

# Better Nutrition & the Battle Against HIV/AIDS in Uganda

By Elizabeth Dalziel

Since the late 1980s, Uganda has been at the forefront in combating the AIDS crisis. President Museveni was the first African president to acknowledge the widespread problem, but infection rates had already reached nearly 30 percent.

Today, many people living with HIV/AIDS cannot meet basic food needs because they are unable to work. As a result, households have adopted harmful coping strategies like reduced food intake and diet substitution with cheaper and less nutritious foods. The duty of caring for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS has put strains on families, since grandparents or older siblings often assume responsibility but cannot provide sufficiently. As a result, HIV/AIDS has exposed the affected households to chronic food insecurity.

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ACDI/VOCA has responded to this crisis by implementing a USAID-funded Title II food distribution program targeted at households affected by HIV/AIDS. In January 2002, in collaboration with Africare, World Vision, Catholic Relief Services and the AIDS Support Organization, ACDI/VOCA began to alleviate food insecurity among 12,000 of the neediest households affected by HIV/AIDS in Uganda, thus improving health and promoting financial stability.

Currently, more than 61,000 beneficiaries in twelve districts benefit from monthly food rations of corn soy blend (CSB) and vegetable oil distributed at 109 local distribution points.



Nutritional banners highlight the benefits of corn-soy blend and offer guidelines on maintaining a balanced diet to stay healthy.

Nutrition information banners, developed by ACDI/VOCA, are used in conjunction with informational presentations on nutrition and are displayed prominently at all food distribution centers (see photo above). The banners highlight the benefits of CSB and vegetable oil and offer guidelines for maintaining a balanced diet and recipes that integrate the distributed food into the beneficiaries' existing diets. The percentage of beneficiaries who know at least two CSB recipes has increased by 62 percent since the program started, proving their usefulness.

The program has had a significant impact on participants. Their nutritional awareness and practices have improved, diet diversity has grown and the number of times meals are consumed a day by the beneficiaries has increased due to the more consistent availability of food in the beneficiaries' households. Additionally, there has been an improvement in the nutritional status of children in beneficiary communities, with fewer underweight children now than at the start of the program. The number of beneficiaries unable to work due to their illness has decreased by more than 50

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*From previous page*

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percent, and focus group discussions have confirmed that beneficiaries are experiencing fewer and shorter periods of illness. With fewer children needing to work for food, more can now attend school and are getting higher grades and gaining confidence. Participating households have reported that child attendance at school is significantly higher.

ACDI/VOCA also incorporates beneficiaries into the agricultural component of the USAID Title II P.L. 480 program since families affected by HIV/AIDS often face devastating reductions in income following the death of heads of households. ACDI/VOCA encourages the associations and cooperatives with which it works to coordinate with distribution partners to realize this effort.

ACDI/VOCA has recently acquired additional USAID funding to carry out trainings at many food distribution points. Beneficiaries receive basic information on nutrition, water sanitation, food storage and preparation and other topics that improve the daily health of families.

Access to the services provided through ACDI/VOCA has encouraged many to overcome their fear of discrimination and stigma and to get tested for HIV, thereby helping many potentially vulnerable people stay healthy.

The efforts of ACDI/VOCA will become even more important as anti-retroviral treatments become available to more people in the coming months, as the efficacy of these drugs depends on good nutrition. With its partners, ACDI/VOCA will remain committed to helping HIV-infected Ugandans live healthy and productive lives.

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