Two months ago, the UN General Assembly called for “all people at all times to have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food...as part of a comprehensive response to HIV/AIDS.” This political declaration represents a significant shift in the global community’s approach to combating the pandemic. For the first time, both the evidence and mandate are clear. What we need now is action.

Until recently, HIV/AIDS was primarily viewed only as a health issue, separate from agriculture and other aspects of development. As a result, collaboration across sectors has been limited, resulting in lost opportunities to effectively fight AIDS epidemics. Fortunately, this perception has begun to shift.

Increasingly, people recognize that HIV/AIDS and hunger are entwined in a vicious cycle. Malnutrition and lack of food may heighten exposure to HIV and susceptibility to infection, while AIDS in turn exacerbates hunger.

These links are particularly acute in rural communities, where households are often dependent on agriculture for both income and food. For that reason, improving rural livelihoods and agricultural production can help reduce both the spread of HIV and the effects of AIDS. Programs that reduce the need for poor people to migrate to look for work (e.g., by restoring degraded land) can reduce their risk of being exposed to the virus.

In many countries, if the agricultural sector fails to take HIV and AIDS into account, it will simply not be able to achieve its primary objective of improving food production and access. In eastern and southern Africa, the AIDS epidemic is already having serious consequences for agriculture by affecting adults at the height of their productive years, making it difficult for poor people, especially women, to provide food for their families. The crisis will only worsen as young adults, who are disproportionally at risk from HIV, become household heads.

As evidence of the interactions between AIDS and hunger has accumulated, both agriculture and nutrition specialists have begun to take AIDS into account. In turn, AIDS experts have become
increasingly aware of the critical importance of nutrition, particularly if antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) are to be effective. The June 2006 UN declaration is a testament to this shift in thinking. A recent study shows that if patients are malnourished when they start ARV therapy they are six times more likely to die than well-nourished patients. They are also more likely to suffer side-effects, which may cause them to stop taking the ARVs altogether. And if many people stop, drug resistance will spread fast.

It is clear that development experts from different sectors must work together if we are to win the fight against HIV and AIDS. To assist affected households and communities to better respond, IFPRI and its partners in the Regional Network on HIV/AIDS, Rural Livelihoods and Food Security (RENEWAL) are calling for a three-pronged approach to the crisis:

- strengthen household and community resistance to HIV and resilience to AIDS;
- sustain and enhance opportunities for food and income in affected communities;
- ensure safety nets for those who are otherwise unable to cope.

The core pillars of global AIDS policy—prevention, treatment and care, and mitigation—remain key, but the growing understanding of the integral role that food and nutrition can play needs to be better reflected throughout.

To be successful, we must also support and empower community-driven responses and innovations, develop and link both short- and long-term responses, and focus on action research, or “learning by doing.” By bringing together agriculture, nutrition, and health, we can achieve breakthroughs in combating HIV and AIDS and reduce hunger and poverty at the same time.

###

_The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) seeks sustainable solutions for ending hunger and poverty. IFPRI is one of 15 centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, an alliance of 64 governments, private foundations, and international and regional organizations. Please visit our website at [www.ifpri.org](http://www.ifpri.org)._

_The Regional Network on HIV/AIDS, Rural Livelihoods, and Food Security (RENEWAL), a program spearheaded by IFPRI, brings together national networks of researchers, policymakers, and public, private, and nongovernmental organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa to focus on the interactions between HIV/AIDS and food and nutrition security. Please visit the RENEWAL website at [http://www.ifpri.org/renewal/](http://www.ifpri.org/renewal/)_. 
