

Promising practices

Addressing HIV/AIDS in the Shire Highlands of Malawi

Very few external mainstreaming programmes have been evaluated and well documented. One of the exceptions is the Shire Highlands Sustainable Livelihoods Programme (SHSLP), part of the Joint Oxfam Programme in Malawi. The core business of this programme is to diversify and increase agricultural production, improve soil fertility through crop selection and manure production, agro-forestry, and gaining access to markets.

With a quarter of adults being HIV-infected in the area, it was not long before the impact of HIV/AIDS became very clear to SHSLP staff and management. In response, the programme opted for a mainstreaming strategy because it believed it could serve its clients better by adapting its core business, rather than become an 'HIV/AIDS-specific' organization. This meant including issues of HIV and AIDS at all levels of programming and policy development, in order to reduce the impact on people, communities and organizations.

The first step was for SHSLP to increase levels of awareness and skills of their staff around HIV/AIDS. The programme works through government extension services and village development committees (VDCs). It starts in each village with the community assessing its problems and possible solutions, and drawing up an action plan. A VDC is then chosen, consisting of equal numbers of female and male members. Two of its members are elected to represent the interests of households that might be marginalized and left out of programme interventions.

Labour shortages

HIV and AIDS have changed households in the community. There are more chronically ill households, women are taking on untenable additional workloads, and this is making many livelihoods interventions irrelevant for a large number of people. The programme, therefore, needed to adapt its interventions to ensure they were relevant in light of such labour shortages. A number of new ideas have evolved. Most have a labour-saving element – this being one of the biggest constraints to HIV-affected households – but many have other benefits, such as improving people's nutritional status (particularly relevant for chronically sick, elderly, and young people). Some increased income security by creating a 'living bank' (livestock providing flexible financial reserves in times of emergency and serve as 'insurance' against crop failure) to rely on rather than forcing people into risky survival strategies such as migration or sex work.



Photo: Martin Ryan

Article produced as part of the KIC project

As a result of these adaptations, poor farming households have seen their production of maize (their staple crop) more than tripled since adopting low-cost, environment-friendly agricultural practices. Some 3,500 vulnerable households have acquired chickens, guinea fowl, or goats through revolving loan schemes. During the 'lean' period in 2004-05, when food was scarce, villages identified some 11,000 of the most vulnerable households to receive food aid. Some children have been able to go back to school, and some chronically sick women and men have been able to work in their fields, do light work at home, or start activities to raise an income.

Community involvement

The community structures that have been established by the programme are helping to ensure that the most vulnerable members of communities are included in development activities, and are identified for support during the lean season of the year. The example set by the community volunteers has encouraged others to become involved, and has encouraged greater collaboration between traditional leaders and communities, in responding to the needs of HIV-affected people, including orphans. As of July 2005, almost 12,000 households affected by HIV/AIDS have been receiving support from local volunteers under a home-based care scheme, run by the Social Welfare Department and 27 community-based organizations. Through Oxfam's collaboration with Médecins sans Frontières, people can also be referred for counselling and treatment at health centres and clinics.

The SHSLP has had some success at mainstreaming HIV/AIDS into its core development work. The use of a mainstreaming strategy has helped the rural livelihoods programme take a critical look at its work from an HIV/AIDS viewpoint, and resulted in change at every level from personnel policies to programme activities. ■

A larger version of this article – including some lessons learned – can be found on our website: www.exchange-magazine.info.

More information:

- Factsheet SHSLP: www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/hiv/aids/downloads/malawi_bangkok.pdf
- July 2005 Programme Impact Report of Oxfam Great Britain: www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/evaluation/downloads/pir_2005.pdf
- E-mail: info@oxfam.org.uk