



HIV/AIDS and the environment: linkages, impacts and mitigation

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is having devastating and tragic social, economic and political impacts. In 2003 there were almost 38 million people around the world living with HIV/AIDS, of whom 25 million were in Africa. The same year there were around 5 million new HIV infections globally, and 3 million AIDS related deaths (UNAIDS 2004).

There are very close linkages between HIV/AIDS, rural livelihoods, human capacity and the environment. World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and its partners in Africa are grappling with the impacts including:

- **overuse of natural resources** including medicinal plants to treat AIDS side effects; timber for coffins; wildlife for food and wood for charcoal-making as alternative livelihood sources
- **changes in land use** as agricultural practices change with falling capacity for heavy labor
- **changes in access to resources and land** especially when widows and orphans cannot inherit land
- **loss of traditional knowledge** of sustainable land and resource management practices
- **loss of human capacity** for natural resource management in government, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, communities, donor organizations, and private sector
- **increased vulnerability of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM)** programs as communities lose leadership and capacity, and HIV/AIDS issues take priority
- **diversion of conservation funds** for HIV/AIDS related costs.

The risk of **future insecurity** is a major concern: as AIDS orphans grow up they often have little traditional knowledge, weak attachment to land and resources, and poor education. The risk of civil unrest is high, with associated impacts on the environment.

WWF, the Africa Biodiversity Collaborative Group and other partners have identified the above HIV/AIDS-environment linkages and a range of coping strategies (www.abcg.org). Coping strategies include:

- **Development of institutional HIV/AIDS policies and strategies** to help both employers and employees in government parks and wildlife departments, NGOs, training institutions, donor agencies, and private sector companies.
- **Adapting conservation training programs** such as the development of special HIV/AIDS modules at the Southern African Wildlife College.
- **Working with local communities to find alternatives to unsustainable resource use and to develop natural resource-based micro-enterprises**, e.g. improved management of medicinal plants, development of micro-enterprises with low labor requirements to relieve environmental pressures and support AIDS-affected communities.

- **Promoting HIV prevention and awareness in community partners:** conservation organizations work with communities in remote areas with poor access to health services; they can facilitate HIV prevention and awareness by bringing health sector partners to the area, and mainstreaming HIV/AIDS into environmental awareness programs.

WWF is mainstreaming HIV/AIDS into several of its community based conservation programs in sub-Saharan Africa and a few next-wave countries, and has developed HIV/AIDS policies in some of its offices and programs. ABCG has been actively sharing lessons learned and promoting a multi-sectoral HIV/AIDS approach by conservationists. We sponsored a resolution on HIV/AIDS and Conservation at the World Conservation Congress in Bangkok in 2004.

The two organizations are now poised to take further action to enhance our understanding of short-and long term impacts, and to promote mitigating measures to relieve impacts. We are actively fundraising for the following future activities:

- **Conducting socio-economic and biological research** to quantify the impacts of HIV/AIDS on natural resource use, rural livelihoods, and conservation organizations, and to identify further innovative coping approaches.
- **Producing a practical manual** specifically designed for conservation organizations on AIDS prevention and mitigation.
- **Convening national workshops** in countries of high HIV prevalence for conservation and health organizations that cover impacts and best practices and to forge new partnerships.
- **Working with partners on AIDS institutional policy and strategy development** with inputs from health and labor specialists
- **Supporting natural resource training institutions** to better integrate HIV/AIDS into their curricula, and to develop appropriate policies and practices to reduce spread of HIV through their organizations.
- **Expanding an active network of health and environment practitioners** who will benefit from improved understanding of best practices and sharing of experiences through a list serv, materials, a video, talks to policy makers, and an expanded website.
- **Establishing a small grants program and demonstration projects** for community organizations, medicinal plant user groups, and policy advocates to implement best practices.

The work will involve partnerships with organizations from the conservation, health, labor, development and agricultural sectors, and collaboration with government departments, NGOs, businesses, communities, donors and academic institutions. Some initiatives will run in parallel with family planning activities in WWF's Population, Health, Gender and Environment Program.

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