

Ageing, Livelihoods and HIV/AIDS Briefing Notes.....No: 3a

Cultivation

Key Points:

- Cultivation plays a pivotal role in the livelihoods of elderly headed households.
- *Mahangu* is cultivated by all and holds material as well as symbolic value
- The elderly are expert farmers who diversify crops and use traditional knowledge of inter-cropping and companion planting to enhance yields.
- Elderly cultivation activities are increasingly risk-prone resulting in lower yields.

Omashisha baskets for storing Mahangu



This briefing examines the significance of cultivation to households headed by the elderly, their cultivation practices and the contemporary pressures they face.

Mahangu (Pearl Millet): Symbolic and material importance

All households in the study were engaged in the cultivation of *Mahangu* (Pearl Millet) that is the staple for rural households not just in Omusati but in the North Central region as a whole. As one elderly female commented '*Mahangu is important because it gives us strength*'. Once harvested *Mahangu* is stored in *Omashisha* baskets and consumed throughout the year. The cultivation of Mahangu is also of symbolic importance in Owambo culture and particularly for the elderly defines rural life – '*without Mahangu we are nothing*'. Household activities are structured around the cultivation of Mahangu that is rain fed. Ploughing and sowing take place following the first rains in December, thereafter activities revolve around weeding and bird scaring until the harvest. None of the elderly households used tractors to plough, most used a plough (*Oshipolo*) drawn by either cattle, donkeys or household members. Because Mahangu is rain-fed, successive years of poor rainfall (with the exception of our fieldwork year) have resulted in poor harvests. The introduction of Okashana, drought resistant pearl millet was cited by many as an important intervention. Approximately half of all elderly households grew Okashana with traditional Mahangu.

Other Seasonal Cultivation

Although cropping Mahangu (pearl millet) is universally important, **the elderly were more likely to cultivate other crops** than younger households. They were also more likely to cultivate legumes often through intercropping as well as engage in companion cropping.



Not only do such practices often increase yields but such diversification protects household food security should one crop fail. Other crops cultivated include beans (97% of elderly households), sorghum (96%), melons (94%), maize (93%), groundnuts (93%), pumpkins (28%), tomatoes (13%). While most are used for household consumption, Sorghum is used by the elderly to brew alcohol (tombo) that they can then sell on.

The elderly as innovative, expert farmers

The research revealed that such diversification and in particular companion and intercropping strategies help to preserve soil fertility. Beans are frequently grown with *Mahangu* because they fix atmospheric nitrogen and release nitrogenous compounds into the soil thereby increasing soil fertility. These traditional cultivation practices based on local knowledge of the environment were more prevalent among the elderly. All case study households were aware of Okashana, indeed several had attended agricultural extension meetings when the new seeds were introduced. Case study interviews revealed that many elderly HHs had already developed a strategy for incorporating this new drought resistant crop recognising some of its limitations. One elderly man described why he grew both Okashana as well as traditional Mahangu to protect his harvest - *'Okashana grows faster than Mahangu when the rainfall is low but when the rainfall is high, then the Mahangu grows very well but the Okashana breaks and I would not predict whether the rain is low or high that is why I grow both'*.

Risks to crop production – the vulnerability of elderly households

Elderly headed households are currently facing several threats to their

cultivation activities resulting in a decline in production and threatening household food security. These include:

- Lack of resources (both information and financial) means that not all the elderly can **access Okashana**. It used to be handed out as drought relief but now is only available for purchase.
- With age, the elderly lack the strength and because they have no adult support they **are unable to cultivate all their fields**. *'I harvest less crops now because I am the only one who ploughs and I don't have enough strength'* (Elderly FHH)
- Although drought is the main threat to crops, **pests such as birds and crickets can destroy entire fields**. Traditionally children have performed the energetic task of bird scaring but *'when the children are at school they are unable to run around'* (Elderly FHH)

In the past, the elderly were able to call on neighbours to assist them with tasks such as ploughing and weeding in return for food and a traditional brew through the traditional support system **Enjabi**. Today this has broken down such that the elderly have to pay for such support – many cannot afford to do so.

- The **indirect impacts of HIV/AIDS** are being widely felt by the elderly such that they are the subject of a separate briefing. Households are affected by adult deaths and illness resulting loss of labour, caring also take the elderly away from their fields.

Population Ageing and Sustainable Livelihoods in regions affected by HIV/AIDS is funded by the ESRC (RES-000-22-1427). The project runs from August 2005 until November 2006.

Project website:

<http://www.ageingnamibia.group.shef.ac.uk>

The Research Team:

Principal Investigators:

Dr Deborah Sporton (University of Sheffield)

d.sporton@shef.ac.uk

Mt Alfons Mosimane (UNAM) amosimane@unam.na

UNAM Research Fellows: Johanna Mbandi, Samson Mulonga