

# The Triple Threat

## Introduction:

The “Triple Threat” refers to the combined danger of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, food insecurity and weakened institutional capacity. Each of these problems alone poses a major obstacle to sub-Saharan Africa -- combined, they have created a crisis on a scale that demands new approaches, not only from humanitarian and development agencies, but also from journalists covering these interlinking disasters.

The term “Triple Threat” was coined following the severe drought that ravaged large parts of southern Africa in 2002. United Nations (UN) agencies and international NGOs descended on the region equipped to deal with a typical, short-term emergency. It quickly became clear, however, that the drought was only a tipping point; other factors had already weakened the ability of communities and governments to manage the natural disaster.

The newcomer to southern Africa’s familiar scenario of drought-induced food insecurity was, of course, HIV/AIDS. Over the previous decades, the disease had slowly eroded the ability of households, communities and even governments to respond to short-term crises. A vicious cycle developed: The HIV epidemic undermined traditional coping mechanisms and exacerbated food insecurity and poverty, which in turn fuelled the spread of the disease.

## The Issues:

### 1. Identifying The Problem

In 2003, the UN published a position paper outlining the newly-recognised, inter-linked crises along with some of the new responses it demanded. The same year, African development and HIV/AIDS experts Alex de Waal and Alan Whiteside published an article in *The Lancet* describing the intersect between southern Africa’s food crisis and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the region as a “new variant famine”. Both documents provide a useful starting point for getting to grips with the Triple Threat.

The challenge for both humanitarian agencies and journalists is to view food security, HIV/AIDS and weakened government capacity not as three separate issues, but as the overall context for southern Africa’s complex and worsening humanitarian crisis.

*See: Organising the UN Response to the triple threat of food insecurity, weakened capacity for governance and AIDS, particularly in Southern and Eastern Africa*

<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/ACOS-64BKR6?OpenDocument>

*See: New Variant Famine: AIDS and Food Crisis in Southern Africa by Alex De Waal & Alan Whiteside, The Lancet, Oct. 2003)*

### 2. AIDS and Food Insecurity

How does AIDS, a disease that ravages the body, manage to scar the land as well? When AIDS strikes productive adult farmers, killing many in the prime of their lives, families’ are often unable to afford agricultural inputs like seeds and fertilizer and must farm smaller areas of land. National agriculture production levels decline as more and more households lose farmers to AIDS. Populations then become much more vulnerable to emergency food shortages, caused by drought or other natural or man-made crises. Critical strategies for coping with food shortages, such as knowledge of wild foods and stretching scarce resources are often lost as mature adults succumb to the disease before passing this knowledge to the next generation.

Skipping meals, another traditional coping strategy, is not a viable option for people living with HIV because of their higher nutritional demands. Poor nutrition weakens the body’s defences against the virus, hastens the development of HIV into full-blown AIDS, and makes it difficult to take anti-HIV medications (ARVs).

### 3. Women and Girls Especially Vulnerable

The Triple Threat is most dangerous to women and girls. Women are not only more vulnerable to HIV infection, but also suffer because of social and economic inequalities. Desperate families often pull girls from school as households struggle to care for sick or dying relatives and orphans. Worse still - girls often resort to prostitution or exchanging sex for food as their hungry families struggle to put food on the table.

### 4. Weakened Government Capacity and The Deadly Cycle

HIV/AIDS weakens government capacity while at the same time creating increased need for state interventions in the form of medical or food aid - a terrible irony that leaves many African countries struggling to cope. Communities who lose breadwinners to the disease are simply overwhelmed when faced with the challenge of drought or other natural or man-made disasters. Meanwhile, governments are also losing talent and resources because of AIDS-related absenteeism and deaths, compromising their ability to help desperate families who can't put food on the table.

When AIDS decimates communities, it also opens the door to other diseases. Weak public health systems combined with food insecurity make people living with HIV especially vulnerable to life-threatening opportunistic infections like TB, malaria and cholera. Without prevention and treatment interventions, these diseases are likely to cut short the lives of the HIV infected.

The Triple Threat can catalyse the spread of HIV throughout communities and countries in several ways: It compromises a government's ability to provide prevention and treatment services; it leaves orphaned children more vulnerable to abuse; it forces women to resort to "survival sex" and, ultimately, it triggers increased migration.

### 5. Long-term, Holistic Approaches Needed

The Triple Threat can cause both short and long-term crises. In the short-term, it may leave communities and governments unable to provide the basics to sustain life - food, health care and shelter. In the longer term, the Triple Threat brings deeper developmental challenges such as poverty, migration and a steep drop in school attendance.

How to face down the Triple Threat? Local governments, UN agencies and NGOs are shifting towards humanitarian interventions that employ a more holistic approach to address both short-term and long-term emergencies. Various UN agencies and government departments are teaming up to avoid duplicating efforts. Food distribution is a good example of combining short-term help with long-term solutions: Emergency food aid is being combined with schemes that promote long-term support, such as garden schemes, irrigation projects and education initiatives aimed at orphans.

#### Key Documents:

- Organising the UN Response to the triple threat of food insecurity, weakened capacity for governance and AIDS, particularly in Southern and Eastern Africa (2003)  
<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/ACOS-64BKR6?OpenDocument>
- "New Variant Famine": AIDS and Food Crisis in Southern Africa by Alex De Waal & Alan Whiteside, The Lancet, Oct. 2003.
- Inter Agency Regional Humanitarian Strategic Framework for Southern Africa (2005)  
[http://www.sahims.net/doclibrary/Sahims\\_Documents/050613\\_och1.pdf](http://www.sahims.net/doclibrary/Sahims_Documents/050613_och1.pdf)

**Useful Websites:**

- Regional Hunger and Vulnerability Programme (RHVP) - Funded by the British and Australian agencies for international development (DFID and AusAID), RHVP was set up in 2005 with the goal of generating some new approaches to southern Africa's chronic vulnerability. The web site has a good selection of background documents and a useful links page.  
<http://www.wahenga.net>
- Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN) - An NGO that promotes debate and knowledge-sharing on poverty reduction in southern Africa. The web site includes links to the latest news and articles relating to food security, HIV/AIDS and governance among other topics. The "Country analysis" section features a wealth of poverty-related documents and information for each country in southern Africa.  
<http://www.sarpn.org.za/>
- Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET) - A UNAIDS site that includes up-to-date reports on the latest food security indicators for some of the most vulnerable countries in southern Africa.  
<http://www.fews.net/>
- The Southern African Humanitarian Information Management Network for a coordinated disaster response (SAHIMS) - A project of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) that pulls together a wealth of documents, data and research on food security, HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, drought and poverty in the region.  
<http://www.sahims.net/>
- ReliefWeb - Another OCHA web site, ReliefWeb has a useful section on southern Africa's humanitarian crisis that includes relevant news reports and press releases and key background documents on the Triple Threat.  
<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/doc106?OpenForm&emid=ACOS-635PKL&rc=1>
- World Food Programme's Southern Africa Crisis page - This section of the WFP's web site focuses specifically on the Triple Threat providing background and the latest updates.  
<http://www.wfp.org/english/?ModuleID=137&Key=1855>

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