based learning in agriculture, was recognized as an appropriate methodology for implementing the project. Field observations, discussions and joint reflection allowed farmers to achieve a holistic understanding of their lives and the factors that negatively or positively impact on their health. As they are capacitated to make decisions on eliminating risk behavior or other threats, farmers become better problem solvers not only in farming, but groups of community gardeners, mainly women, attended FLS sessions during two growing seasons.

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Evidence showed that the practical focus on agriculture actively engages participants, while allowing them to explore issues around HIV and AIDS, in a relatively non-threatening way and at their own pace. The analysis also shows, however, that the social dimensions that drive the epidemic, such as poverty, stigma, gender inequality, and violence, also undermine participatory approaches. Interventions aiming to mitigate AIDS impacts require thorough understanding and, where possible, adaptation to the socioeconomic context.

One of the main requirements for group-based learning is a safe environment in which freedom of expression is honored. However, in a high prevalence area, where stigma, gender inequality, and violence are profound, it takes time and effort to create such an environment. Results show that AIDS related stigma is widespread and is enacted through gossip and social exclusion. The association with immoral behavior, lack of general knowledge, stereotyping, and active discrimination further exacerbate people's fear to talk about it. Women particularly feel powerless to protect themselves in a male-dominated cultural setting. Group-based methodologies, using participatory and sensitive tools, offer support to discuss and challenge stigma and discrimination. However, it requires an environment which takes into account people's situations and the context they live. Support for specific vulnerable groups, in combination with ARV-roll out, and assistance by Home-Based Care workers are crucial. The study also indicates that awareness programs focusing on general knowledge, prevention and treatment, and promoting

interaction between social groups in a community, are urgently needed to create a common understanding and commitment for collective action.

The need for innovative strategies for improving food security and well-being also emerged as highly critical. The project showed that agriculture based on moisture conservation, particularly in the drier months, has the potential to enhance food security and household income. However, for the majority of the people, it may take years to acquire relevant knowledge and skills and to apply such skills successfully. The project highlights the potential of micro-credit and saving schemes in combination with capacity building and small-scale experimentation for addressing this. At the same time, innovations need to go beyond quantitative aspects of enhancing food security. The study identified several innovations related to nutritional value and storage of crops, and different ways of social organization which may be equally effective, although the time frame of the project was too short to be conclusive. Diversification on activities beyond the domain of farming may be another alternative.

The spread and impact of HIV and AIDS on farmer households is complex. So too is the process required for mitigation. The process has to take place at all levels, i.e., individual to community, and has to be focused on the short, middle, and long-term effects of AIDS. The contributions of various disciplines—scientific and operational—are needed, necessitating an interdisciplinary approach within a multi-level framework.

About RENEWAL

RENEWAL is a growing 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. RENEWAL aims to enhance understanding of the worsening interactions between HIV/AIDS and food and nutrition security, and facilitate a comprehensive response to these interactions. Core objectives are (1) to reduce critical gaps in understanding how livelihoods, particularly those deriving from agriculture, (a) contribute to the further spread of HIV (susceptibility), and (b) are affected by HIV and AIDS (vulnerability); (2) to generate new policy-relevant knowledge on how households and communities may strengthen both their resistance to HIV transmission and their resilience to the impacts of AIDS, and (3) to enable relevant institutions (in particular, governments) to generate and to act upon realistic priorities for responding to the interactions of AIDS epidemics with food and nutrition insecurity.

RENEWAL is both a network and a process, with the process of network development being viewed as both a means and an end. The aim is to enhance and sustain impact through pro-actively establishing links between locally-prioritized research, capacity strengthening and policy communications.

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