



Averting 'New Variant Famine'

Briefing Notes No 2

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New Variant Famine: the theory

Six southern African countries that have experienced recurrent severe food shortages in recent years also have exceptionally high HIV prevalence rates. This led Alex de Waal and Alan Whiteside, in 2003, to hypothesise a 'New Variant Famine' (NVF) in which AIDS is the primary cause of the region's food insecurity. While drought has affected southern Africa, the recent food crisis has three distinct features: very widespread vulnerability, including in areas unaffected by drought; a more rapid onset of household impoverishment than is usual; and a failure of households to recover properly. These features are attributed to four processes through

which AIDS increases household vulnerability: increased dependency ratios owing to adult sickness and mortality; loss of assets and skills owing to high adult mortality; a high burden of care for sick adults and orphaned children; and vicious interactions between AIDS and malnutrition. The full impact of NVF, it is said, is yet to be felt: the infection rate may have slowed but the number of deaths will continue to rise, and a third epidemic of wider impacts will follow.

Critiques:

Use of the term 'famine' to describe the recent food shortages is controversial. There is no evidence of a decline in aggregate food production due to AIDS,

and levels of acute malnutrition and starvation-related mortality have not been exceptionally high. Some have suggested the crisis was exaggerated by governments wanting to distribute free food and those keen for genetically modified foods to gain a foothold in southern Africa, and that the association with AIDS helped leverage funds. Others fear the term 'famine' gives the impression of a short term 'natural' event, unconnected with everyday poverty, and quickly overcome through technical measures. For advocates of the NVF hypothesis, however, famine is a socio-economic process related to household vulnerability.

Famine as Entitlement Decline

The NVF hypothesis rests on the work of Amartya Sen, who in the 1980s elaborated a new way of understanding famine. Rather than explaining famine in relation to the overall availability of food, Sen revealed how it was possible to find famines happening in places where aggregate food production had not fallen. For Sen it was the capac-

ity of households to access food that was of fundamental importance. Access to food might be secured through a range of means: direct production, exchange or purchase.

Critiques

Although the entitlement approach moves the explanation for famine away from natural causes, it is criticised as apolitical

and ahistorical. Long-term structural causes of vulnerability such as liberalisation and structural adjustment do not receive the same attention as the immediate causes of famine. In practice, famines are often political, with deliberate starvation sometimes used for political ends. Famines always reflect power relations, and it is important to recognise

how the distribution of food is shaped by politics, economics and ideology, at household and wider levels. Within households, weaker members may be sacrificed and left without the capacity to secure food. Equally, the historical dimension is important as particular patterns of entitlement are produced and reproduced over time.

Key Points:

- The 'New Variant Famine' hypothesis posits a causal link between high HIV prevalence and recent food insecurity in southern Africa
- Use of the term 'famine' in relation to the food crises has proved controversial
- The NVF hypothesis associates famine with declining household level 'entitlements' to food
- Studies of the impact of AIDS generally adopt a sustainable livelihoods approach
- It is important that such studies should not focus exclusively on the household level



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Sustainable Livelihoods Approach



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Research exploring the impact of AIDS on household food security generally adopts a livelihoods approach, whereby various means of generating livelihoods, and constraints on their adoption, are considered. Peasant families secure food through multiple strategies – not merely direct production – and these are affected by a range of processes operating at different scales.

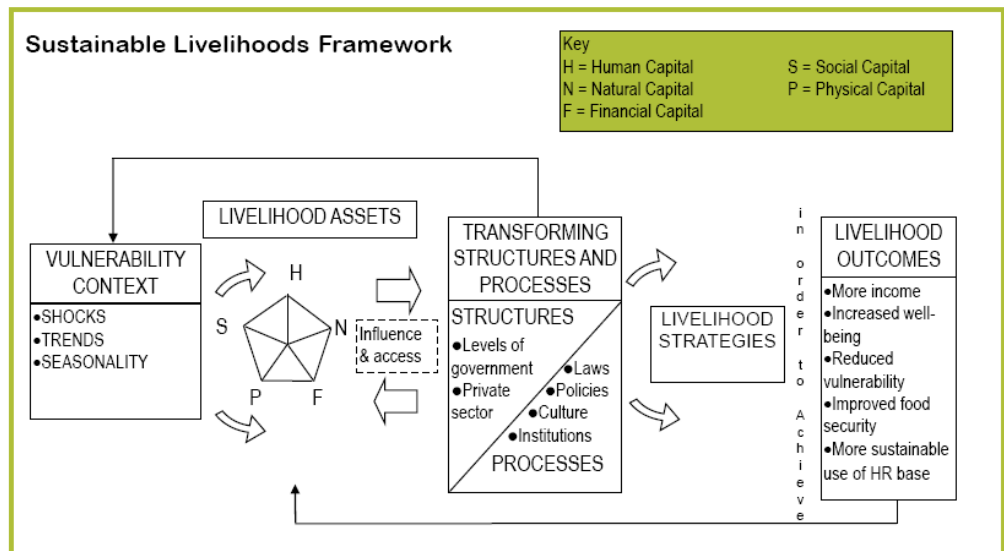
AIDS is hypothesised to impact on many elements of this livelihoods model, including all forms of household assets – human,

financial, social, physical and natural capitals. It also affects the institutions, incentives, policies and laws that govern access to assets and their value in livelihood generation. Coping strategies employed to ensure security of livelihoods in the immediate term may threaten, future possible livelihoods.

Critiques

Although the sustainable livelihoods approach is intended to incorporate processes operating at multiple scales, analysis tends to focus at the

household level. The wider socio-political and socio-economic contexts are important to understanding the entitlements of households and individuals, but since the 1970s analysis has moved from the global and national levels to the local and household. Studies confined to the household level reveal little about wider impacts of AIDS, or what is happening within households, such as the intra-household division of labour, caregiving and other resources, and especially the impacts on women and children.



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Project website: www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sse/chg/projects/nvf

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