

**Strengthening responses to HIV/AIDS in the
Southern Africa region – learning from field programmes in
Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia**

**Joint Project of Concern Worldwide (CW), Oxfam International (OI) and
the Southern Africa Regional Poverty Network (SARPN)**

Zambia

1. Background

A number of Concern Worldwide and Oxfam-International projects were visited in Zambia between the 1st and 10th of May as part of the joint project on strengthening responses to HIV/AIDS in the Southern African region. The trip consisted of a blend of policy level discussions with organisations such as Concern, Oxfam-GB, Women for Change, and HODI and on-site reflections of field staff currently engaged in development work in Mongu District in Western Province. Essentially the objective was to debate and document the experiences and understanding of practitioners engaged in supporting communities to achieve livelihood security taking account of HIV.

The following represents some of the field observations, which are shared to elicit initial commentary and debate amongst interested parties engaged in this process. These have been grouped as common themes that emerged from the discussions as crucial with regards to livelihood security and HIV/AIDS in Zambia.

2. Livelihoods in Western Province

Discussions with staff of the Concern and OGB district offices, as well as partners of both organisations, provided a rich understanding of diverse livelihood strategies across Western Province. In many ways a shared analysis emerged around the drivers of food insecurity with some differences in terms of the emphasis.

Overall livelihoods have been seriously impacted since the 2001 regional crisis, exacerbated by the outbreak of livestock disease (contagious bovine plural pneumonia, CBPP) that decimated the asset base of many people. The reduction in cattle affected food crop production, as cattle provide draught power and field fertilisation, which resulted in a decrease in the size of cultivated land per household¹. Climate variability and the lack of state support, particularly in terms of agricultural extension and inputs, were major hindrances to recovery. As a result it was felt that many communities had not really recovered and were definitely worse off than during the 1990s. One outcome was that an increasingly diversified set of livelihoods strategies was being employed across the district, largely a result of communities utilising the different environmental options available. An interesting indicator of change was the increased use of cassava to supplement maize, as the drought-resistant qualities were increasingly recognised.

It was felt, particularly by Concern, that the diversified nature of livelihood strategies meant that longer-term initiatives should become the focus of external development agencies. A

¹ Pigs and goats have been promoted as an alternative to cattle, which has impacted negatively on the environment, particularly the sensitive flood plains.

Food Security Assessment conducted by Concern and the Mongu District Farmer Association (MDFA) challenged the notion that livelihoods in Western Zambia were based only on subsistence farming of staple food crops. The report held that sources other than own food production made up 57 percent of total food sources and that up to 43 percent of food needs were purchased or exchanged for labour in Mongu district.

Despite this optimism around livelihood diversification, it was conceded that many coping strategies, utilised during times of stress, had become normalised. For example, the increased use of mango porridge outside of the hungry season, as well as dependence on wild foods. It was also acknowledged that fishing and fish trading, as an important source of income, will likely fall under increasing pressure due to environmentally unsustainable methods². The subjective impression that many children were undernourished was another indication that many were vulnerable to food insecurity.

3. The Drivers of Food Insecurity

Livelihoods in Western Zambia to a large extent depended on rain-fed agriculture and access to labour. Thus the impact of climate variation, in particular rainfall failure, and chronic illness were perceived to be the major drivers of food insecurity. Rainfall variation coupled with high temperatures in the 2004/5 production season significantly reduced both cereal and non-cereal yields in many districts in Western Zambia. This combined with other underlying vulnerabilities such as continued macro-economic decline reduced many households access to food and other essential non-food items.

The lack of government support, which had also become “normalised”, accelerated food insecurity. For example, the fact that there was no veterinary services or cattle inoculation meant that the onslaught of CBPP was seen as an unfortunate livelihood shock rather than a preventable disease that should have been averted as a right.

HIV/AIDS was widely recognised as a major driver of food insecurity. The Food Security Assessment conducted by Concern and MDFA claimed that a high number of female-headed households (over 50% in one agricultural block), as a proxy indicator of HIV/AIDS, indicated that the epidemic was having an impact on households. The relationship between poverty and HIV/AIDS was recognised, particularly as limited options pushed vulnerable groups into dangerous coping strategies. Another dimension to this relationship was the urban-rural connection whereby urban-based family members, who being more exposed to HIV, often return to their rural home with AIDS. The double burden of caring for the sick and the loss of an urban remittance thus exacerbated the situation faced by many rural households. The fact that many households were now “preoccupied” with caring for the sick meant that available resources were not focused on sustainable livelihoods.

Another significant driver of food insecurity was a lack of access to land and other resources by the most vulnerable households. These included female-headed households affected by inheritance disputes. In some instances property grabbing or dispossession was causing destitution. This in turn often led to women being forced into sex work leading to heightened exposure to HIV infection. When combined with evidence that female-headed households tend to be poorer in general than their male-headed household neighbours, agencies such as Concern and OGB face a serious challenge to devise means to protect the rights of poor households (and particularly poor female-headed households) to land within future poverty alleviation and rural development strategies.

² A conflict of interest has arisen between fishing and agriculture where prolonged rainfall failure has forced farming communities to place rice fields along waterways, which affects water flows and fish numbers.

4. Working with Institutions

A notable difference in how Concern and OGB district offices operated in Mongu was the interaction with existing government institutions, such as the District Disaster Management Committee and the Health Forum.

OGB staff agreed that there had not been enough government and NGO co-operation focused on longer-term development with too much emphasis on emergency response. This was recognised as a limiting factor particularly in terms of the sustainability of projects. Government structures had the potential of being more permanent, which through a capacitating process could support communities in the long-term when the NGOs pulled out of an area. However, it was not a given that government structures were permanent as evidenced by the demise of the extension services due to government neglect and changes induced by structural adjustment. OGB staff expressed some concern about being “controlled” by local government and relinquishing the independence of NGO work traditionally “outside” that of the state. Other fears included being associated with or being drawn into government “white elephants” (for example costly but ineffective agricultural stations) might impact on the legitimacy of NGO interventions.

OGB staff did, however, recognise that close co-operation and partnership with government opened opportunities for advocacy. The linkages with government structures would help create sustainable interventions, particularly if the national government could be held accountable to allocating sufficient resources to decentralised structures. In turn local government should be held accountable to work with local community institutions. In practice, Concern had actively sought strong partnerships with local government structures.

Concern staff were clear that their support (“capacitating”) of the District Disaster Management Committee (DDMC) at the District Commissioner office was to support the co-ordination of different interventions across Mongu. Part of the discourse around “co-ordination” was levelled against OGB and the cash transfer programme, which was perceived to run contrary to development programmes and to have created “dependency”. It seemed that there was some overlap in terms of the geographic area in which OGB and Concern operated in, which had created some misunderstandings about intentions³. Certainly communication was a major limiting factor in establishing the cash transfer programme. If the DDMC could act as a forum to facilitate better co-ordination and to act as a vehicle for communication, then it is recommended that such opportunities be explored.

The DDMC were mandated by national government to co-ordinate responses to disasters, including slow-onset emergencies that require concerted long-term planning. Discussions with the District Commissioner and two members of his staff, including the Director of Planning, emphasised a need to move away from dependency in Mongu district. This “syndrome” was seen to be prevalent as a result of widespread food aid and community expectations around handouts. Essentially the DDMC seemed to be struggling with moving the focus in Mongu away from a relief and rehabilitation mode to long-term development that would ensure disaster preparedness partly through underpinning community resilience. The DDMC also believed they could identify and target areas most in need and through co-ordination direct agencies to operating in appropriate areas. However, at present the

³ Concern felt that OGB should have shared beneficiary lists, discussed definitions of vulnerability and targeting mechanisms as they were already operating in some wards where the cash transfer programme was implemented. They believed that their programme to support winter cropping should have been better co-ordinated particularly over the issue of targeting where it was felt that beneficiaries of the winter cropping programme should not have been targeted for cash transfers. In this way they felt their programme promoting “self reliance” was undermined.

Committee remained under-funded, evident by a lack of vehicles in an area without adequate road infrastructure.

OGB staff were less convinced about the co-ordinating function and expressed apprehension about local government attempts to control or interfere unnecessarily in their function. These concerns appeared relevant, particularly in a context where agencies needed to move fast in order to respond effectively to an emerging situation. An inadequately prepared DDMC could prove to be a hindrance in some situations.

Another gap in terms of sustainable partnerships for both Concern and OGB was that of the private sector. According to head office staff, this limitation in Western Province was due to the position of the Traditional Barotse Royal Establishment, which discouraged private investors. Part of the problem was around property rights and the control that the Establishment held over land. This kind of disincentive has been overcome in other parts of southern Africa, such as Mozambique, where investors were encouraged through a framework that attempted to protect both their and community rights.

In terms of working with existing institutions, the example of the District Health System was important. It was acknowledged by both Concern and OGB in Mongu that the high prevalence of HIV (at about 22%) would lead to a significant increase in AIDS cases, which would seriously impact on the overstretched health facilities. The inability of the district health system to cater for the sick would have to be supplemented by more effective HBC initiatives. However, a view that was not articulated within Mongu was that HBC might be considered as “burden shifting” from the public health system back onto fragile household systems. This is not to condemn the very necessary HBC system but to raise awareness of the dangers of raising the expectations of what such a system could accomplish. In many ways it might overwhelm communities without careful linkages back to professional health support.

5. New Livelihood Programmes

When considering “new” interventions in a context of HIV/AIDS, such responses need to be adapted to reflect specific vulnerabilities relating to the epidemic. As has been widely cited in development literature, one of the central issues in agricultural input programmes is the availability of labour within the household (or clusters of inter-related households). The impact of HIV/AIDS on food security suggests that households may suffer serious labour constraints, which means affected households might be unable to participate effectively in agricultural input programmes. However, the extent to which labour constraints are affecting participation in agricultural programmes remains unclear. In many instances, households with chronic illness are able to find sufficient labour through social networks. Research focused in Zambia maintains that the utility of labour-saving technology has been over-generalised, although such technologies may be appropriate for certain types of households and regions⁴. Other research argues that labour-saving technologies may even be harmful if they further drive down wage rates that are already falling due to HIV-induced cash-constraints on ability to hire⁵. Emphasis may need to be placed on other ways of assisting these households, such as cash transfers to help them with labour hire.

⁴ Jayne, T.S., and Chapoto, A., 2005: Characteristics of individuals afflicted by AIDS-related mortality in Zambia. Working paper No. 14, Michigan State University, Food Security Research Project, Lusaka, Zambia.

⁵ Dorward, A. and Mwale, I., 2005: *Labor market and wage impacts of HIV/AIDS in rural Malawi*. Paper presented at the international Conference on HIV/AIDS and Food and Nutrition security, Durban, 14-16 April, 2005.

When considering new options in terms of livelihood interventions that engaged with food security and HIV/AIDS, it was widely recognised that very few innovative approaches had been attempted. This was apart from the OGB cash transfer project, which was criticised by organisations outside of OGB partnerships. OGB staff in particular felt that the lack of new initiatives was part of the reason why livelihoods had not recovered more significantly. As such, OGB staff felt that many programmes in Mongu were too rigid or too focused on one dimension of a livelihood strategy to be effective. The integration of different issues would be a better way of engaging the full spectrum of livelihood strategies and enable beneficiary communities to choose and adapt what best suited their situation.

Although research around livelihoods was an operational norm of both OGB and Concern, discussions with staff from both organisations revealed that there needed to be more focus on the cultural underpinnings of livelihood strategies. In particular there needed to be a greater understanding of broader community resources and livelihood options of the past. For example, it was recognised that some households were never food insecure as they survived on a variety of different foods, including less popular traditional crops, throughout the year. Those dependent on food crops such as maize and cassava were perceived to be more vulnerable to food insecurity in a context of climate variability. Understanding the seasonal food types and cultural acceptance (or not) of these types, as well as sourcing seeds for propagation, would be useful for future interventions. Another range of “new” options existed around the water canals and using these to underpin sustainable fishing and irrigation for certain crops through careful community planning and sharing of the water resources⁶. It was also evident that livestock projects did not include the concept of “passing on” offspring (of goats and chickens), which was widespread in Malawi and visibly appealed to partner organisations such as the Network of Zambian People Living with HIV/AIDS when discussed.

In terms of looking at existing programmes to identify how to “work better”, a limitation of HIV sensitisation programmes was identified. This was the lack of a livelihood base to provide broader opportunities to support people dealing with the epidemic. It was argued that sensitisation had to be linked to livelihood options for the messages to have meaning; otherwise the lack of alternatives rendered the information meaningless. Despite investment into awareness campaigns, it was held that inadequate information around HIV/AIDS was widespread. For example respondents to the Concern / MDFA survey did not suspect the chronically ill to be suffering from HIV/AIDS but were thought to have been bewitched.

6. Cash Transfers in Mongu, Zambia

A significant “new” intervention visited in the district was Oxfam’s emergency cash transfer programme. The large-scale use of cash as an emergency response to food crises is relatively new for international NGOs. OGB implemented the unconditional cash transfer programme as its sole response to the perceived emergency crisis⁷. Although the programme ended in March 2006 when crop harvests became available, it was part of an exploration into appropriate responses to chronic food insecurity that could be replicated elsewhere in southern Africa. This was part of current thinking around social protection and in particular social transfers, which might transition into longer-term programmes.

⁶ It was alleged that earlier work around clearing the canal network had stopped because of people’s access to relief food. Concern intended to revisit this in its latest strategy.

⁷ OGB used assessment information available from the Zambian Vulnerability Assessment Committee and an INGO assessment, which both concluded that a large-scale relief response was needed in different areas in Zambia. In contrast, the assessment undertaken by Concern and MDFA concluded that the impact of drought would not be catastrophic given the highly developed set of livelihood options. A baseline study conducted by OGB confirmed that the two districts were not facing a humanitarian crisis with little sense of acute suffering.

The cash transfer programme in Mongu and Kaoma district involved unconditional transfers of 90,000 Zambian Kwacha (equivalent to a standard food aid ration) per household per month to 13,500 vulnerable households for a four-month period⁸. The programme aimed to assist households that were not meeting over 50% of their food needs. Targeting was a combination of geographic and community-based targeting, with the latter conducted by village level local committees using certain criteria. Standard Chartered Bank and a contracted security company delivered the cash to distribution points. Bank and OGB staff distributed the cash in individual envelopes to registered beneficiaries in person (or their named deputy). Several monitoring exercises were carried out throughout the exercise to analyse the impact of the programme, including an analysis of local markets.

According to the evaluation of the programme, the response seems to have played a preventative role, rather than responding to an acute crisis. Even those that did not benefit from the cash transfer directly were able to benefit from indirect sharing of assistance and the greater availability of piecework. Recipients of cash transfers primarily purchased food with the cash, which helped protect consumption levels and reduced the need for piecework and gathering wild foods thus enabling recipients to work more on own agricultural production. Those households that did not receive relief did “cope” largely by intensifying existing livelihood strategies, including intensified piecework, greater reliance on wild foods and reducing household consumption⁹. The evaluation and insights from OGB partner organisations also confirmed that the cash transfers had a positive effect on local economies creating multiplier effects. At least some food was purchased from local producers or farmers in neighbouring areas.

During discussions with the DDMC it appeared that local government structures did not know about the cash transfer programme and felt that this would create dependency and erode existing livelihoods. However, the independent evaluation of the programme and discussions with OGB staff argued to the contrary. According to these sources, the DDMC had agreed that the initiative target specific vulnerable wards (as per their function). Nonetheless, it became clear through a number of discussions that OGB should have consulted more widely, particularly with government officials and the MDFA, at the outset of the project.

It was also evident during discussions with organisations not directly involved in the programme that there was a perception that the programme had caused widespread anti-social behaviour. It was felt that the transfer could disrupt existing social dynamics within villages and would be misused. This was particularly expressed by the DDMC. The evaluation and OGB’s own monitoring argued that it seemed likely that any anti-social use was relatively limited. It seems opportune to present this argument in a forum such as the DDMC and elicit a debate to increase understanding and learning about cash in an emergency situation. In the context of a nation-wide social protection scheme involving cash transfers intended to help alleviate poverty, knowledge about the role and impact of cash will prepare practitioners in Mongu for a not too distant reality of the Kalomo model rollout.

This could lead to debates and discussions in Mongu about different forms of safety nets and the appropriate roles of different agencies. Apart from debating the merits and demerits of an emergency-based cash transfer programme, other interesting debates around linkages would be helpful for agencies. In a number of “reflective” discussions facilitated with OGB,

⁸ For an evaluation of the cash transfer programme see Harvey, P and Marongwe, N (2006) ‘Independent Evaluation of Oxfam GB Zambia’s Emergency Cash-Transfer Programme.

⁹ This indicates that there was not an acute crisis facing households in the two districts but a “moderately difficult year in which already chronic food insecurity and poverty was exacerbated by poor harvests” (Harvey & Marongwe, 2006).

Concern and their partners, it was evident that the cash transfer programme should in future be linked to longer-term development opportunities. For example, microfinance groups, farmers' organisations, and savings clubs would all add another dimension to the initiative.

Overall there appeared to be a growing recognition that cash-based responses may have advantages in certain circumstances over other, more traditional, responses. The Mongu cash-transfer programme provides a real opportunity to learn about transfers other than food, and a forum should be considered by OGB and Concern to debate and discuss the merits and limitations of such a scheme now that an external evaluation of the programme has been completed. Locally-based discussions forums, providing "safe places" to debate for a wide range of sectors including government, grass-roots organisations and NGOs, is a key mechanism to improving responses to HIV/AIDS and livelihoods.

7. The Role of Farmer's Organisations

The Mongu District Farmer Association (MDFA) offers some important insights into building a sustainable programme with local commitment that engages directly with food security issues and the reality of AIDS as experienced by local farmers. The MDFA is a self-initiated grassroots organisation that through local structures works collectively to underpin a viable small-scale farming sector in the district. The District Association is constituted by a number of Area Farmers Associations at community level, which in turn are made up of Farmers Clubs at very local level. The MDFA is affiliated to the Zambian National Farmers Union but "not led by them" thereby giving expression to the importance of accessing national information but operating collectively at a district level. District level partnerships include the DDMC, the District Commissioner's office and organisations like Concern, which are partnering them to build capacity.

Key questions discussed with the MDFA was their role in increasing access to the markets for the farmers and the extent to which the opportunities presented filter through to the vulnerable groups of society. It has been suggested in the development literature and reiterated in the field that farmer organisations perform three distinct functions in relation to addressing the production and marketing problems faced by farmers. Firstly, farmer groups take the lead in identifying and consolidating members' demands for goods and services, thereby lowering the costs of commercial activities of doing business with smallholder farmers. In other words, create a local market. Secondly, farmer organisations lower their members' production costs through the bulking of activities, especially group transport and group purchase of inputs, realising economies of scale where otherwise they could not as individuals. Thirdly, farmer organisations provide goods and services, such as access to information on prices and markets.

Although the focus group discussion with the MDFA was not detailed enough to corroborate all these issues, some important insights were gained about collective action in Mongu. In particular the third function identified above was emphasised by the MDFA in that accessing information around markets was seen as a priority. It was recognised that a marketing system needed to be developed to give impetus to small-scale producers and enrich the local economy. It seemed that small-scale production in Mongu had not yet reached a level where the bulking of production activities (creating economies of scale) or group demands for services were major concerns. The sector was not yet developed enough for these to be prioritised although there were requests for scotch carts and a vehicle to enable produce to be collected and to ease access to members. The Association claimed that it did help ensure that marginalised or poorer farmers voices were heard through their structures. This was in some ways confirmed when the chairperson ensured that all members, and in particular women, were given the opportunity to express their opinions.

The MDFA offers an interesting example of self-sufficiency in a context where most local organisations identify “dependency” as a problem. The concept of “self sufficiency” as expressed by the MDFA was essentially a response to what they perceived as a culture of “hand-outs” since independence and an inconsistent and very general agricultural policy established by national government that did not truly benefit the diversity and complexity of Barotseland within Western Province¹⁰. They also recognised structural limitations to farming in the Western Province (the “most neglected of the nine province”), in particular an inadequate road infrastructure, smaller bridges to connect isolated areas, and a weak extension service including a neglect of any veterinary services.

The MDFA appeared to be a useful vehicle for Concern to identifying appropriate support needs, which required response either through existing channels or linking to the state. For example, many members argued that they needed to find ways to add value to their produce in order to become commercially viable, an express objective of the group. In this regard the MDFA identified the need to understand food preservation to sustain households during times of hunger, to enable markets to be found in time and to eliminate waste, particularly after the glut of mangoes and tomatoes that occurred each year. This included understanding appropriate technologies and the development of storage infrastructure such as sheds. A major limitation facing the farmers was the lack of government extension services, iterated by the fact that they received very little in terms of expertise or advice outside of the NGO sector. They also expressed a desire to implement conservation farming in Mongu, using techniques such as organic fertiliser, intercropping, and crop diversification and rotation.

Another dimension to the MDFA was that of providing a “home-grown” role model for communities struggling with livelihood insecurity. The Association believed that their experience should be shared across Mongu using radio and other media, and through the establishment of a tape and document library where aspirant farmers can learn “from other farmers”. The Association also identified the role of media, particularly radio, in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, which were not seen to access rural areas. A limitation to radio was that many farmers did not possess radio or could afford new batteries, which raised the question of disseminating wind-up radios along Association structures.

Working with groups of farmers, particularly groups that have emerged from grassroots organisations, provides real opportunities for Concern and Oxfam to strengthen livelihood activities within their programme areas, as well as creating channels through which HIV/AIDS interventions can be delivered.

¹⁰ When discussing “food for work” and “food relief”, the MDFA believed that these had “killed a culture of independence” through undermining agriculture. They requested that NGOs move away from hand-outs to encouraging cultivation through the provision of expertise and seeds that might underpin independent farming.