

Stimulating Research on HIV/AIDS, Migration and Urbanisation, and Poverty and Inequality: Experiences from three Small Grant Programmes in the SADC region

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Generous grants from the Andrew W Mellon Foundation allowed three Nodes on Migration and Urbanisation, HIV/AIDS, and Poverty and Inequality to invest in capacity building by funding projects with potential for producing good quality research. These Nodes are located at the universities of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, University of Natal in Durban, and University of Cape Town in Cape Town.

This paper examines the context within which these investments were made by arguing that insufficient research has been conducted on the influential role of the inter-section between Gender, Migration, and Poverty in the spread of epidemics such as HIV/AIDS. It then reflects on the process of setting up the small grant programmes to support research in the fields of Migration, Poverty and Inequality, and HIV/AIDS, and shares some important experiences on challenges to research capacity building in Africa. Background documents, and management and organisational issues are reviewed.

A report on training and support of developing country population scientists prepared for the Population Council by a panel of eminent population scientists (Menken *et al* 2000) recognized the need to support population studies research in developing countries by locating such support at selected training institutions. The panel recommended that donor consortiums be developed to provide long-term support to selected universities in the developing world to create centers of excellence for the training of population studies.

These recommendations noted that the long history of failed attempts to support developing-country training institutions had yielded a number of lessons. These lessons suggested that training institutions should be firmly rooted in universities with few exceptions in order to be successful. It also pointed out that support should be long term. The report saw the most important elements of support as being **research grants** (*emphasis added*), computer facilities, libraries, travel grants and funding for transnational exchanges (Menken *et al*, 2000).

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The choice of institutions to which support would be directed was to be influenced by the recognition that such investments were long term and expensive. As such the recommendation made to donors was that the most effective strategy was to ‘focus on a small number of carefully selected universities starting with those that have a base of local support and the potential for strong leadership.’ (Menken *et al*, 2000: 5). The panel noted that directing support to local institutions would ensure that they were responding to locally determined research agenda.

The recommendations highlighted above led to the choice of the Universities of Cape Town, University of Natal Durban, and University of the Witwatersrand for support to establish centers of training in population studies and also for support to the tri-nodal investment to support research in Poverty and Inequality, HIV/AIDS, and Migration and Urbanisation located at the three universities respectively. These three areas were seen to represent sources of the most enduring challenges to population policy and therefore high priority areas in development in the region.

For the Southern African region, research agenda in population studies and specifically in the areas of HIV/AIDS, Migration and Urbanization, and Poverty and Inequality is shaped by several important factors related to industrial production, political exigencies, and recent or emerging development imperatives in the context of heightened need for regional cooperation and integration. In particular, the impact of circular male dominated labour migration driven by the unholy convergence of mining and industrial workforce needs and apartheid legislation has indelibly marked the regional economies, family configurations and health. The region also lagged behind other African countries in benefiting from funding for population research due to its late emergence from colonial and apartheid era.

The relationship between migration, poverty and HIV/AIDS must be understood within the structural, political and socio-economic context that regulated labour and human movement and settlement in Southern Africa. This relationship between the three would lead us to the inevitable conclusion that the rapid spread of epidemics including HIV/AIDS can be partly attributed and indeed is a result of the fertile grounds prepared by the way they have historically ‘inter-sected’ in Southern Africa. The coinciding paternal social context prevailing in the communities in this region added fuel to the spread of epidemics such as tuberculosis with a predominantly male mobile labour migrant population acting as the primary carriers. Thus patterns of poverty, migration and vulnerability to epidemics were ‘gendered’ rendering it futile to look at any one of them in isolation. Re-examining this historical ‘inter-section’ and recent changes has the potential to help us understand the relationship between gender, under-development, migration and the spread of epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and possibly propose new areas of research capacity that need to be strengthened.

The value of such an understanding would not be for scholarly interest only but can provide the basis for new policy responses to issues of gender empowerment, development initiatives, and appropriate responses to the challenges posed by an epidemic such as HIV/AIDS. Insights into the role of legislation in migration trends, patterns, and consequences can greatly assist in devising appropriate management and mitigative measures from communities, governments, and international agencies.

Conventional approaches to the relationship between migration and HIV/AIDS as with other infectious diseases have rarely looked beyond the agents responsible for the spread of the diseases into the underlying structural context at the sending and receiving communities. Thus, much effort is expended in studying patterns, trends and role played in the spread of the diseases among such groups as truck drivers, commercial sex workers, refugees, internally displaced persons and other mobile populations engaged in trade, and circulatory labour.

Very little effort has been directed at examining the underlying often-complex structural context and within where migration and HIV/AIDS infection occurs. Where such work has been done, it has tended to look at either the economic calculus of household decision-making or has been limited to looking at labour force participation rates and accompanying migration patterns. Few studies have delved into the evolution of legislation aimed at controlling human population movement, their implications for development patterns and trends in African countries. Even fewer have extended their interest to how this context relates to the often 'gendered' contours marking the spread of epidemics such as HIV/AIDS.

The work done under the three Nodes provides an opportunity to stimulate debate on the three areas and how they inter-sect as this paper attempts to do. It also stimulates multi-disciplinary research on the three areas and promises to provide opportunities for researchers in the region to strengthen their capacity and be drawn into a regional network of population scientists.