

SARPN & Oxfam Seminar on
Poverty, HIV/AIDS and Inequality in Southern Africa

Seminar Paper

HIV/AIDS,
Poverty &
Inequality

HIV/AIDS and inequality in South Africa

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Introduction

South Africa is undergoing one of the most devastating times in its history after the demise of the apartheid system. Poverty and HIV/AIDS have a symbiotic relationship in present day South Africa in general, and black communities in particular. This symbiotic relationship between HIV/AIDS and poverty has often created some confusion particularly around the causes of HIV/AIDS. It has led to people, particularly those who occupy the highest echelons of power, into thinking that poverty is the main cause of HIV/AIDS. This is a very dangerous and problematic view of dealing with this pandemic that is decimating the people of our country.

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Background

When dealing with the issue of poverty and inequality, we need to look back at South Africa's unpleasant history. South Africa has had one of the most brutal forms of colonial oppression and exploitation that has ever been practised by man against man. For almost four centuries, the indigenous people of South Africa have been subjected to a system of exploitation that has been unparalleled in the history of mankind. Slave labour, forced labour and cheap labour have been used interchangeably by the successive colonial/settler regimes who have been occupying South Africa since 1652. The discovery of diamonds and gold in the latter part of the 1800's, led to the further dispossession of land from the black people of South Africa. The colonial powers of the time made it a point that the Africans should be confined to the "reserves" so that they can supply the mining and agricultural industry with an unending cheap labour. This system further eroded what was left of normal African family life because it led to the introduction of the inhuman migrant labour system. Under this system, African males were forced to supply labour cheaply on the mines and farms.

Burgers Park
Hotel

Pretoria
South Africa

South African colonialism has been distinct from other forms of colonialism in the sense that the colonial "master" was never based in another country. The colonialists shared the same territory with the people whom they were oppressing. This has led to some literature to correctly argue that the South African colonialism is a "colonialism of a special type". Under this form of colonialism, the colonialist has always been omnipotent over the colonised, both physically and psychologically.

The oppressed has always been taught about how inferior he is, how he must behave or conduct himself in the presence of the master and, finally, how he must accept the situation that the colonialist has imposed upon him. This form of oppression and exploitation, I want to argue, was the basis upon which the system of apartheid was to be founded.

When the Nationalist Party took power in 1948, a new chapter in South African historiography was opened. The new regime soon introduced a battery of laws that were designed to keep the Africans in the condition of perpetual oppression and exploitation. These laws prohibited the Africans from participating in the political processes of the country.

Suddenly, Africans became aliens in the country of their birth. Along came a new system of "locations" and "townships" that were built next to the white areas as a form of supplying cheap labour for the growing industry. To further encourage the oppression of the African majority, the pass laws were intensified in a large scale for the sole purpose of controlling their movement. The townships, by their own nature, were designed to make the life of Africans as difficult as possible. There was no proper sanitation, few schools and the health system was almost non-existent.

The South African Context - Poverty, HIV/AIDS and Inequality

HIV/AIDS affects mostly the black poor communities in our country. This does not suggest that those who are economically well off are not affected. They are also affected but not at the same scale as the other black majority.

There are many reasons that are causing this situation amongst which are:

Unemployment: The high unemployment rate in our country perpetuates the spread of HIV/AIDS in one way or the other. Women in general and young girls in particular, are forced to have unprotected sex with their partners because of the scarcity of resources. If in the relationship, it is the male partner who is working, he wields immense power. His partner is supposed to do what she is being told to do. Many women who are unemployed depend on their partners for their survival. They are their objects. In return, these male partners tend to be involved in multiple sexual relationships. That is why we are today facing this unending vicious cycle of infections and re-infections in our communities.

Education: Most African people are not educated. This is because of the legacy of apartheid capitalism. Our people were discouraged from pursuing education as they were expected to become cheap labourers. As a result of this, many people are ignorant when it comes to serious issues particularly, HIV/AIDS. Because of this lack of education, people do not want to talk openly about HIV/AIDS. On the contrary, those people who were lucky to have proper education are not as vulnerable to HIV/AIDS as their counterparts. This does not mean that there are no literate or semi-literate people who are infected with HIV/AIDS. There are those who are infected, but not in the same rate as those who are not literate.

Lack of recreational facilities: In the townships this is one of the causes for the increase in numbers of people who get infected with the HIVirus. Many young people are introduced to substance abuse very early in their lives.

It is mostly from the shebeens that you find where young people got infected with HIV. It is important to note here that it is rare not to find company if you go to a shebben in Khayelitsha, Nyanga or Gugulethu if you are driving the latest car and have money. Strangely enough, these youths who are wasting their lives in these places do not see themselves as vulnerable to HIV infection. If you compare this to the youth in the suburbs you find a totally different picture. They have access to the best schools in the land, they are taught life skills very early in their lives and they grow up in an environment that is devoid of crime and violence.

Unequal health system: In South Africa there are two systems of health service delivery, the private and the public. The private health system is lilly-white, well serviced and well funded. On the other hand you have the public health system that is predominantly black, under funded, has staff shortages and is overcrowded. This is the stark reality that you find in South Africa today. The implications of this is that you find demoralised staff at the public

health sector. Nurses and doctors are leaving the public health sector for the private sector. Large numbers of these health workers decide to find better paying jobs in overseas countries. These people, unfortunately, leave with the much sought after expertise. This leaves communities with poor service delivery. What is strange is that both these systems are funded by the same government.

With the high prevalence rates the situation cannot be allowed to continue unchecked. Bearing in mind that out of the estimated 6.3 million South Africans who are living with HIV/AIDS, the majority rely solely on the public sector. That is why organisations such as the Treatment Action Campaign are of the view that this must come to a stop and there is need to narrow the gap between the private and public health sectors.

Conclusion

Inequality, it must be noted here, is the main cause of poverty in South Africa today. Resources are not distributed equally among the South African population. People who are poor are trapped in dire poverty so that it is extremely difficult for them to escape the situation that they find themselves in. That is why it is often said that HIV/AIDS is predominantly a poor people's disease. The combination of poverty, violence, social chaos and the disempowerment status of women facilitate the transmission of HIV. HIV/AIDS increases the risk of a household or individual becoming impoverished, and lowers the general level of health in communities because of its close relationship with other communicable and poverty related diseases such as tuberculosis. Today some politicians and scientists will exacerbate the situation by denying the existence of HIV and blaming the disease solely on lifestyle and poverty. Such misunderstandings are willingly used by politicians, who militate against rigorous AIDS prevention programs.