

A Virus, Democracy, and Sustainable Society: The Experience of Community-based HIV/AIDS Initiatives among the Gurage, Southern Ethiopia

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Abstract

The ideas of democracy and sustainability seem to collide in many respects. HIV/AIDS is one field in which such problems have become evident. We assume that our societies will be more sustainable if we are able to eliminate the virus. However, our societies will be more democratic if we consider that those living with the virus are an essential part of us.

In this paper, I describe community-based HIV/AIDS initiatives promoted by different stakeholders in the Gurage Zone of southern Ethiopia. One such initiative is a pre-marriage testing campaign that was supposed to prevent transmission from young males who migrate to urban centers in search of job opportunities. Another initiative described in this paper is the “plow your neighbor’s garden” campaign, which requires community members to provide free labor for households affected by HIV/AIDS. Currently, debates are underway locally regarding the relevance of these initiatives.

Based on the experience of the Gurage, I discuss some important aspects of HIV/AIDS initiatives that lead to a sustainable and democratic society in the face of the epidemic. I propose the affirmation of discordance as the key idea. The active involvement of community members in promoting universal testing and supporting households affected by HIV/AIDS are among the key practices that lead to the affirmation of discordance.