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**SOUTHERN AFRICA: New thinking needed on impact of HIV/AIDS on agriculture**


Photo: USAID

There has been a shift from cultivating maize to roots and tubers

JOHANNESBURG, 15 March 2005 (PlusNews) - The impact of HIV/AIDS on agriculture in Southern Africa is now well recognised. But a new report is calling for a rethink of current views on the effects of the epidemic and more concrete and specific regional responses.

Despite current thinking on the effects of the epidemic on farming, which has mainly been based on qualitative methods, the study found that most

quantitative household-level studies gave "a less catastrophic assessment of the impacts of rising AIDS-related mortality on the agricultural sector".

According to the report, to be presented next month at an international conference on 'HIV/AIDS and Food and Nutrition Security' in South Africa, it has been generally accepted that the loss of productive family members would have an adverse impact on household agricultural production.

However, prime age mortality affected households differently, as some were able to adjust to the shift in availability of resources through sharecropping arrangements, substituting hired labour for family, and reducing the amount of land cultivated.

The recent shift by countries in the region from cultivating maize to roots and tubers has led to growing speculation that HIV/AIDS was responsible for these changes. Although it was possible that AIDS had contributed to the move, the report noted that major changes in agricultural policy were largely behind it.

"Maize marketing policies in Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe were either eliminated or scaled back significantly, starting in the early 1990s, as part of economy-wide structural adjustment programmes. These policy changes clearly reduced the financial profitability of growing maize ... and has shifted cropping incentives toward other food crops, especially those relatively unresponsive to fertilizer application, such as cassava," it noted.

As a result, "the evidence is mixed as to how AIDS is affecting agricultural systems and cropping patterns," the report added.

Nevertheless, the researchers identified three emerging trends that could help governments come up with responses based on localised farming systems, the suitability of alternative crops, and household characteristics.

"As the supply of skilled and semi-skilled labour becomes relatively constrained as the disease progresses, the costs of skilled labour in the (mostly non-agricultural) formal sector is likely to rise", causing a decline

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in the competitiveness of knowledge-intensive activities both in agriculture and non-agriculture. The authors called for steps to accelerate skills training in the sector.

Secondly, mortality among rural households could cause a reversed migration of unskilled labour from urban to rural areas, to make up for the loss of agricultural labour caused by AIDS. This would enable rural households and communities to preserve existing farming systems, or slow the transition to less labour-intensive ones.

Agricultural systems were likely to become less capital-intensive in hard-hit areas, exacerbating income inequalities as poor households sold off assets and land to those who could afford to buy, the paper pointed out.

Agricultural policy could contribute to slowing the spread of HIV/AIDS through poverty reduction; living standards could be raised through productivity-enhancing investments in agricultural technology, improved crop marketing systems, basic education, infrastructure and governance, to help communities withstand the social and economic stresses caused by the disease, the report concluded.

To access the report: [www.aec.msu.edu](http://www.aec.msu.edu) 

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