

# The African Forum: An integrated response to the dual epidemics of HIV/AIDS and food insecurity

Lusaka, Zambia, May 2006

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## “When spiders unite, they can tie down a lion.”

The spirit and spark of this African aphorism represents the overall spirit of the Africa Forum 2006: An Integrated Response to the Dual Epidemics of HIV/AIDS and Food Insecurity that took place May 8–12, 2006, in Lusaka, Zambia. One of the first events of its kind, the Forum assembled 220 delegates from 20 countries for a practitioner-led, non-academic conference. Its purpose was to showcase new ideas on integrated food and nutrition security and HIV/AIDS programs from affected areas of Africa. Following the World Health Organization Consultation (April 10–13, 2005), and the International Food Policy Research Institute Conference on HIV/AIDS and Food and Nutrition Security (April 14–16, 2005), Project Concern International (PCI) became aware of the escalating

demand to exchange experiences from the perspective of field practitioners. The event in Lusaka was organized with the goal of providing a platform to build relationships and enable collaborative learning and to improve and expand service delivery at the community and household level. Thus, the Forum allowed and encouraged participants to share their expertise with one another. It enabled them to discover practical solutions for improving food and livelihood security in their own communities. Over the five days of the conference, moreover, participants identified the priorities and changes needed at all levels in order to make the concept of integrated programming a reality.

### **Food security is a central issue in Africa and in the fight against HIV/AIDS**

According to World Food Programme projections, 13.8 million people will need access to HIV/AIDS care by 2008, and of

those, almost half of them (6.4 million) will need some form of nutritional support. Of the 6.6 million also needing access to antiretroviral therapy, approximately one million will need direct food aid. For those hearing the projections in Lusaka, this posed a tremendous challenge as they were only too fully aware that people in countries most affected by HIV/AIDS also suffer from hunger. In these countries, the sectors of nutrition, food security, and agriculture are often disconnected from one another, not to mention the added fragmentation of HIV/AIDS and livelihood interventions. The message emphasized during the Forum was that a pathway toward integration, i.e. focusing on both epidemics, is more important now than ever before. Readers of the Magazine will appreciate how important a quality diet and adequate nourishment are for bolstering immune systems. Strengthening nutrition and health interventions will help to support anti-retroviral treatment adherence and mitigate the impact of the illness and resultant deaths on families by protecting assets and

options. In short, the central principle that the Forum sought to advance was that through the strategic use of resources, food and nutrition security and HIV infection can be addressed in ways that foster improved health and livelihoods outcomes for those infected (harboring the virus) and those affected (living in the same household or communities).

Participants in the Africa Forum 2006 were a unique group of individuals, coming from diverse disciplines and vocations: small-scale farming, agribusiness, HIV care

compelling experiences of the Forum.

### The round of key note speakers

The week commenced with a welcoming reception and opening remarks delivered by Zambia's Minister of Community Development and Social Services, Mr. Steven Manjata, and U.S. Defense Attaché, Lt. Col. David Dougherty. The speakers highlighted the fact that the dual epidemics of HIV/AIDS and food and nutrition insecurity are putting entire generations in Africa at risk. They combine to

– but also manage to perform your life-saving work with conviction, compassion and humility, day in and day out.”

Reflections to set the context of the week were presented on the first day of the event by Dr Stuart Gillespie, co-founder and Director of RENEWAL (Regional Network on HIV/AIDS, Rural Livelihoods and Food Security) and Ms. Kate Greenaway, former HIV/AIDS Coordinator for C-SAFE (Consortium for Southern Africa Food Security Emergency). Dr Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the UN Millennium Project and Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, also made an address by video conference. “HIV/AIDS, nutrition and food security,” he stated, “are not only interlinked, they are the components of the ‘perfect storm’ that is underway right now in Africa.” These professionals represent the most thorough and innovative thinking in devising policy and program responses to the hunger and food insecurity aspects of the epidemic. The Forum then took off with what participants had come for, namely unique and powerful opportunities for hands-on learning through site visits, skills-building sessions, interactive discussions, presentations, and other activities.

### The diversity of formats on the Forum program

The Forum was not a typical, PowerPoint presentation driven conference. Throughout the week, participants were expected to be both learners and contributors/teachers. This meant that each participant had to present in one form or another. Participants learned by getting their hands dirty, not only in a figurative, but often in a literal sense; for example, by digging gardens. Other activities



Taste and touch session

and treatment, nutrition programs, care of orphans and vulnerable children, food security and livelihoods programming, and other areas. All of these relate directly to the themes of the Forum. At least half of the participants were women, and numerous delegates were, themselves, people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA). “It was a diverse group with a common interest, using different approaches to address food and nutrition insecurity and HIV/AIDS,” one participant described. “Discussing, debating and struggling to answer tough questions with Africans from different countries and organizations,” was identified as one of the most

impact negatively on the economic, social, and political development of many countries in the region. Lt. Col. Dougherty went on to recognize the people in attendance as constituting the “front line” in the fight against food and nutrition insecurity in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He stated: “You and your colleagues are the public health experts, the medical technicians, the agriculture extensionists, and the project implementers who grapple with the enormity of these life and death issues everyday, under often difficult circumstances and with limited resources. And yet somehow you and your colleagues not only persevere

included: visiting nearby communities, dancing with orphans, vulnerable children and their caretakers, and learning from widows how to grow mushrooms and rear quail to obtain household food and increased personal income.

Projects and training opportunities emphasizing cost-effective, replicable interventions that could be tailored for expanded use in various African settings were showcased. An illustrative list of some of the topics covered is shown in the **Table**.

In total, 17 presentation slots were

participants to observe and experience project activities, in addition to discussing and exchanging ideas. As one participant described, one of the best site visits and overall forum activities was, “learning how people grow food for themselves and others, as well as for economic viability.”

**Skill-building sessions for staff in the field**

Skill-building sessions emphasized building capacity around integrated program approaches that have demonstrated success. These sessions were tailor-made for the field

**Participatory responsibilities of the participants**

The week’s poster session exhibit evolved into a popular ‘Show-and-Tell’ session in which delegates had the opportunity to present individual projects. One display featured foods, herbs, and plants common to East Africa and showed pictures of various sites implementing permaculture methods, an ecologically friendly and self-sustaining system of agriculture. Each participant also took part in a ‘taste and touch’ session where they prepared a wide variety of indigenous food recipes to diversify diet and increase nutrient availability for PLHA. A variety of unique and creative opportunities for self-expression were provided to engage participants and facilitate interaction, such as collective painting of a mural depicting an African market scene abundant with healthy food and livestock.

Each participant was asked to prepare an individual action plan, describing how he or she would apply what they learned at the Forum to their own work. Participants were also asked to describe how they would support the ‘call to action’ that had been developed during the week. The Africa Forum 2006 Declaration describes changes that need to happen in order to make integrating food and nutrition security and HIV/AIDS programming a reality.

**Examining the role of research**

The Africa Forum 2006 demonstrated that much is currently going on as implementers grapple with the dual epidemics, trying to integrate food security efforts and the response to HIV/AIDS. Practitioners have a lot to share about the specific challenges they face in trying to make integrated program-

**Table:** Selective topics related to food security programming for the participants of the African Forum

- Never-ending food with permaculture
- Junior farmer field schools
- Soybean processing and utilization
- Infant and young child feeding in the context of HIV/AIDS
- PLHA self-help to improve nutrition and livelihoods
- Strengthening antiretroviral therapy adherence through nutritional support
- Bee venom therapy for PLHA
- Mainstreaming and holistic approaches to integrated programming
- Orphans and vulnerable children and food security

PLHA: People living with HIV/Aids

filled during the five-day Forum, consisting of two presenters per session, and a facilitated audience discussion. Fifteen panel sessions also took place, using a ‘talk show’ format to engage the audience in an exploration of topics across methodologies, programs, and countries.

The participants particularly enjoyed the nine site visits that offered them an opportunity to gain an enhanced first-hand understanding about integrating food and nutrition security with the other concerns of the Forum. Site visit facilitators were encouraged to create lively and interactive outings, allowing

staff. The organizers realized that field workers are people of action, who require dynamic, practical and skills-oriented learning approaches. Peer learning and active engagement of health practitioners were featured as ways for those in attendance to build upon what they already knew. “During the skills building sessions,” explained one participant, “I received hands-on training on how to improve nutrition and food security through bio-agriculture. I learned new livelihood interventions, and how to improve food security and HIV/AIDS mainstreaming into my organization’s programs and policies.”

ming a reality. They also have a lot to share about interventions that show promise and need further research and investment. Like the old adage that asks, “If a tree falls in a forest and nobody is around to hear it fall, does it make a sound?” Implementers also face the thorny question of how much time and financial resources can be dedicated to research efforts to improve practices, thus rephrasing the adage, “Does innovation on the ground exist if there is no documentation or research to prove it?” Clearly, in an ideal world, action and study need to be combined for maximum quality and impact, and to provide the evidence needed for collective advocacy and fund raising purposes. However, it escaped no one at the Forum that resources for investigation are somewhat of a luxury.

#### A visit from a former President of Zambia

No matter from what part of Africa (or of the world for that matter), a delegate to the Africa Forum 2006 was from, the thrill and excitement of the visit of Dr Kenneth Kaunda to deliver the closing remarks was palpable. To the Zambians, Dr Kaunda is known as “Father” and founder of their nation. Still spry,



Site visit to OVC center

lucid and wise in his 82nd year, the ex-President of the nation of Zambia, who guided his country out of the era of colonialism, was revered by all 220 in attendance. Combining jokes, aphorisms, and even song, he spoke to the assembled and deepened their fortitude in the tough battle against the dual epidemics. Dr Kaunda personifies several struggles in securing the independence of a nation and governing it into a cohesive state. As founder of the Kenneth Kaunda Children of Africa Foundation, furthermore, Dr Kaunda is, “committed to practical involvement and in working with all institutions, organizations, and individuals to bring relief to the suffering, while

offering the children what they need most: hope for a better tomorrow.” His presence at the Forum served as a living metaphor that while problems may be large, they can ultimately be resolved.

#### Epilogue

The African Forum was not an end, but a beginning. Since the event, we have remained in touch with the delegates and are gauging the long-term impact these five days in Zambia may have had. In 2007, PCI will begin producing periodic Briefing Notes of case studies from these advancements, demonstrating how participants have applied learning and the ripple effects that this has had. It is clear from the stories and comments that participants felt empowered to improve their own programming. As one delegate revealed, “The conference has empowered me to improve the care of those patients with whom I work at the AIDS clinic in Kenya. I will be a better and more holistic provider due to this experience.”



Building a keyhole garden