

HIV/AIDS AND ENVIRONMENT

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Gender Makes the Difference

- 34 – 46 million people were estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS¹ globally at the end of 2003, and 2.5 – 3.5 million AIDS-related deaths occurred around the world that year. The most economically active age group is affected: 15-49 years.
- Globally, women constitute just under half of the adults with HIV/AIDS, but in sub-Saharan Africa more than 55% of infected adults are women; young women are two to four times more likely to be infected than young men. In South and South-East Asia, 60% of young people infected are female.
- Loss of the most economically active members of rural households means loss of salaries and heavy labor for agriculture. Consequently many households become increasingly dependent on natural resources – hunting, fishing and charcoal-making have increased in many areas.
- Women usually care for the sick, who may be ill from side-effects of AIDS for a long time before dying. This is very time-consuming and morale-sapping. Grandmothers are often left raising many orphans.
- AIDS reduces women's capacity for sound resource stewardship: they have less time because of caring for the sick; women champions of community conservation are being lost; and social structures for resource management may break down (for example, women's resource user groups).
- Women's indigenous knowledge to manage resources has evolved over generations, handed down from mother to daughter. When women of the middle generation in a household die, that knowledge of local resource management may die with her, and may not be passed on to her daughters.
- In some countries and societies women cannot inherit land. If the male head of a household dies first, his wife and children often lose land and resources. Women may be forced into prostitution to support their children, increasing their risk of contracting HIV or passing it on.
- Medicinal plants are heavily used to treat side-effects of AIDS such as diarrhea and pneumonia; women increasingly have to harvest plants unsustainably and go farther afield to collect them.
- Women who work for natural resource organizations (government and NGOs) have increased absenteeism as they spend time caring for the ill, or are sick themselves. AIDS affects their productivity and work morale.

HIV/AIDS is having ever-increasing impacts on biodiversity conservation and natural resources by reducing human capacity for conservation and resource management; increasing unsustainable use of resources; and causing changes in land-use. Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly hard hit, but the pandemic is spreading fast in South and South-East Asia, Eastern Europe, East Asia, the Pacific, and the Caribbean. Land and resource degradation in turn result in ever-increasing poverty as the long-term basis for rural livelihoods is eroded. With economic poverty and inadequate or no access to HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, HIV spreads fast. Full-blown AIDS develops quickly in poor dietary and sanitary conditions where there is inadequate medication.

Strong gender linkages accelerate the vicious cycle of HIV/AIDS, land and natural resource degradation, and poverty. Women are the backbone of most rural households in developing countries, and important stewards of many natural resources.

⁽¹⁾ AIDS, or Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, is the late stage of infection caused by Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).



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FURTHER INFORMATION ON THIS TOPIC CAN BE FOUND AT:

Africa Biodiversity Collaborative Group
www.abcg.org

FAO
www.fao.org/hiv-aids/links/index_en.htm

Health Economic & HIV/AIDS Research
Division, University of KwaZulu-Natal
www.nu.ac.za/heard

UNAIDS
www.unaids.org

SOURCES:

Africa Biodiversity Collaborative Group
(ABCG).
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Geneva, Switzerland. 2003.

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In many African societies women are responsible for use of key resources such as firewood, water, medicinal plants, and wild foods. They use these resources to feed and educate their families and keep them healthy. When women develop AIDS they can no longer play this role, and the whole household suffers. Women are usually the main care-givers for AIDS orphans and the sick, and often bear responsibility for finding alternative household incomes when AIDS strikes. This includes prostitution, which in turn increases the spread of HIV, especially if they cannot negotiate safe sex. HIV/AIDS is placing huge and disproportionate burdens on women, and hence on resource use, rural livelihoods and the environment.

WHY GENDER MAKES THE DIFFERENCE IN HIV/AIDS AND ENVIRONMENT

The conservation sector has started developing ways to reduce impacts of HIV/AIDS on the environment by trying to maintain capacity, reducing unsustainable resource use, and addressing land-use changes. These approaches need to integrate gender to be more effective. Approaches include:

- Integrating community health awareness including HIV/AIDS in community natural resource projects in remote areas with poor healthcare access (by bringing in a health partner or recruiting health staff). This can include family planning services that benefit women and slow population pressure on resources.
- Training and mentoring orphaned girls and boys in traditional gender-specific resource management, to preserve indigenous knowledge and help ensure livelihood security.
- Encouraging the adoption of institutional policies and procedures on AIDS for natural resource management institutions. This helps protect both conservation staff and communities.
- Developing alternatives to unsustainable use of natural resources in community-based projects: for example improve harvesting of medicinal plants and extraction of active ingredients to make use more efficient; promote cultivation where possible. Where logging for coffins is destroying forests, promote alternative materials for coffins such as reed mats.
- Working with the agricultural sector to promote alternatives to heavy labor so that old, young, and female headed households can continue to farm, reducing dependence on natural resources.
- Promoting natural resource based enterprises with low labor and time inputs to improve livelihoods of AIDS-affected households, such as bee-keeping, fruit juice production, and agroforestry.
- Advocating policy reform in countries and cultures where women cannot inherit land.
- Encouraging men to make wills to protect rights of spouses to land, resources and property.
- Providing HIV/AIDS awareness, mitigation, and treatment to protected area and community project staff who are based away from their families and are often especially at risk of contracting HIV through having sex with other partners. If they are already infected they may introduce the disease to remote communities. Reduce this risk by not separating men from spouses (e.g. by having mobile patrols from a central base where families can be accommodated).
- Supporting women's leadership in resource management, and strengthen their capacity for resource management (for example by promoting institutions to support women).
- Promoting girls' education, combined with natural resource management training and HIV/AIDS awareness.
- Sponsoring women champions of natural resource management and HIV/AIDS prevention.
- Encouraging small grants to women and AIDS orphans and technical assistance for conservation-based enterprise development to provide opportunities.

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