

Agriculture hit by Aids

A recent study into the effects of HIV/Aids in Southern Africa shows a clear negative impact on food production in the region

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HIV/Aids has proven to be the bane of our times since it started decimating humanity across the globe in the twilight of the last century, and it is expected to take an increasingly negative toll on the economies of the countries most affected by it.

Some research organisations in the area of food security, for instance, anticipate that labour loss in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) because of the epidemic will be between 12,7% and 26% in the next two decades.

Whichever way one looks at it, this is a frightening scenario.

In an October 2006 report, the World Food Programme said that the high prevalence of HIV/Aids in Southern Africa had a direct negative impact on food security. Health experts, the report further said, estimated that between seven and eight million farmers in the region have been lost to HIV/Aids over the past few years.

A study commissioned last year by the Southern Africa Trust — a regional non-profit agency which supports and encourages inclusive policy dialogue aimed at poverty reduction — found that 24,7-million people in sub-Saharan Africa were living with HIV/Aids, and that 59% of that figure was accounted for by women and children.

The study, which was conducted by the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network, FANRPAN, which conducts research on agricultural issues with a view to informing policy in the region, also noted that women and children were increasingly becoming the group most affected by the disease.

Malawi-based Victor Mhoni, of the Civil Society Agriculture Network (Cisanet), said of the relationship between the epidemic and the decline in farming activity in the region: "The problem with this pandemic is that it wreaks havoc with farm labour patterns since there is now a lot of time spent by labourers on tending to the sick, thus neglecting farming activities. There is also the fact that, usually, when

people in urban areas get sick, they go home to rural areas to be close to their families.

"This often creates a situation where families no longer properly stick to their farming calendars."

Cisanet is an advocacy group which also does extensive research in the area of livestock, agricultural marketing and small-scale irrigation. Mhoni also noted that most of the people affected by HIV/Aids are energetic young people — the very people whom the agricultural sector needs most.

Mary Malukene from Bela Bela in South Africa is such an example. According to an Oxfam report of two years ago, the then-84-year-old had only one son who was still alive after her other three children had died of HIV/Aids and left their own children behind in her care.

Old and fragile, Malukene was then forced to take on the role of being mother and provider to two of her grandchildren and one great-grandchild: "I struggle to bring up the children because I am very old. But I must carry on. I ask God to give me strength until they are older."

Cesar Palha de Sousa of the organisation Cruzeiro do Sul in Mozambique said: "We have evidence here in Mozambique — based on surveys on the effects of HIV/Aids and the functioning of rural markets — that the composition of households has largely changed as a result of the deaths of people still in their prime."

But, said Palha de Sousa, this composition changes more in cases where the death is that of a man than it does in cases where the woman dies, because when a woman dies and leaves a man behind, society will be quicker to provide the widower with a new spouse.

The problem with this, he said, is that, if the man has HIV/Aids, he will then infect the new spouse, thus leading to a vicious cycle of infection and death. This in turn will lead to a further rapid decline of the labour force and with that comes less agricultural productivity.

The FANRPAN study illustrates the possible impacts and responses of agriculture-dependent house-



A recent study has shown the possible impact on agriculture-dependent households in which either or both the adults have HIV/Aids. Photograph: Paul Botes

"We have evidence ... that the composition of households has largely changed as a result of the deaths of people still in their prime"

holds in which either or both of the adults have HIV/Aids.

If one of them becomes sick, he or she will work less, meaning that labour has to be imported. The imported labour could perhaps be a relative. But sometimes there may not be replacement labour.

At the same time, health expenses will rise. In the event that replacement labour is not found, household consumption is likely to drop and there will eventually come a point at which the ill adult stops working altogether.

Because the children will have to spend more time tending to the ill parent, they may even drop out of school.

Meanwhile, debts creep up. Finally, the adult will die and funeral expenses will be incurred.

The household may also fragment as members of the family migrate to seek work in the cities — leaving

the land lying fallow. Access to the household land may also be affected by issues surrounding the property rights to the surviving widow or children. The downward spiral accelerates from then on, says FANRPAN.

But what has been the response of the region to the epidemic? And how successful has it been?

In an effort to combat the epidemic, the Maseru Declaration on HIV and Aids was signed by the SADC heads of state in 2003.

The realisation that the countries most affected by HIV/Aids also experienced slow growth in agricultural productivity and an increase in food insecurity over the last two decades, has led to the establishment of national Aids commissions in every SADC country.

More recently, Oxfam has funded a project led by the Women and Law in Southern Africa Trust, which, according to Oxfam's Craig Castro, "will facilitate information sharing and peer learning among women and other vulnerable groups.

"In addition, it will contribute to an improvement in their livelihoods through greater capacity to influence decision-making processes affecting their development and that of the communities they live in," he said.

But, as Mhoni, said, "The challenge is too high. Most NGOs have well-defined HIV/Aids-programmes, but it is the actual farmers in the field who are experiencing hardship.

"Farmers' associations have started awareness programmes and are trying to link farmers to organisations dealing with HIV/Aids."

As the FANRPAN study has shown, in all countries in Southern Africa, HIV/Aids has accelerated processes of rural impoverishment and the breakdown of extended family relations that have over many years been the foundation of traditional safety-net mechanisms.

With a grant from the Southern Africa Trust, FANRPAN will soon embark on a vulnerability study to assess the degree to which the region is vulnerable to factors that may adversely affect food security.

Tiisetso Makube is the editor of The Afropolitan. The content on this page was provided and sponsored by the Southern Africa Trust

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