



RESTORING HOPE: CRS AND HIV



In just over 25 years, 65 million people around the world have contracted HIV, with millions more affected by the disease. Those growing numbers – and the millions of orphans and other vulnerable children left behind – endanger the development of many regions of the world. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) provides care and support to those whose lives have been overturned by the virus, restoring hope to patients, families and communities.

The prolonged sickness and possible death of those with AIDS diminishes families' abilities to thrive and communities' social cohesion. Poor families and societies affected by the disease are often underserved, and young women often cope with the greatest risks and shoulder the greatest burdens associated with HIV.

HIV&AIDS Quick Facts

- In 2007, there were approximately 33 million people living with HIV in the world. Sub-Saharan Africa is the worst affected region, accounting for 75% of AIDS related deaths.
- There were 2.7 million new cases of HIV and AIDS in 2007.
- Young people aged 15-24, account for 45% of all new global HIV infections.
- AIDS killed 2 million people worldwide in 2007.

HIV, or Human Immunodeficiency Virus, attacks the immune system, killing white blood cells. Transmitted through bodily fluids, HIV makes it harder for a person to fight off illnesses and infections. AIDS is a clinical diagnosis given when the immune system of someone living with HIV is functioning at an extremely low level. Patients do not die of AIDS; rather, they die of illnesses that their bodies cannot stave off when they have AIDS.

Women and HIV

HIV affects men and women on every continent, of every race and economic level. But women often face heavy financial, legal, cultural and social disadvantages that make them particularly vulnerable to the effects of the epidemic.

Young girls, for example, are often pulled from school to care for family members who are ill with the virus. Lacking formal education, these girls are less likely to earn a steady income for their families and are more vulnerable to HIV infection. Older women often shoulder the burden of care when their adult children fall ill, and may become the primary caregivers to orphaned grandchildren. Women widowed by AIDS may lose their land and property when their husbands die – even if inheritance laws are designed to protect them – and often struggle to produce enough food for their families.

Orphans and Vulnerable Children

Beyond providing care for people living with HIV, CRS supports entire communities affected by the pandemic. Rising HIV-infection rates have orphaned millions of children or increased their vulnerability. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, more than 12 million children have been orphaned by AIDS. In many of the hardest-hit countries, the fate of the children will determine the fate of their nations for many years to come. Local organizations must build their capacity to respond to the needs of children infected and affected by HIV in a long-term, sustainable manner.

CRS programming responds to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children by helping families strengthen their abilities to cope with problems associated with HIV. Key interventions include:

- Supporting education programs geared at keeping children in school;
- Providing support for family members or other caregivers who have agreed to raise orphans; and
- Teaching children how to best care for themselves, meeting their own needs.

CRS Programming

More than 33 million people are living with HIV around the world. CRS' HIV policies call for the affirmation of human dignity and seek effective means of addressing the crisis. In partnership with other secular and faith-based organizations, CRS directly supports more than 4 million people affected by HIV around the world through more than 250 projects in 52 countries. These projects provide a comprehensive continuum of services, from initial testing to nutritional support to home-based and palliative care.

The Catholic Church operates broad networks that provide quality health care, education and social services around the world, reaching deep into communities that other organizations cannot regularly access. In fact, CRS estimates that Catholic institutions provide care to one of every four people living with HIV around the world. As a Catholic agency, CRS partners with these networks in many of the places where it works, though programs provide help to people without regard to race, creed or nationality.

Community-Based Care and Support Quick Facts

- The Catholic Church runs one of every four health centers treating people living with HIV around the world today. As a Catholic agency, CRS is uniquely positioned to make a difference in the lives of these patients.
- CRS supports more than 250 HIV projects in 52 countries with a total value of more than \$120 million (U.S.).

HIV Prevention

CRS aims to reduce the transmission of the virus while caring for those who are most in need. The agency takes an integrated approach to prevention that is grounded in the Catholic Church's teachings on human sexuality and in best practices garnered from years of experience. All program activities encourage abstinence and marital fidelity and contain messages about risk avoidance that are widely recognized as essential components of successful HIV interventions. CRS also supports risk-reducing practices – including delaying sexual activity, limiting the number of sexual partners, engaging in voluntary counseling and testing, treating sexually transmitted infections, and taking precautions that promote blood safety and limit blood-borne infections.

The majority of CRS prevention programs are offered in concert with the local Church. CRS works to build the Church's capacity to respond to HIV in local dioceses around the world, while using the Church's vast educational and pastoral infrastructure to increase the number of people exposed to healthy educational messages. CRS also works with the Church to engage other faith-based groups and advocate for appropriate government responses.

Treatment

HIV attacks the body by weakening the immune system, making it vulnerable to infections like pneumonia and tuberculosis. Over time the quantity of virus in a patient's body grows and the immune system weakens, leading to AIDS.

Antiretroviral therapy, also known as ART, is a combination of medications that helps reverse this potentially lethal progression. Without this treatment many people die within five years of infection. The toll is particularly significant in Africa, where almost three quarters of all people living with HIV reside.

Until recently, high costs left antiretroviral therapy out of reach for much of the developing world. But a promising combination of decreasing costs and increasing awareness of the life-saving nature of these drugs is expanding the availability of ART – and restoring real hope to many people living with HIV in the developing world.

Through its AIDSRelief consortium, CRS provides ART to more than 84,000 people living with HIV in nine countries. The number of people served is constantly growing, as CRS helps spread hope around the world.

Nutrition

People living with HIV require more food to maintain their energy level, but they are also likely to lose their appetite and reduce their dietary intake at the very time their nutritional needs are greatest. In many parts of the world, HIV strikes families and communities that are already suffering from poor nutrition. CRS programs use a holistic approach that encourages people, including those infected with the virus, to care for themselves through proper diets and a well-rounded regimen of care. Strengthening the nutritional status of people living with HIV helps to improve the quality and length of their lives.

People with HIV are not the only ones whose nutritional needs are affected. Children and adults whose family members are living with HIV are also not as well nourished and more likely to be sick. Evidence from East and Southern Africa show that people in households affected by HIV tend to eat fewer meals and consume less nutritious foods. In addition, these families have less money to spend on health care for family members who are not infected.

The relationship between HIV and nutrition is further complicated in poor rural areas. In these places, farmers and their families may become too sick to work, or too busy caring for sick loved ones to cultivate food. The virus has caused the long-standing social and economic structures of these rural communities to disintegrate.

CRS tries to help bolster the nutritional status of people affected by HIV in several ways, including distributing food rations, and working with communities to promote sustainable agricultural practices and develop food markets. Through agricultural programs and initiatives that help build stable and vital economies, the agency aims to ensure that every man, woman and child has enough to eat.

Livelihoods

A debilitating sickness or death of a loved one tends to decrease a family's income, as that person is no longer able to work. Sickness and death often also force families to sell assets, such as livestock, to cope with the overwhelming expenses of health care and burials. One recent survey found that 40 percent of households in Zambia affected by chronic illness had sold assets to cover food, medicine and funeral costs. People already living in severe poverty have virtually no capacity to shoulder these additional financial burdens.

Food Security and Nutrition Quick Facts

- Seven million African agricultural workers in 25 countries have died from AIDS since 1985. Another million will die over the next 20 years.
- In several countries, 60 to 70 percent of farms have suffered labor losses as a result of the epidemic.
- A study in Zambia showed that households headed by a person who was chronically ill planted up to 53 percent less than households headed by a healthy adult.
- The death of an adult from AIDS has a greater negative impact than if the death were from another cause. This is because of high costs associated with care and treatment.

The effect of HIV on adults today also takes a long-term toll on future generations. Children, particularly girls, are often taken out of school to care for sick family members or placed into jobs to subsidize a family's income. This prevents them from getting a formal education, which could help them find jobs that would lift them out of poverty.

Building Assets

Living a healthy, productive life requires a basic set of resources, including food, water, shelter and security. These are the building blocks from which individuals can achieve increasingly difficult goals, from feeding their families, to educating their children, to starting a business and acquiring assets. One of the most effective ways to improve the lives of people affected by HIV is to ensure that basic resources are available.

CRS and its partners help people to build the assets they need to achieve these goals through a range of programs. For example, agricultural improvement programs help vulnerable communities increase crop production, while projects aimed at water and sanitation help improve systems for drinking, irrigation and livestock.

Things You Can Do

HIV and AIDS affects us all. We can make a difference by raising awareness, reducing the stigma associated with the disease and restoring hope for our brothers and sisters in need.

- **Pray** in solidarity by hosting a CRS World AIDS Day Candlelight Vigil. Visit crs.org/worldaidsday to download this and other prayer resources.
- **Learn** about global issues that affect the poor as well as CRS HIV programs at crs.org/hiv-aids.
- **Act** by signing up for CRS' Legislative Network at actioncenter.crs.org and urge Congress to continue to support HIV programs.
- **Give** a contribution to support Catholic Relief Services' HIV and AIDS work. Call 1-800-736-3467 or visit crs.org/donate for more information.
- **Participate** in HIV testing with counseling. Did you know that across the world, only 1 in 8 people who want to be tested are currently able to do so. Find out where your local testing center is and spread the word. Go even one step further, and encourage prominent members of your community to be tested as sign of solidarity on World AIDS Day. This will also help reduce stigma.

Catholic Relief Services is the official international humanitarian agency of the U.S. Catholic community