

THE CHALLENGE OF HIV/AIDS IN THE FISHERIES SECTOR IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Global overview of HIV/AIDS in the fisheries sector

People in the fisheries sector in developing countries are among those at highest risk to HIV and AIDS. Global data suggest that fisherfolk, including fishers, their families, fish processors and traders, are among high risk groups with infection rates that are five to ten times higher than in agricultural communities in the same areas.

Geographically, the spread of HIV/AIDS in the fisheries sector mirrors the spread in the general population, with sub-Saharan Africa showing the highest incidence. Importantly, however, absolute numbers of HIV positive fisherfolk are very high in Asia due to large fishing populations, and case studies from Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia suggest that here, too, fisherfolk are among the high risk groups.

Vulnerability of fisherfolk to HIV/AIDS

Drawing on case studies from around Africa, the 2006 International Workshop on Fisheries and HIV/AIDS identified the following main factors of vulnerability among fisherfolk:

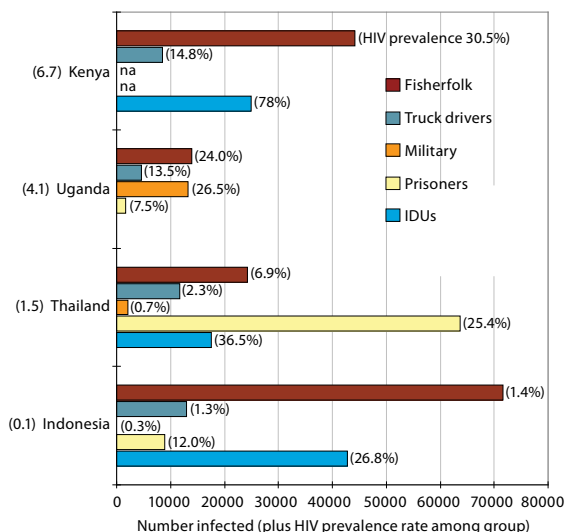


Figure 1. Estimated HIV prevalence (%) and numbers infected (bars) among sub-populations (Kissling *et al.* 2005).

- Demographic structure with high rates of single men in sexually active age groups.
- High rates of mobility and migration.
- Generally poor health and hygiene status in fishing camps and among mobile populations interacting with these communities.

- Easy availability of cash income on a regular basis without tangible investment or savings opportunities.
- Poverty and gender inequality that marginalize women in commercial transactions, making them more vulnerable to sexually exploitative relations.
- Poor health service infrastructure, condom availability and access to specialized centres where voluntary testing is available.
- Culture of risk taking and perception of low social status among many fishermen. (WorldFish Center 2006.)

Working in West and Central Africa, the Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme (SFLP) of the FAO identified further institutional constraints arising from the omission of the fisheries sector from national HIV/AIDS strategies as well as from local government services and NGO initiatives. As a result, even basic health technologies and HIV/AIDS messages are not commonly available in fishing communities.

Implications for the future of fisheries

The implications of the epidemic for the future of fisheries are far reaching. The small-scale fisheries sector, where over 90 percent of the world's fishers operate and over 60 percent of the world's capture fisheries production occurs, is facing the risk of losing valuable human resources, knowledge and experience without having the capacity to replace these through formal processes. As part of this, the substantial investments in improving management of fisheries resources which

have been made by governments throughout the developing world are at risk as the value of long-term planning and of stewardship of natural resources is less compelling when life expectancy declines and communities disintegrate. The economic and social costs to developing countries have not been specifically quantified, but they are likely to be substantial at all levels. Allison and Seeley (2004) differentiate between impacts in the fisheries sector at four levels (see Figure 2), from the individual to the resource base. These include declining human development, economic inefficiency, reduced management capacity and weakened conditions for sustainable fisheries. The overall economic impact of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa has been estimated at one percent to 1.5 percent of GDP. This cost is likely to be greater in highly affected sectors such as fisheries.

Responding to the challenge

Governments in developing countries and international organizations increasingly recognize the importance of HIV/AIDS as a development challenge in the fisheries sector. In several countries, including Uganda and Malawi, national policies and strategies specifically targeted at fisherfolk have been developed. FAO's SFLP reports institutional impact of their work in several West and Central African countries (Benin, Cameroon, Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, and Republic of Congo). National HIV/AIDS plans in these countries now include fishing communities, fisheries departments are working more closely with HIV/

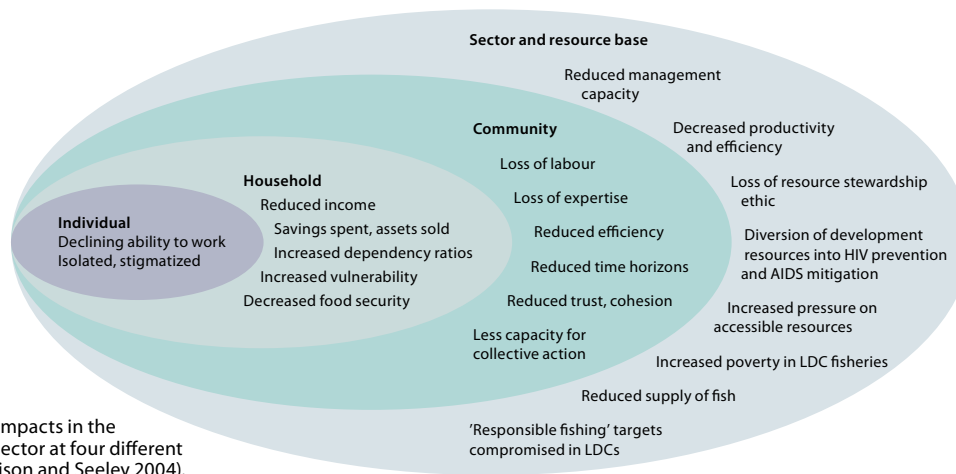


Figure 2. Impacts in the fisheries sector at four different levels (Allison and Seeley 2004).

AIDS and livelihood support programs, and NGOs and other health service providers are increasingly targeting fishing communities.

Regional economic blocks such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC) and the South Pacific Commission (SPC) are supporting wider regional HIV/AIDS programs that target the fisheries sector. A current program by the WorldFish Center and FAO, with support from Sweden and Norway, seeks to identify viable investment opportunities that can reduce known risk factors among fisherfolk. For example, the program supports innovations among fish traders and fisher associations to improve business relations along fish marketing chains and develops more effective approaches by NGOs and community organizations to deliver HIV/AIDS services

to fishing communities and mobile fish traders.

A critical institutional challenge is to foster partnerships between fisheries management institutions and health sector agencies. In most cases, fishing communities are among the most marginalized in terms of health service entitlements and actual service delivery by governments or civil society organizations. While institutional incentives for cross-sectoral collaboration are often lacking, opportunities are increasing through the decentralization of government functions, health service reforms and stronger community participation in fisheries management. Practical guidelines and workable models are now urgently required for integrating HIV/AIDS objectives into local fisheries management plans.

There is need to show the relevance and role of the fisheries sector in both the transmission

of HIV/AIDS and the fight against it, and for the inclusion of specific aspects in the diagnosis and formulation of community action planning. This includes targeting differentiated groups of fisherfolk (accounting for the differences between industrial and artisanal fisheries), developing partnerships to strengthen the capacity of agencies working on HIV/AIDS to understand the specificities of fisherfolk, and supporting fisheries organizations to prioritize HIV/AIDS objectives in their plans and strategies.

Multi-sectoral and multi-level approaches are required that combine regional and national policies with community responses. SFLP findings further emphasize the importance of livelihood

support and diversification programs to complement health sector and educational interventions at community level. Promotion of small-scale enterprise and non-fisheries based income options through strengthening of technical and financial services can be targeted at highly vulnerable groups such as youth and women and can help reduce vulnerability and bring about behaviour change. SFLP's work with communities in Benin and the Republic of Congo to develop and implement Community Action Plans to combat HIV and AIDS (*Plans d'Actions Communautaires de Lutte Contre le VIH & Sida - PACLS*) has shown positive socio-economic results that should be considered for wider dissemination.

References

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