An Agrarian Portrait of HIV

Summer Starling
Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University, New York, NY

Abstract

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An often-unnoticed face of HIV in Tanzania is distinctly agrarian. For farming communities in the Arusha area of Tanzania, the connection between food security and HIV is hard to ignore.

About 8 out of 100 people in Tanzania are living with the virus. Livelihoods claimed by the HIV epidemic are increasingly young men and women whose families depend on their labor on family-run gardens and farms. In the last ten years, young people have begun migrating from their rural communities to urban centers. This trend, combined with HIV infection rates among the young, have a crippling effect on food security in the isolated hills outside Arusha. Whole communities struggle with drops in local food production, loss of market opportunities, and high imported food costs.

Women comprise the majority of Tanzanian food producers in rural settings – roughly 90% of women in Arusha district engage in subsistence farming and market activities every day. As the HIV epidemic reaches more and more rural areas, women bear newer roles as farmers, breadwinners, and caretakers to those family or community members with HIV.

Global Service Corps (GSC) is a San Francisco-based non-profit that facilitates HIV education workshops and bio-intensive agriculture trainings for people in the Arusha area, making the critical connection between HIV prevention and sustainable farming. Trainings stress a multi-generational, family-centered approach to HIV prevention, and include discussions around sexual decision-making, negotiation, and condom use. Most recently, GSC has launched HIV-prevention day camps for secondary school students to help them stay HIV-free.

Bio-intensive agriculture (BIA) trainings instruct on sack-gardening, crop rotation, companion planting, and other labor-saving farming techniques. These trainings also emphasize family nutrition and sustained crop yield.

Numbers of people in the Arusha community receiving both BIA and HIV trainings are on the rise. Embracing an ecological perspective in the fight against HIV and food insecurity, Global Service Corps’ operations set a sustainable example for integrating disciplines on the ground for improved quality of life.

Keywords: Tanzania, HIV/AIDS, agrarian, food security.
Women observe a condom demonstration at a community HIV training. Condom use has growing cultural acceptance among younger women in Tanzania, both as a way to prevent HIV and as a way to delay or plan pregnancies. Family planning is unilaterally embraced by the international community as the best means of ensuring adequate nutrition in resource-poor and subsistence farming settings.
Training participant with her child. Because nearly 90% of women in the Arusha district farm or sell produce at market to support their families every day, their health is critical to the health of the larger population. The HIV status of a female head-of-household is the largest determining factor in the health of her family. Women attending trainings made considerable adjustments in their schedules to attend session.
The child of an HIV training participant quietly observing class. Children feel the impacts of food insecurity first, especially in large families. Traditionally, having many children was a way for families to safeguard against hunger and malnutrition, as children would help cultivate family food plots exclusively for family and community consumption. But in the last ten years, young adults have begun migrating to large urban centers at high rates. Women have largely taken up agrarian and market roles to feed their families, often traveling long distances with heavy loads.
An HIV-positive mother brings her baby to a training to learn about how to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission. Preventing mother-to-child transmission of the virus is a crucial front in breaking the cycle of HIV. In 2004, the Tanzanian government unrolled new initiatives for HIV testing during prenatal care, as well as efforts to educate HIV-positive expectant mothers about delivery options to minimize transmission. Poorer, rural women are still in need of many of these new options.
A Tengeru farmer showcases his bio-intensive permaculture plot. Traditional farming practices among Tanzanian farmers were once adequate to support their families at the much lower population levels of generations previously. But both overpopulation and soil devastation have resulted in poorer nutrition and decreased yields. Bio-intensive agriculture trainings stress using materials ready at hand, incorporating space-efficient rotation methods and crop diversity, which replenish soils.
A woman sells vegetables at the weekly Tengeru market. Market producers and sellers are overwhelmingly women from rural areas. With available farming labor in decline as younger generations migrate from their rural birthplaces to city centers, women stand to benefit the most from bio-intensive farming techniques.
Global Service Corps trainer Evans Javesson demonstrates how to maintain a sack garden, which conserves space and energy for subsistence farmers. Especially for families caring for a member with HIV, making the most our of available materials and conversing space and time are critical. At Global Service Corps’ BIA trainings, women and men participants are about equally represented.
A Masai man discusses how HIV has affected his rural community. He described how many of his village's young men have migrated to urban areas only to return infected with HIV. Masai communities depend almost exclusively on the young men from their tribes to tend cattle, hunt, and otherwise provide food for their families. The HIV epidemic has devastated this resource pool in many indigenous communities. As the virus claims more and more young men, food scarcity and insecurity pose a true threat.
A village mama prepares an afternoon meal. With many young men either absent from their tribal birthplaces, or living with a stigmatized HIV virus, the roles of women have increased to even more realms. Once viewed only as men’s work, farming and land management are shifting into the realm of women’s responsibility, in addition to traditional domestic duties.
Christine, an HIV Day Camp 2008 participant. HIV rates in Tanzania are highest among young persons aged 18-24. There has been a greatly recognized need among international aid and activist groups for HIV prevention education to begin in primary schools. While there are growing numbers of education professional in Tanzania getting behind this idea, sexually transmitted infections remain a taboo topic for many administrators in the country. HIV day camps were conducted by GSC during summer break, and included condom demonstrations and situational role plays for safer sex.
Students from Uraki Secondary School in Usa celebrate and perform at the graduation from HIV Day Camp 2008. Anatomy and reproduction, HIV prevention skills, and decision-making were all skills taught at HIV camp. Educating and empowering young girls around HIV and protection is viewed as the most effective vehicle to reducing HIV rates for the whole of Tanzania. As in many developing country settings, negotiating safer sex is often challenged by power discrepancies and women’s lower status in society. Given women’s emerging roles as farmers and food marketers, turning the tide of their HIV infection rates is a crucial national endeavor for the health of all.
Rachel, right, and her great grandmother laugh at a break during HIV training. Both women expressed the need for HIV prevention to be “a family concern.” Hearing this ethic expressed in an unabashed manner, free of stigma around the topic of HIV, is a hopeful indicator of the future of all Tanzanians.