

ZIMBABWE: Five year plan to battle HIV/AIDS on farms launched

HARARE, 16 November (IRIN) - Zimbabwe's government is launching a five-year plan to combat HIV/AIDS in the agricultural sector after realising the impact of the pandemic on farming.

The initiative, 'Zimbabwe Agricultural Sector Strategy on HIV and AIDS' - coordinated by the agriculture ministry, with support by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) - is seeking to mobilise financial and human resources to halt the spread of the disease on farms, reduce stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS, fight gender inequality and domestic violence, and facilitate treatment for infected people.

The agriculture ministry, which concedes that it has lacked a clear policy on HIV/AIDS, intends to establish an agricultural management information system to monitor various issues related to health and service delivery, and accurately assess the cost of HIV/AIDS to farming communities and the extent to which farm workers and agricultural-sector employees are vulnerable to the disease.

According to the Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey, 18.1 percent of sexually active adult people in a population of about 11.5 million are infected with HIV - the sixth highest prevalence in the world.

"HIV and AIDS is affecting personnel from the agricultural sub-sectors, that is, the ministry of agriculture and its departments, the parastatals under the ministry, private-sector providers, the farming community and agri-business. Therefore, the integrity of the sector should be protected against the impact of HIV and AIDS. In the absence of a strategy, the agricultural-sector response to HIV and AIDS has been erratic and uncoordinated," the ministry said in a statement.

Vulnerability in the agriculture sector was heightened by factors such as worker migrations during harvests, which led to long periods away from their families when they often stayed at centres that "have been identified as hotspots for HIV infection".

"The Ministry of Agriculture and its departments, parastatals and commercial farms have experienced an increase in absenteeism of staff due to illness, attendance of funerals and the need to care for the sick," the ministry commented.

More disturbingly, there has been a "decline in crop varieties, and changes in cropping patterns, as high labour-demanding cash crops may be abandoned", with subsistence farmers being forced to sell cattle and donkeys used for draught power to meet care and treatment expenses.

Around 70 percent of the population depends on agriculture, which provides more than 60 percent of the raw materials used in the manufacturing sector and contributes up to 45 percent of the country's exports.

Low literacy levels in farming communities, caused by a shortage of farm schools, made it difficult to communicate anti-AIDS messages effectively, while "poor housing conditions on commercial farms and in research station compounds result in overcrowding and a breakdown of social norms, ... [which] encourages risky sexual behaviour."

Government's response to HIV/AIDS in the sector has been limited to appointing people to a few positions in the agriculture ministry's headquarters in the capital, Harare, and provincial offices, who merely hand out condoms and basic information without any clear strategy.

The fight against HIV/AIDS in agriculture has been carried out mainly by community-based nongovernmental organisations, farmers' unions and HIV/AIDS service organisations, some of whom have established nutrition and herbal gardens, and community fields for infected and affected people.

Gift Muti, deputy secretary-general of the General Agricultural and Plantation Workers Union (GAPWUZ), which represents some of Zimbabwe's 400,000 farm workers, welcomed the "positive" initiative, but cited poverty as one of the main reasons for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

"From even before independence [in 1980], farm workers have tended to be poorly paid and live in abject poverty. This makes it easy for them to be infected because women are easily forced into prostitution, while sex is the main source of entertainment, since farm owners only provide them with beer halls," Muti told IRIN.

Muti, whose poorly funded organisation distributes food to sick farm workers, said it was common for girls younger than 18 years to marry,

while divorce and extra-marital affairs were run of the mill among farm workers.

Since the government launched its fast-track land reform programme in 2000, in which farmland was redistributed from white farmers to landless blacks, Zimbabwe's economy has gone into freefall. An annual inflation rate hovering around 1,000 percent has seen unemployment rise above 70 percent, while shortages of foreign currency have caused food, fuel and electricity to become scarce commodities.