

Hunger, HIV, and AIDS—The Brutal Cycle

Hunger is a major effect of HIV and AIDS because of diminishing population and illness-induced weakness that reduces farming productivity. Less people means less labor towards the production and cultivation of food in communities that are pastoral. Rural families with family members who have AIDS often have to reduce the amount of land they cultivate, and shift the diversity of their crops from high-value and labor-intensive cash crops to a reduced number of basic cereal grains. One study in Mozambique found that 45 percent of AIDS-affected households had reduced the area under cultivation, and 60 percent had reduced the number of crops grown.

Widows and children orphaned by AIDS are also often the victims of property grabbing, which robs them of the basic necessity of land for growing food. As much as 29 percent of widows and 20 percent of teenage orphans in a Uganda study reported having had property seized by outsiders.

An Ethiopian study showed that households affected by HIV and AIDS spend just 12 to 16 hours per week on farming, compared to 34 hours per week for households not affected by HIV and AIDS. This is especially significant since 80% of all households in Ethiopia rely on farming for their income and livelihood.

AIDS decimates the human capital of communities and entire societies. AIDS has already killed 7 million farmers in Africa since 1985, and could kill 16 million more by 2020. Namibia is projected to lose 26% of its agricultural labor force. Other states are similarly affected, including Botswana (23%), Zimbabwe (23%), Mozambique (20%), South Africa (20%), Kenya (17%), Malawi (14%), Uganda (14%), and Tanzania (13%).

Households affected by AIDS are often forced to sell any remaining assets, deplete savings, and go into debt to pay for medical expenses and funeral costs. Other productive assets, such as irrigation and grain storage systems, many times fall into disrepair.

In Tanzania, per capita food production decreased 15% in poor households surveyed after the death of one parent. In Zimbabwe, where AIDS has killed over 10% of the agricultural workforce, communal agricultural output declined by 50% in a five-year period, and a 1997 study showed that in households affected by HIV and AIDS, production of maize dropped 61%, cotton dropped 47%, vegetables dropped 49%, ground-nuts dropped 37%, and the raising of cattle dropped 29%.

While HIV and AIDS contribute to food insecurity, food insecurity helps drive the spread of HIV and AIDS. Hunger increases the likelihood that people will adopt risky strategies to survive. Men may migrate to find work, and women and children may turn to sex work or transactional sex for food or food money, drastically increasing the risk of HIV infection. A study in Tanzania found that one-quarter of elementary school girls surveyed said they had had sex with adult men, including their teachers, in exchange for money. Men who migrate to find work are often separated from their family, a scenario associated with higher numbers of sexual partners.



At present, only five percent of HIV-positive people in the developing world have access to antiretroviral drugs (ARVs), but as ARVs are made available to more and more people, nutrition will play a key role in maximizing the treatment's success.

Good nutrition is vital for the health and survival of all people, but it is particularly important for people with HIV and AIDS.

HIV and associated diseases weaken the immune system and increase the body's need for energy. Food can provide the first line of defense in warding off the detrimental effects of HIV and AIDS and can help people recover from illness.

Good nutrition is not a substitute for life-extending drug therapies. But nutritious food, in combination with safe water, good hygiene, and care, can help people with HIV stay healthier longer, adhere to drug therapies, and lead a better quality of life.

"The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice."

—Proverbs 13:23 (ESV)