

HIV/AIDS and Food Insecurity: Double Jeopardy



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IDRC Photo: S. Colvey

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By Kate Harper

In 1989, while working at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Stuart Gillespie spent six months examining the connection between HIV/AIDS and food security. It quickly became clear to him that the epidemic's long-term impacts could have a devastating effect on hunger throughout the developing world.

Seventeen years later, he continues to emphasize this connection as a senior research fellow with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and cofounder of the Regional Network on HIV/AIDS, Rural Livelihoods and Food Security ([RENEWAL](#)), partly funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Reaching the MDG targets

Gillespie says that responding to the connection between HIV/AIDS and food security is now more important than ever, particularly in the context of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), drafted in 2000 and subscribed to by all 191 UN member countries. Halting or reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, and halving the proportion of the world's population living in extreme hunger are two of the eight MDGs to be achieved by 2015.

“There's no way that Africa will reach the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 without addressing HIV/AIDS and food security together,” Gillespie says. “Both challenges are now so intertwined that they cannot be compartmentalized.”

To help tackle these issues, RENEWAL was launched in 2001 at a conference on HIV/AIDS, rural livelihoods and food security in Malawi as a joint project between IFPRI and the International Service for Agricultural Research (ISNAR). Currently active in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia, RENEWAL's goal is to increase the “HIV-responsiveness” of agriculture, food, and nutrition policies and programs and to identify actions that could help reduce people's exposure to HIV and lessen the impact of AIDS.

For example, research has shown that those affected by HIV and AIDS may be less likely to access a diverse mixture of crops needed for adequate nutrition, as the disease weakens their productivity. Dietary quantity and quality deteriorates, creating further health problems. RENEWAL researchers say this can be solved through more HIV-aware development policies and practices linked to improving access to information on the disease and the importance of nutritional support within prevention, care, and treatment.

After the 2001 Malawi conference, researchers began to see the advantages of working together in a network to strengthen their capacity, sharing information to inform policy.

In its first phase, launched in 2002, RENEWAL expanded into a “network of networks,” linking local researchers across sub-Saharan Africa through a series of eight studies examining HIV/AIDS and food security.

“We thought, ‘Why should we just limit this to one or two countries? Why not try and maximize that kind of interaction by going regionally as well?’” Gillespie says.

Maximizing results on a national level

In the project’s second phase, the results of these studies were compiled, and a further nine were initiated. The original studies continue to be used to inform national policies and programs. For example, in Malawi, the government met with RENEWAL researchers to draft an AIDS and agriculture strategy. Piloted in 2004 near the capital, Lilongwe, and officially launched in 2005, the strategy aims to integrate food and nutrition security interventions with HIV and AIDS prevention programs.

In the future, RENEWAL aims to encourage studies that focus on more local and regional issues. This is part of an effort to expand its influence beyond the food and nutrition community by targeting international organizations, including many that deal with health or HIV policy.

A study in Malawi, for example, found that the risk of sexually transmitted diseases increased during the “hungry season.” As local residents faced a decreasing food supply, some had little choice but to resort to high-risk transactional sex, to support themselves and their families.

Renaud De Plaen of IDRC’s EcoHealth program says that the research results from Malawi illustrate the need to examine HIV/AIDS not just from a health standpoint, but from a food and nutrition perspective as well.

“The more people are affected, the harder it becomes for them to produce enough food, and the more vulnerable they become,” De Plaen says. “As the most vulnerable are often the most at risk, it becomes a vicious spiral.”

Gillespie agrees. “People who are extremely poor or food insecure are more likely to be at risk of being exposed to the virus, and being infected,” he says. “Then later, their households are at greater risk of becoming irreversibly poorer because of this infection”



Involving key stakeholders

At the regional level, RENEWAL is supported by National Advisory Panels (NAPs) of about 10 members, which include representatives from the local agriculture and health sectors, nongovernmental organizations, and AIDS-related groups within each country of operation. Involving those closest to the issue is key to solving problems, and is an important part of the RENEWAL research process, Gillespie says.

“To have a real and sustained impact, certainly at a national level, all key stakeholders grappling with this crisis have to be fundamentally involved,” he says.

A third phase of RENEWAL, set to launch in 2007, will end in 2010, the year the UN aims to have achieved several benchmark goals for HIV/AIDS, as outlined in its 2001 Declaration of Commitment. This next phase will involve more activity throughout sub-Saharan Africa as well as in India and will increase connections with international AIDS organizations. Another goal is to eventually make the networks self-reliant, Gillespie says.

“We need to keep our focus on the bigger picture,” he says. “Our ultimate goal is to have demonstrable impact on the food and nutrition sectors, as well as the health and HIV sectors, with regard to the interaction between the two.”

Though there’s still work to be done, more people are beginning to recognize the connection between HIV/AIDS and food security, says De Plaen.

“Four years after the initial phase, there is a general recognition among the scientific community that food security and HIV/AIDS cannot be looked at separately,” he says. “It’s very clear the only way to handle the AIDS crisis is through better collaboration between the health, food production, agricultural, and education sectors.”

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For more information:

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