

Special Report from the Rapporteur's Desk: RENEWAL Regional Workshop: A Decade of Work on HIV, Food and Nutrition Security

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This week I am participating in an exciting workshop on HIV, Food and Nutrition Security. The Regional Network on AIDS, Livelihoods and Food Security (RENEWAL) is a 'network-of-networks' that operates in five countries across southern and eastern Africa. Housed within the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), it is made up of national networks of food and nutrition-relevant organizations together with partners in AIDS in public health. Since 2000, this dynamic group has been working to enhance understanding of the intersections and links between HIV/AIDS, food and nutrition security, called the 'HIV-hunger nexus' and to inform comprehensive responses. There is also a strong focus on developing networks for research and advocacy. RENEWAL's strategy has been built on three interacting pillars: Capacity Strengthening, Action Research and Policy Communications. They have become key players in the international research and policy arena, with links to UNAIDS, the World Food Program and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The network was initially created with a vision of four 'phases' to its institutionalized lifespan. With the third phase coming to a close this December, recent discussions had moved towards the idea of decentralizing coordination of the network, wherein current national representatives might 'spin-off' initiatives locally. However, as the workshop came to a close today, there was a resounding call from all stakeholders for regional collaboration, coordination and co-learning to continue in the form of an entity or institution.

Workshop participants were diverse, including: stakeholders from academic institutions, aid donors, civil society, the World Food Program, National AIDS Control Councils and the Medical Research Council of South Africa, to name a few. They came from Malawi, Uganda, Kenya, Ireland, South Africa, Zambia, India and the United States to reflect, learn and strategize. The workshop was structured to do the following:

- Provide a review of RENEWAL's history, research and methodology
- Showcase key research findings related to HIV, Food and Nutrition Security
- Stimulate discussion and debate on the links between HIV, Food and Nutrition Security and about how research can influence policy and practice
- Generate ideas for a way forward into the fourth phase

As a collaborative representative of my host organization, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), I was invited to act as a 'rapporteur' for the workshop. With the role of observing, documenting, synthesizing and reflecting on the proceedings I have been in a unique vantage point from which to observe a dynamic network organization in the midst of a transformational process. Discussions as to the future of RENEWAL continue as I write, but the following key priorities emerged in the closing session:

'What is now needed to make an impact on HIV, Food and Nutrition Security?':

- Getting research into policy and practice (GRIPP): understand these processes, develop strategies for how to engage with policy makers, improve 'knowledge translation' (how research findings are packaged and communicated), lobby effectively and involve key political players or 'champions' for the cause
- Learn how to scale-up 'what we know works'
- Support demand-driven research: incorporate the needs of stakeholders, participants and those affected by the issues being researched
- Focus on operational and intervention research to understand and evaluate interventions
- Promote 'mixed-method' and transdisciplinary research in order to address the complex issues relationships between HIV, Food and Nutrition Security
- A paradigm shift in how to promote rapid change in policy and practice.
- Emphasize participatory research processes and focus on sharing results in ways that educate, engage and mobilize changes in public opinion.

Particularly interesting was that ideas about how to impact HIV, Food and Nutrition Security focused on the need for understanding and engaging in policy processes, as opposed to generating more research. As so often in the spheres of development and health: the evidence is there, the challenge rests in convincing policy makers, politicians, the general public, and even ourselves, to take on the changes needed to really address the issue.

As the workshop closed, lively discussions filtered out into the hallway about how to move forward. How can we share the findings from our research in ways that empower regular citizens to mobilize around the issues? How can we partner with civil society for advocacy? How can we connect with the policy makers and politicians who could push these changes through government avenues?

Although the future of RENEWAL in its current form is uncertain, it is evident that the people here today will continue to move forward in trying to answer these questions. The relationships built through years of partnership will be an important resource to draw on as the institutional framework itself is reworked. Frameworks aside, what remains is a powerful commitment to the real social, political and economic changes need to address the drivers of HIV, Food and Nutrition insecurity in the region. And I for one am intrigued to see how they will decide to go about doing it.

To learn more about the work of RENEWAL, you can visit:

www.ifpri.org/renewal