

HIV/AIDS, disasters and food security: the Baphalali Swaziland Red Cross Society pilot project

Swaziland is a small, southern African kingdom which shares borders with Mozambique and South Africa. Most of its population relies on subsistence farming. Since 2002, Swaziland has been affected by recurring droughts. The country also suffers from one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection, estimated at 33 per cent. Almost half the population lives below the poverty line of US\$ 2 a day.

All these factors contribute to households being vulnerable to food insecurity. Recurrent droughts mean that people are forced to sell valuable assets in order to cope. However, poverty levels are such that selling possessions, particularly tools such as farming implements, can result in destitution. The interaction between HIV/AIDS and food security is complex and, for the poor, can mean:

- poor access to HIV/AIDS information;
- households having a higher dependency ratio, with a lower number of healthy adults. An ailing individual is less productive. For example, if farmers are ill, they cannot work on their fields and therefore produce less. At the same time, they are a greater burden on their families, who have to spend more money on medicine and care for them. When a person contracts HIV/AIDS, the process of depletion of household assets takes place over an extended period of time and increases the families' vulnerability to problems and misfortunes;
- resorting to risky practices in order to secure access to food, such as prostitution, thus running the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS;
- less access to relatives living in urban areas and abroad, who help poorer members of their family with gifts in cash or in kind. The poor in rural areas tend to receive smaller gifts less frequently than better-off households;
- less access to regular employment, pensions, property and medical services;
- less access to nutritious food than better-off households – a key factor in prolonging the lives of infected individuals; and
- having a poorer health and nutrition status.



Droughts decrease the ability of people to cope with the burden of HIV/AIDS.

As a result of commitments made by African National Societies at the 2000 Pan African Conference, the Baphalali Swaziland Red Cross Society (BSRCS) decided to implement a food security pilot project. This project is implemented through a tripartite agreement between the Finnish Red Cross, the BSRCS and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The pilot project has a four-year time frame.

The intervention

The project's main aim is to link food security with disaster mitigation and HIV/AIDS prevention and management. The project was implemented in three areas of Swaziland: Sigombeni, Mahhashinni and Maphungwane. A number of expected outputs were elaborated at the start of the project. These included:

- improving farming methods for households in the Sigombeni clinic catchment area;
- establishing income-generating activities for HIV/AIDS-affected households in Sigombeni;
- establishing communal poultry and cotton growing gardening projects in Mahhashinni; and
- establishing communal fishery and garden projects in Maphungwane.

The project targets 430 vulnerable households (approximately 3,440 people). The target population is responsible for managing the activities. Groups from the various communities have agreed on constitutions and have set up committees which meet to discuss any issues that may arise. Technical support to the project is provided through a food security specialist recruited by the BSRCs and the Ministry of Agriculture.

Positive impacts

A mid-term evaluation stated that it was too early to determine major impact. However, based on feedback from the communities and key personnel, there is evidence of impact on the target population's ability to:

- produce food for their own consumption;
- donate food to other vulnerable people in the community; and
- raise income for other basic necessities such as school fees.

Some projects are more advanced than others. For example, members of the poultry project are able to stock chicks themselves, share dividends and save reserves for expansion. But none of the projects are as yet sustainable, although the evaluation team noted that this was to be expected at this stage of the projects.

Lessons learned

- There is a need to facilitate integrated programming. For example, in order to ensure sustainability, many of the projects require reliable access to sufficient water. A study of how best to provide such access should be undertaken and technical support by the water and sanitation professionals should be provided.
- Although training of communities has taken place, the mid-term evaluation highlights the importance of continuing to build the capacity of participating communities and beneficiaries by providing relevant and tailor-made training in both professional and management skills.
- The mid-term evaluation also recommends increasing the professional and management capacity of the BSRCs site officers in agriculture, agro-forestry, fish farming, project management, planning and reporting.

- One of the major issues faced by the project has been the targeting of beneficiaries. The mid-term evaluation stresses the need to revisit this and suggests that the BSRC develop and introduce clear and transparent selection criteria.
- Other aspects identified as important in order to improve technical support to the project are further developing the partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and continuing to work with the University of Swaziland.
- It is essential to maintain the support of local leaders in the communities by keeping them regularly informed of the project's progress.
- Finally, the mid-term evaluation emphasizes the need to strengthen the current analysis and recording procedures in order to ensure the utilization and replication of best practices.



While recognising the need for food distributions in the short term, the BSRCs pilot project attempts to reduce vulnerability to disasters.

Conclusion

The BSRCs food security pilot project has already demonstrated a positive impact on targeted communities through improving production, consumption and income levels. It is, however, important that the recommendations of the mid-term evaluation are implemented in order to develop further the project's sustainability. The project can help other southern African Red Cross Societies by acting as a learning ground. However, to achieve this, better use of the BSRCs's experience must be made by National Societies in the region.

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