HIV/AIDS AND AFRICAN AGRICULTURE: A HIDDEN THREAT TO PRODUCTION, EDUCATION & EXTENSION

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In Africa, HIV/AIDS currently infects 11,000 people a day, kills 6,000 people a day, and has orphaned about 15 percent of children in the worst affected cities. The United Nations has predicted that the disease will wipe out half of the teenage population in some of the continent’s poorest countries. UNAIDS reports that 70% of the world’s HIV/AIDS cases are in Sub-Saharan Africa. By some estimates, the disease will lower life expectancy in Sub-Saharan Africa from 59 to 45 by 2015. This statistic is misleading as HIV/AIDS actually affects individuals in their most productive years, usually between the ages of 20 and 40, leaving populations of the very young and very old. In Africa, statistical evidence shows that some groups of girls are infected as young as 10 years of age.

Production

Labor and land are usually the only sources of earnings available to small-scale farmers in Africa. In regions of Tanzania hit hardest by this disease, there has been an estimated 50% decline in production of bananas, coffee, and staple foods. Many farm families in HIV/AIDS affected areas change to less labor-intensive crops and shift away from cash crops to concentrate on subsistence crops such as yam, sweet potato, and cassava and adapt their livestock-raising practices away from cattle and toward smaller livestock, such as pigs and poultry. It has also been documented that in agricultural communities with a high incidence of HIV/AIDS, there is an increase in soil erosion, more agricultural land left fallow, and time-consuming work like weeding, mulching, and pruning is either not carried out properly or left undone.

Extension

HIV/AIDS has had a devastating effect on extension personnel. Some eastern African countries report that there are districts that cannot maintain sufficient personnel to maintain extension services to the rural populations. Reports show that frequent illnesses and death are having adverse effects on extension workforces through loss of work time attending more funerals, missing more days of work due to their own illnesses, and deaths of highly trained and experienced staff.

Additionally, farming communities affected by HIV/AIDS need support and advice on coping strategies to mitigate the effect of the disease on agricultural production, family health, and nutrition. For instance, farmers need assistance to set up home-based income-generating opportunities and small-scale trading activities to maintain their income levels. Some farming families are developing their own coping strategies that require less labor and less financial input, but front-line extension agents are in a good position to provide training and advise on improving these coping strategies.

Education

Education is not only a key factor in reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS on agricultural production, it is also affected by the epidemic. The impact is felt on: a) the demand for education (fewer births as people die young; children infected and dying; orphans and child heads of households unable to attend school); b) the supply of education (teachers dying at a rate greater than they can be replaced; competition from other sectors, such as health, thereby reducing resources for education); and c) the quality and management of education (teacher absenteeism, loss of inspectors, administrators, and planners who provide support for education). In particular, educational institutions at all levels are dealing with a shrinking number of teachers and developing strategies to stem the spread of HIV among students and teachers. For instance, a trained manpower needs assessment conducted at the University of Namibia; College of Agriculture recommended an increased need for agricultural graduates by 40% over previous estimates to compensate for the loss of trained agricultural personnel from HIV/AIDS.