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# The Southern African Food Security Crisis, Causes and Responses

Sue Mbaya

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# *Food Security in Southern Africa*

Causes and responses  
from the region

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THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN FOOD SECURITY CRISIS  
CAUSES AND RESPONSES:  
*A Regional overview*

**Sue Mbaya**

Compassion Ministries Harare

## **1. Introduction**

Over the last few decades, Southern African governments have identified the eradication or alleviation of poverty as a key objective of developmental programmes. In spite of these repeated articulations and ongoing efforts poverty levels have not fallen. In fact, poverty has gradually worsened culminating in the present region-wide food crisis. The crisis will affect over 15 million people through impacts ranging from lack of access to food, food insecurity, malnutrition, and possibly famine. The ongoing food crisis has had a significant toll and brought great suffering to many in the region. However, within the spectre of starvation and collapse lie opportunities for key players in the region, both governmental and non-governmental, to identify and address the factors underlying the vulnerability that has allowed the prevailing crisis to develop. This treatise aims to give an overview of the factors underlying this crisis, some of the key responses to it, the lessons that have been learnt from it to date and the opportunities for intervention.

## **2. Baseline Livelihood Patterns**

The economies of Southern African countries are a function of their rural and urban subsets. In many of these countries the rural and urban economies are interlinked and closely related. The majority of the people of Southern Africa are rural with agriculture as their main source of livelihood. In addition to most people in the region relying on agriculture, most of the countries in the region also have agriculture as one of the main contributors to their economies. At the same time, three quarters of the poor live and work in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> This gives agrarian economies special significance in the region and particularly in the discussion around poverty and food security. For this reason, agrarian factors may appear to dominate this overview.

While agriculture is the main source of livelihood most agrarian households, both commercial and non-commercial, diversify their sources of income within the overall framework of an agricultural existence. Hence, households frequently combine cropping for subsistence purposes with cash cropping. In addition, they may raise livestock. Here, land is the main resource for household livelihood and food security. Land is also a main vehicle to invest, accumulate wealth, and to transfer it between generations.

<sup>1</sup> IFAD, 2001

In those parts of the region where water bodies are prominent, such as certain parts of Malawi, fishing may be the main source of livelihood which is then supplemented by agricultural activity such as the cultivation of cassava. A key difference between the commercial and smallholder sub sectors is the fact that in the case of the smallholder sector, households generally derive a greater proportion of their livelihood from non-cash activities while the situation tends to be the reverse within the commercial agrarian sub sector.

An important livelihood source for many rural people in the region is that of "off-farm" income. This is income that is derived from a location that is separate from the farmer's holding. Sources of off-farm income include seasonal or contract labour and small-scale income generating activities, such as the retailing of various commodities, gold panning etc. While most communities do employ a mixed set of activities as their livelihood strategy, the choice of the main livelihood activity frequently varies by age group and by gender. For instance, younger men and women are often more likely to choose off-farm activities, in the case of young women - particularly non-agricultural ones - as their key livelihood activities. On the other hand, older people are often more likely to rely on on-farm income sources.

Away from rural areas, in the peri-urban zones, income from non-agricultural sources becomes an increasingly more significant component of the livelihood strategy. Agricultural activity often becomes gradually less significant a contributor to livelihood as one approaches the urban areas where urban agriculture tends to be a secondary source of income for those engaging in it, with non-agricultural income sources predominating.

A mixed livelihood strategy is generally acknowledged as being more resilient than a livelihood strategy that is based on a single activity. The basis of this premise is that the disruption of one livelihood activity does not then automatically signify the absence of a livelihood source. The implication of this is that even though most communities or groups within communities recognise a particular activity as their main source of livelihood, there will be occasions where, as part of their recovery strategy during times of stress, such communities or groups rely on a secondary activity as their primary source of livelihood.

### **3. The Extent of the Crisis**

The current food crisis has affected all countries of the Southern Africa region. However, countries in the region have been affected differentially. While the majority of the countries have been so badly affected so as to require external food aid, a few have been able to contain the situation and to

mobilise internal resources in response to the hardship experienced by their people. This overview will examine some of the factors underlying these differences.

Two of the indicators that have been used to assess the extent of the food crisis in each country are; the number of people requiring emergency food aid and the levels of malnutrition in children under the age of five. The performance of the countries in the region in relation to these indicators is compared in Table 1. From these and other indicators, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi have been recognised to be the worst affected.

Table 1. The Extent of the Food Crisis in Southern African Countries

Country	People Needing Food Aid <sup>2</sup> (%) of Population	Malnutrition in Children Under Five	
		Wasting	Stunting
Lesotho	34%	7.5%	34.7%
Malawi	31%	6%	49%
Mozambique	3%	5.5%	43.8%
Swaziland	28%	2.2%	40%
Zambia	28%	4.4%	39.9%
Zimbabwe	52%	7.3%	49.3%

*Sources: SADC, 2002a; SADC 2002b*

Factors underlying the ongoing poverty and the current food crisis are varied but generally include transitory shocks to production systems, weak economic growth performance resulting from unsuccessful macro-economic policies, poor balance of payments situations and highly skewed patterns of income and wealth distribution resulting from past colonial policies.

<sup>2</sup> September 2002 through March 2003

## **4. The Food Crisis: Emerging Trends**

### *4.1 Vulnerable groups*

#### **(a) Women and girls**

Reference is often made to the feminisation of poverty. This usually incorporates the following dynamics:

- traditional and societal gender roles that keep women at the lower rungs of the social ladder in manner that compromises women's access to resources, entitlements and assets
- traditional and societal gender roles that restrict women to tasks that are valued lowly or unpaid
- that most women are in the informal sector where there is greater risk of their labour being poorly remunerated
- that women constitute the majority of those living in poor rural areas
- that women tend to major on subsistent, food production efforts as opposed to cash generating endeavours which tend to be the domain of men

The social and economic factors listed above have the effect of compromising the food security situation of households that are headed by women. It is therefore no surprise that female-headed households have been found to be more adversely affected by the current food crisis than male headed households. Female-headed households have also been found to be more significantly represented in the poor and very poor wealth categories than male-headed households.<sup>3</sup>

#### **(b) Children**

The Southern African humanitarian crisis has enormous implications for children, since 60 per cent of the region's population are aged under 18.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore logical to estimate that over half of the 15 million people to be affected by the crisis will be children. The effects of the ongoing crisis on children have been summarised as follows:

<sup>3</sup> *SADC 2002a*

<sup>4</sup> *SCF, 2002b*



## BOX 1

### Key Issues for Children

- ▶ Acute levels of malnutrition are threatening the lives of children across the region.
- ▶ Children and their families are at risk of being displaced from their homes as they are forced to leave in search of food.
- ▶ Children are being removed from school to work and to help their families find or pay for food.
- ▶ Children are vulnerable to high-risk behaviour including prostitution, in order to procure food. High rates of HIV/AIDS have left many child-headed households increasingly vulnerable to food shortages.

*Source: SCF, 2002b*

Young children, whose bodies are in their formative years and whose resistance and stamina are much lower than those of grown ups have been severely impacted by the current food shortages. Under such conditions children tend to be more susceptible to illnesses than adults. Another effect of the food crisis relating to children has been absenteeism from school. Children sometimes miss school in order to assist the family to secure food. Alternatively children who have to walk long distances to get to school stop going to school because they are too hungry to walk the distances involved. For instance according to the Zimbabwe National Vulnerability Assessment Committee, 18 per cent of households in the country have removed one or more children from school as a coping mechanism in response to the lack of food. The immediate and long-term consequences of such disruption to children's education can be considerable.

The SADC Vulnerability Assessment Committee assessments carried out at the end of 2002 revealed that although chronic malnutrition is prevalent, severe malnutrition exists in pockets, and not as the norm. Malnutrition levels among children (measured by weight-for-height) were found to be below the 10-15% thresholds that qualify a crisis to be termed a famine.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> SADC 2002a

### (c) Farm workers

Farm workers represent an appreciable proportion of the rural populations in several countries in the region, such as Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe the farm worker community represents 12 to 15% of the total population. Farm workers tend to be among the most impoverished and vulnerable groups. They tend to have limited food security, education and access to health services. They also have inadequate shelter, water and sanitation facilities. Their earnings are generally inadequate to meet basic family needs and therefore must be supplemented by subsistent food production.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, these statistics would make farm worker communities among the most vulnerable to food insecurity, and they have been.

In the case of Zimbabwe, the displacement of large numbers of farm workers as an outcome of the land reform process has added a significant dimension of vulnerability to lives of farm worker communities. Not only has household food security been severely undermined as a consequence of the loss of employment, but social safety mechanisms that were in place to cater for the weaker members of these communities were disrupted leaving many orphans, the elderly and the disabled destitute.

### (d) Those affected by HIV/AIDS

Over the last few years, HIV/AIDS has emerged as a key developmental factor on the continent. During this period an important relationship has evolved between HIV/AIDS and food insecurity.<sup>7</sup> Those who are affected spend more time on patient care or seeking medical attention than on productive activities. They also spent more resources on medical bills than on income-generating activities. Similarly, they have less energy and motivation for food production and other income generating activities. These factors have the tendency of reducing the vibrancy of this group of people and increasing their vulnerability to food insecurity.

## 4.2 Coping Strategies

One of the most common coping strategies in times of food insecurity is that of reducing food consumption. In badly affected parts of Zimbabwe households have sought to cope with the situation by initially eating smaller portions. As scarcity of food supplies becomes worse families intensify their efforts at coping by skipping a meal during the day. This gradually graduates

<sup>6</sup> *Mayo et. al., 2000*

<sup>7</sup> *see the section on HIV/AIDS as a determinant of food insecurity*

to skipping several meals per day. In extreme cases, families then resort to skipping whole days without eating a proper meal. This extreme response has negative consequences on daily routine. Hence, school children who have to walk long distances to school begin to miss school in response to the need to conserve energy. Similarly, household chores and work requiring significant manual strength suffer. This trend has been observed in other parts of the region. About 80% of households surveyed in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland Zambia and Zimbabwe indicated that they had already changed their consumption patters in response to the ongoing food insecurity.<sup>8</sup>

The change of food consumption patterns is frequently accompanied by strategies to increase the household's financial resource base in order to increase the household's access to scarce (and therefore more dear) commodities. Strategies to increase the resource base may include income generating activities or money saving strategies. Frequently both types of are employed simultaneously.

Coping strategies with negative long-term consequences have also been observed. Perhaps the most commonly recognised are prostitution by women and girls, theft and other criminal/illegal activities such as gold panning, the selling of valuable household assets and the eating of wild grasses, fruits and leaves whose potential side-effects may be unknown.

Community based coping mechanisms have also been instituted in response to the prevailing crisis. One such response in Zimbabwe has involved reverting to the traditional practice of community food reserves. In the past, some cultural groups in the country had a practice of keeping what might be referred to as a community food bank. This involved community members (in addition to their own food production), participating in cultivating and producing a communal food reserve at the premises of traditional leader (or alternatively contributing to the food bank from their own harvest). This reserve would be kept under the supervision of the traditional leader and the food distributed to vulnerable community members in times of hardship when their own resources fell into short supply.

<sup>8</sup> SADC, 2002b

### 4.3 *The Urban Gap*

While it is true that the majority of the poor and vulnerable live in rural areas, it is also true that a significant number of poor people live in urban and peri-urban areas. This is especially the case in countries that have a significant informal settlement problem in urban areas, such as Zambia. In spite of this, very little has been unearthed concerning the food insecurity situation in urban and peri-urban areas. For instance the recent SADC Vulnerability Assessment Committee assessment report<sup>9</sup>, only included urban data for Zimbabwe and Zambia. There exists an important gap.

## **5. Recent Determinants of Food Security**

The causes underlying the current and ongoing food crisis in the region are varied and in some respects, complex. In many fora the prevailing crisis is attributed to climatic events over the last three seasons. Firstly, in 1999 floods associated with Cyclone Eline, disrupted the agricultural season resulting in poor harvests particularly in parts of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. This disruption was followed by two years that were characterised by drought. In this way, irregular rainfall seasons have had a significant contributory role to the current crisis. However drought conditions are not solely responsible for the current situation. Other, significant factors can be recognised including fundamental issues such as poor planning and forecasting capacity, pricing and distribution dynamics; emerging, adverse trends including HIV/AIDS; economic and agricultural policies, whose relative impact depend on countries.

In addition to the factors tabled above, another factor has begun to emerge as a significant contributing force to regional food security. It is that of regional and international trade agreements that compromise the capacity of countries in the region to develop their production systems and markets in favour of northern production systems.

### 5.1 Economic Considerations

Many of the countries in Southern Africa are characterised by poor macroeconomic structures. Countries in the region generally exhibit low rates of economic growth. The challenge for the region is to increase and sustain rates of growth in order to prevent the incidence of poverty.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, most of the countries in the region exhibit lower economic growth rates than those required in order to prevent the incidence of poverty. For instance, Zimbabwe experienced improved food access in the

<sup>9</sup> covered six countries; Zimbabwe, Zambia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique and Malawi

<sup>10</sup> SAPES, UNDP, SADC, 2000

smallholder sector between 1990 and the year 2000. This was due to previously subsistent farmers progressively undertaking other income generating activities. The income earned would be used to supplement crop production and to ensure access to food when the harvested food items were depleted. In this way food security was gradually enhanced. However, since the year 2000, the deteriorating economic climate has reversed those gains. In addition to negative growth rates, the escalating inflation rate (currently well into the three digit range) has worsened the position of the poor as their incomes have failed to keep up with escalating commodity prices, gradually eroding their buying power. In this way, the food access of both the rural and urban poor has been decreased.

Another economic factor has been working to further compromise the food security situation in Zimbabwe. Following several seasons of reduced food accessibility, Zimbabwe has been forced to consider the importation of many foodstuffs. The implementation of this response has been limited by shortage of foreign funds.<sup>11</sup> In the face of inadequate local production and insufficient imports, food shortages have gradually intensified causing further escalations in prices and ultimately worsening food insecurity.

The failing economy in Zimbabwe has affected rural households from another angle. Households have been impacted by the reduction in the level of remittances that they receive from city-based family members. The reason for this is that urban dwellers have been gradually realising declining real incomes as a result of the inflationary economy and high unemployment levels (over 65%). The ability of household, both rural and urban, to save in preparation of lean times has also been significantly impacted, worsening their vulnerability.

The deteriorating economic situation in Zimbabwe has had many ramifications. Since the year 2000 the resulting mounting food insecurity has seen some Zimbabweans turning increasingly towards illegal income-generating initiatives, some of them with cross-border implications. Informal or illegal exports of commodities such as sugar into neighbouring countries became prevalent. Initially these trading activities had the effect of depressing the local markets of the recipient countries. As time has progressed, the informal cross-border trade has contributed to the shortage of commodities in the exporting country, while ameliorating the situation in the recipient country. This can be illustrated by the example of informal exports from Mozambique and Tanzania to Malawi and Zambia. The estimated levels have been high enough to have helped to reduce the cereal gap in Malawi and Zambia.

<sup>11</sup> caused in part, by poor agricultural production as a result of the disruptions to the commercial farming sector and in part by the dwindling manufacturing industry

The issue of decreased remittances has also been a significant factor in Lesotho. The economy of Lesotho has traditionally been dependent on South Africa primarily due to the significant levels of expatriate remittances received from South Africa. In recent years there has been a significant downward trend in employment opportunities in South Africa and an increase in retrenchments. The resulting reduction in remittance income has had a negative impact on household income and ultimately household food security.<sup>12</sup>

The SADC Regional Human Development Report of 2000 indicated that many of the economies of the region had a structural deficiency, exhibiting an unhealthy dependence on agriculture. The stabilising influence of the manufacturing industry was said to be on the decline. This structural deficiency meant that the countries of the region were compromised with respect to their capacity to ameliorate against the impact of shocks to their agricultural production systems. This has subsequently been demonstrated by the fact that the recent disturbances to agricultural production in the different countries (whatever the source of these disturbances), subsequently contributed significantly to the present food crisis. In contrast, the two countries in the region that have a less pronounced reliance on agriculture, South Africa and Botswana, have been observed to have suffered much less from the consequences of the shocks to their agricultural production systems. In the case of Botswana dry conditions and production shortfalls have affected the household food security of poor households. The situation has been managed internally with the affected households receiving assistance from government. No requests have been made to the international community for humanitarian assistance.<sup>13</sup>

## 5.2 A Structural Issue?

Maize is the staple food for the majority of countries in Southern Africa. In the remaining countries maize is still a significant food source. In Zimbabwe for instance, the official consumption requirement for maize is 1.8 million tonnes per annum.<sup>14</sup> Zimbabwe has the capacity to produce enough maize for domestic consumption however, over the past 6 years, Zimbabwe has tended to produce harvest below self sufficiency levels.<sup>15</sup> This trend is fairly common across Southern Africa. Evidence from Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia confirms the fact that millions of people in the region do not produce sufficient maize from which they can subsist.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> SADC 2002a; Abbot, 2002

<sup>13</sup> SADC, 2002b

<sup>14</sup> *The Farmer*, April 3, 2001

<sup>15</sup> *The Farmer*, October 17, 2000

<sup>16</sup> Abbot, 2003

Clearly then, there is a serious issue with respect to national food availability within the region. This has the effect of increasing the demand for the product, giving rise to the need to import. Invariably, it is more expensive for countries in the region to import a tonne of maize than to produce it domestically. The difference between these two costs, the import parity, is subsequently reflected in the maize prices which become elevated. In the case of Malawi this scenario resulted in 2002 maize prices that were beyond the reach of most rural households. This gave rise to a food access problem in addition to the food availability one. The Malawi situation is particularly worrying. A recent analysis noted that even though already considered high, consumer maize prices are likely to now increase after being abnormally low over the last couple years as a result of the export parity. This has led to the analysis proposing that the Malawi maize crisis is a continuing, structural problem.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of recurring commodity deficiencies raises the question of planning and forecasting. Proper planning and forecasting in this regard would take into consideration anticipated production levels in relation to projected demand. This way, seasonal shortfalls would be identified in advance and the appropriate steps taken to avert impending disaster. The case of Zimbabwe can be used to illustrate this point. At national level Zimbabwe is one of the countries in the Southern Africa region with the capacity to produce enough maize for domestic consumption. For instance, during the 1999/2000 season Zimbabwe's maize production was in surplus of domestic requirements. When a joint FAO and the World Food Programme (WFP) forecasted a shortfall for the 2001/2002 maize harvest and the need to import, government failed to act on this information timeously, contributing to the resulting crisis. This and other instances of failing to forecast accurately or failing to react to forecasts received, point to the need for greater capacity in the areas of planning and early warning systems. In the case of Zimbabwe there was an additional factor to be considered, that of political intervention. Food shortages forecasted and published by the technical division of the agricultural ministry were both contested and ignored by the political levels within the ministry; an example of political imperatives taking precedence.

The issue of recurring maize shortages also raises the question of the appropriateness of maize as a staple food in the region. Being non-indigenous to the region, maize crops often fail in many of the areas that experience moisture stress. In the case of Zimbabwe, this constitutes approximately two thirds of the country. And yet, maize is planted widely throughout the region in preference to crops that are more resilient to moisture stress, e.g. sorghum

<sup>17</sup> Rubey, 2002

and millet. The relative susceptibility of maize to failure as a result of moisture stress has had the effect of increasing the vulnerability of many rural households to food insecurity.

### 5.3 The Contribution of Some Recent Policies

The land reform programme in Zimbabwe and associated policies have been the subject of considerable scrutiny and commentary. The “fast-track” manner in which the second phase of the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme was implemented set up a situation which the state could not support and develop in a sustainable manner. Also fairly widely reported and discussed has been the significant decrease in cereal production as a result of the disruption to commercial farming operations. Downstream effects of this disruption now include reduced availability of:

- cereal products
- oil seed products (mainly soya beans) and hence valuable nutritional oil products
- stock feeds and therefore
- dairy products

While the politically motivated assertion that the commercial farming sector did not feed Zimbabwe<sup>18</sup> can be said to have been accurate as far as maize was concerned, events have subsequently proved the assertion to be inaccurate. The shortage of the above-mentioned commercial farming sector outputs has contributed appreciably to the levels of food insecurity in the country. These shortages and their effects have been exacerbated by yet another series of government policies, that of price controls.

Faced with its inability to provide agricultural inputs (seed and fertiliser) to resettled farmers as it had promised, the Zimbabwe government began instituting price controls in the year 2001. While the price of key agricultural inputs was fixed to make them more affordable to government, the gazetted prices were unsustainable in terms of production. Shortages of these inputs subsequently became a major problem during the 2002/2003 agricultural season, limiting severely the total hectareage brought under crop. The situation has been further complicated by the emergence of parallel, informal markets for the controlled items. In essence controlled commodities have become inaccessible at the official prices, but more available at the elevated informal market prices. This has worsened the situation by creating “artificial” shortages since many are unable to afford the inputs at these elevated prices.

<sup>18</sup> and therefore that the redistribution of land from white commercial farmers to indigenous small and medial scale farmers would in no way jeopardize the country's maize supplies



#### 5.4 Chronic Vulnerability

It is an accepted fact that the majority of the poor live in rural areas. Rural areas are more at risk from large, transitory shocks induced by climate (droughts, floods, etc.) and from illness and high mortality (due to the relatively poor health care services). The poor are especially vulnerable to such risks.<sup>19</sup> Invariably, communities have developed coping mechanisms to mitigate against such shocks and to ameliorate against their vulnerability to them. However, in most countries in the region, pockets of chronic vulnerability can be found. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the drier regions of the country tend to experience the most acute food insecurity and hence the need for food aid. Here, food insecurity has become chronic.

Chronic vulnerability has been identified as one of the main contributing factors to the current food crisis in Lesotho. The causes responsible for this chronic vulnerability have been said to include:<sup>20</sup>

- Loss of household income due to retrenchment and reduced employment (most notably South African employment);
- Reduced purchasing power due to much higher costs of food and inputs
- Increasing household expenditure on items associated with long term illness and death (highly linked with HIV/AIDs);
- Reduced land planted due to heavy rainfall, reduced use of inputs and chronic illness;
- Government policies on subsidizing inputs which encourage farming households to delay their planting to wait for inputs (which often arrive late); and
- Poor agricultural practices that result in low productivity.

The significance of chronic vulnerability is that it greatly impacts the community's capacity to bounce back from the shocks that may be experienced. In many cases, the coping mechanisms are severely compromised to the extent that they are no longer viable.

A possible source of future chronic vulnerability can be observed in Mozambique. While the 2001/2002 season saw reasonable yields being produced in the northern parts of the country, the southern parts were less productive. The food insecurity situation subsequently experienced in the southern and central parts of the country was in part, as a result of the poor infrastructural linkages that limited the efficient distribution of available food stocks. In this way the underdeveloped communication systems may give rise to the chronic vulnerability of communities in remote areas.

<sup>19</sup> IFAD, 2001

<sup>20</sup> Abbot, 2002

## 5.5 HIV/AIDS: A causal/effect factor

The impact of HIV/AIDS on food security has aptly been summarised as follows:

### **BOX 2**

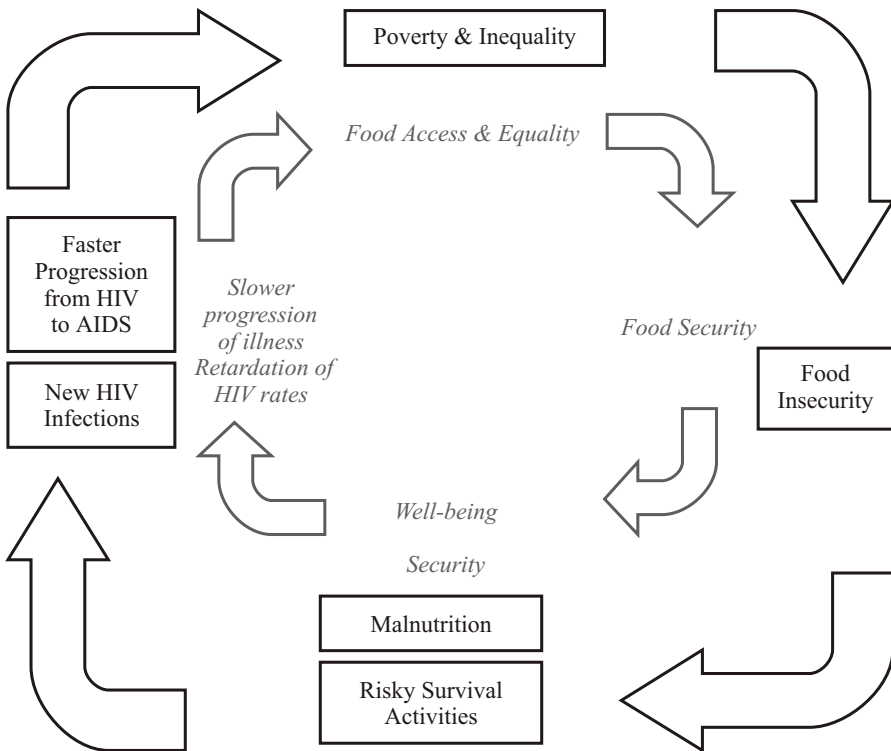
#### **The Impact of HIV/AIDS on Food Security and Development**

The devastating implications of HIV/AIDS for development and poverty reduction may be attributed to the fact that the pandemic:

- ▶ deprives families, communities and entire nations of their young and most productive people
- ▶ is deepening poverty on a massive scale
- ▶ is reversing human development achievements in a huge part of the developing world
- ▶ is worsening gender inequalities,
- ▶ is eroding the ability of governments to maintain essential services
- ▶ is reducing labour productivity and supply and
- ▶ is putting a brake on economic growth.

*Source: Loewenson and Whiteside, 2001*

In other words, HIV/AIDS has and continues to compromise the development initiatives which have been designed to eradicate or alleviate poverty in Southern Africa and beyond. To the contrary, HIV/AIDS has had the effect of exacerbating poverty on the African continent. On a personal level HIV/AIDS weakens the individual from undertaking livelihood securing activities (be it work of searching for food), thereby increasing the likelihood of food insecurity. At the same time, food insecurity and the hunger and malnutrition that accompanies it has the effect of accelerating the progress of disease in the HIV-positive individual as well as rendering that individual susceptible to other infections. The fact that the health situation in the region is either poor or deteriorating (as in the case of Zimbabwe) exacerbates the situation. The vicious cycle emerging and the impact of food security potential can be illustrated as follows:



**Figure 1: The Interplay Between HIV/AIDS and Poverty**  
*(Adapted from Save the Children and Oxfam, 2002)*

One of the more easily recognizable impacts of HIV/AIDS is loss of income due to absenteeism resulting from illness or from care of the ill.<sup>21</sup> This means that cash income and labour are diverted towards coping with the illness, reducing the affected household's efforts towards income generating activity, be it agricultural or otherwise. Either way studies have observed that there is ultimately an impact on the food security of the affected household.<sup>22</sup>

An additional link between HIV/AIDS and reduced household food security is financial debilitation as a result of the liquidation of assets. The liquidation of assets is now recognised as a coping strategy to generate income in response to the financial demands of the illness that accompanies HIV/AIDS.<sup>23</sup> Families badly affected by HIV/AIDS dispose of their savings, income, household assets and finally immovable property in response to the demands of illness and death associated with HIV/AIDS.

<sup>21</sup> FAO, 1994

<sup>22</sup> Mbaya and Ngaru, 2002

<sup>23</sup> Microsave-Africa, undated; Mbaya and Ngaru, 2002; Drimie, 2002

In many households HIV/AIDS does not just attack one person, but often more than one. In this way HIV/AIDS causes progressive and worsening deterioration in the livelihood status of households experiencing multiple illnesses and deaths. Households that are better resourced prior to the onset of illness tend to cope better with the effects of HIV/AIDS.<sup>24</sup> This means that as food insecurity has increased over the last few years, there has been a corresponding decrease in the capacity of affected households to cope with the effects of HIV/AIDS, particularly once the chronic stage of illness is reached.

A recent study raised concern about the emerging urban-rural migration trend associated with HIV/AIDS.<sup>25</sup> The study noted that there was a strong tendency for city-based people to return to their rural homes once they were in the chronic phase of HIV/AIDS related illness. The study raised concern over the sustainability of the burden that was being placed on rural resources in this manner. There are also likely to be implications for the already shrinking household livelihood resources.

Perhaps one of the most insidious impacts of HIV/AIDS is the manner in which it has attacked the fibre of society and all its institutions; the family; local leadership; central and local government; service and community support infrastructure and so on. Hence, the following consequences of HIV/AIDS have become increasingly more common:

- growing numbers of child-headed households
- increased incidence of grandparents and other extended family members taking care of numerous orphans
- the prevalence of unfilled civil service posts following the death of officers

In this way HIV/AIDS has negatively impacted the capacity of communities to secure and enhance their livelihoods. In addition, the pandemic has and continues to negatively impact the security of these communities in the generation(s) to come.

In an earlier section the impact of economic factors on household food security was discussed. There are now indications that HIV/AIDS has the potential to significantly impact national economies. According to the World Bank as HIV prevalence rates rise, the national income or gross domestic product can fall significantly. The example is given that in South Africa, the

<sup>24</sup> Mbaya and Ngaru, 2002

<sup>25</sup> Mbaya and Ngaru, 2002

pandemic is projected to reduce the economic growth rate by 0.3% to 0.4% annually, resulting by the year 2010 in a GDP 17% lower than it would have been without HIV/AIDS. In essence, the pandemic would wipe out US\$22 billion off the country's economy.<sup>26</sup> This example gives a measure of the incredible destabilising potential of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

As already indicated, the present food crisis has tended to make poor people more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS as an increasingly compounded situation unfolds. Those who are food insecure undertake coping strategies that place them at risk of contracting HIV infection in order to survive. At the same time HIV/AIDS accelerates people's food insecurity by reducing their capacity to work and to secure food. The combined effect of HIV/AIDS and food insecurity has the potential to produce a humanitarian disaster of unprecedented levels.

### *5.6 Unfair International Trade Systems*

One of the contributory factors to the failure of poverty reduction initiatives in the region has been the failure of agricultural reform programmes that were instituted under the umbrella of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). Countries embarking on SAPs were compelled to adopt stringent economic reforms in order to receive loans from international monetary organisations, namely the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). SAPs have subsequently been widely criticized for their secretive, undemocratic processes of decision-making, the heavy-handed role of the World Bank and IMF and the hardship ultimately suffered by poor people, women, small producers and the environment as their governments are left grappling with crippling debt repayments. Frequently sighted outcomes of SAPs included:<sup>27</sup>

- the elimination of protective tariffs led to the collapse of domestic manufacturing industries;
- privatization led to state bankruptcy by allowing international capital to buy state enterprises at very low costs;
- deregulation of banking systems led to very high interest rates;
- cuts in public sector employment, cost recovery programmes in the health sector and liberalization of the market all reduced the safety nets previously enjoyed by the poorer people and thus exposed them to the harsh climate of a liberalized economy.

Hence, unfair policies associated with SAPs and other related programmes have contributed to the economic ills of the region, the marginalisation of the poor from markets and, ultimately, to growing insecurity for the poor.

<sup>26</sup> World Bank, 1999

<sup>27</sup> Catholic Relief Services, 2000

## 6. Lessons Learnt and Options for the Future

Following an initial lethargic reaction by a number of the governments in the region, the regional community has subsequently begun to recognise the seriousness of the ongoing food crisis. Table 3 gives an indication of the progress made by the different countries in meeting the production shortfalls. The key response has been that of mobilising food reserves from areas of plenty to the affected areas. While the main sources have been outside the region, there has been a degree of meeting these regional needs from within. South Africa whose food stocks have remained stable overall, has steadily supplied other countries in the region with food.

**Table 3: Filling the 2002/2003 Domestic Cereal Gap (September 2002)**

Country	Domestic Cereal Gap (MT)	Remaining Cereal Gap
Lesotho	255,500	77%
Malawi	277,000	76%
Mozambique	380,000	22%
Swaziland	121,000	73%
Zambia	684,000	87%
Zimbabwe	1,654,000	75%

*Adapted from FEWS, 2002*

It is likely that the delay in filling the cereal gap will significantly jeopardise the capacity of actors concerned to supply existing needs this year. Another illustration of this lethargy is the slow pace with which the Zimbabwe government has acted in response to the disaster in the Matebeleland south region of the country. Perhaps one of the worst affected areas in the country, food reserves have been total depleted and livestock herds decimated by the drought. Only in March of this year was a state of emergency declared in the area by the authorities. A valuable lesson that has been learnt has been the importance of governments and relevant civil society organisations reacting and responding quickly to early warning messages.

In the same way members of the international donor community can be said to have been initially slow in responding to the crisis and to requests for assistance.<sup>28</sup> While the international community has subsequently responded positively, saving many from starvation, the initial slow response is partly

<sup>28</sup> see for instance, SCF, 2002b

responsible for the fact that the World Food Programme is yet to secure all the resources required to fund the identified regional needs for the period ending March 2003.<sup>29</sup> Current indications are that the remaining shortfall, estimated at over 1 million MT will be difficult to achieve.<sup>30</sup>

A lesson well illustrated by the case of Zimbabwe has been that of the ruthlessness with which political imperatives can be given priority over the security of the vulnerable. While governments might be expected to make decisions that are in the interest of their nationals at all times, it is ultimately the responsibility of civil society elements to call their governments to accountability and to show political commitment to the food security of their nations rather than to self-serving political agendas. Although in most countries it remains the role of government to create the environment (policy and otherwise) for wide scale responses to threats of disaster, there is much that can be achieved by local and international civil society structures with respect to influencing the decisions of policy-makers in this regard.

The operating environment for NGOs wishing to participate in food distribution efforts has posed significant challenges to their food distribution efforts. Political dynamics have been widely reported to have interfered with the food distribution efforts of NGOs in politically unsettled parts of Zimbabwe. In addition, untimely changes in the NGO registration regulations were also used to streamline NGO participation in food distribution activities. Over and above state-instituted challenges, NGOs have also encountered challenges caused by the poor economic climate. For instance, with the country experiencing its worst fuel crisis in two decades,<sup>31</sup> oftentimes distribution missions had to be cancelled or postponed as a result of the non-availability of fuel.

The food distribution efforts launched by the partnership between governments, local and international non-governmental organisation and international donors have been fashioned as emergency relief operations with the objective of saving lives. These efforts have been hugely successful in saving lives and averting a famine. Noteworthy is the role played by smaller NGOs, church organisations etc. in reaching albeit small numbers of people who fell outside the distribution programmes of the larger agencies. While the operations of these organisations have been at a small scale they have nonetheless been an integral part of averting starvations.

<sup>29</sup> WFP, 2003

<sup>30</sup> SADC, 2002a

<sup>31</sup> WFP, 2003

There have also been some efforts to couple the food handouts with a development component. For instance, some organisations have been involved in a donor-supported initiative to distribute household drip irrigation kits as a way of encouraging communities to embark on household and community gardens. The produce from these gardens is intended to supplement the food aid items distributed to the communities. Unfortunately such efforts have been limited. For the most part observed efforts have not gone beyond the sphere of relief. Of course there is a limited amount that humanitarian efforts can do given the underlying factors. It is really the responsibility of local development agencies and their governments to begin to address the issues relating to innovative agricultural strategies; cropping regimes that allow farmers to maximise on their efforts in the face of shifting climatic conditions and soils; and labour-saving technologies that increase resilience to erratic rainfall, the sustainable rebuilding of a civil society sector that has been ravaged by HIV/AIDS and energy saving, mechanisms and processes for households that are affected by HIV/AIDS. In the absence of these responses, the gains achieved through the ongoing relief efforts may not be sustained, particularly in the face of forecasts of another sub-normal harvest. Given this, the prognosis has to be that the crisis for the region is not over.

The challenge that faces policy analysts and policy makers is how to address the structural defects and the chronic vulnerability that contributed so significantly to the current crisis. Failure to do so leaves the affected countries in a “sitting duck” position with the inevitability of a repeat scenario an all too likely occurrence. While the required effort will vary from country to country, it is apparent that the process will call for a committed, transparent and multi-sectoral analysis involving a wide cross section of players in order for appropriate, sustainable interventions to be identified.

Another challenge that confronts civil society and governments alike is that of continuing to search for coping strategies in response to the prevailing situation and possible similar occurrences in the future. However there is the need for such strategies to be relevant to prevailing tastes and trends. The importance of this can be illustrated by the example of the community food reserves that were encouraged in Zimbabwe. The success of this initiative has been somewhat limited as it has been in other parts of the region.<sup>32</sup> It would appear that in a progressively individualised world, the concept of community labour is no longer well received. Community responses to this traditional practice would seem to indicate the need for the practice to be modified in keeping with new paradigms.

<sup>32</sup> see for example *the dying out of similar community practices in Malawi* (Mbaya and Ngaru, 2002)



An area that requires serious and urgent attention is that of ensuring that responses to the current crisis take into consideration the HIV/AIDS dimension. Many organisations with a tradition of embarking on relief work in response to humanitarian crises have automatically churned out their usual responses without factoring in this new and all-important dimension. What does an HIV/AIDS sensitive food relief programme look like? This is the question that organisations must now ask themselves on a project-by-project, community-by-community basis. The interventions will vary from consideration factors such as making particular arrangements for the ill or for those caring for the ill and who may therefore be unable to attend food distributions and associated meetings. There may also be preventive interventions, for instance those that reduce caregivers' risks of becoming ill themselves etc. Associated with the issue of consideration for caregivers is the apparent lack of focus on the gendered nature of exposure to HIV/AIDS and food insecurity dimension. This is an area that requires careful consideration.

There is an important discussion which presently occupies a very low profile. That is the discussion concerning the recovery strategy for the region. The devastation of household and community viability that has been caused over the last few agricultural seasons has been considerable. Unfortunately current indications imply that while some countries such as Malawi currently have reasonable prospects for a good agricultural harvest, in other countries the present season's harvest may not bring significant improvement to the existing crisis (see Figure 2). Several reasons are identified. Many of these are the very factors that have contributed to the evolution of the crisis in the first place. Firstly, climatic factors; for instance, the current season's rainfall in Maputo (Mozambique) has been the lowest recorded in the last 50 years.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Zambia have experienced crop losses as a result of the effects of Tropical Cyclone Japhet. A second factor is that of the consequences of recent policies. For instance the non-availability of agricultural inputs together with the reorganisation of the commercial farming sector in Zimbabwe have resulted in less than 40% of maize farmland planted for the next season.

However, even if the current season were to yield a normal harvest, it will take more than just a successful agricultural season in order to restore badly affected households and communities to security and viability. For instance the communal farmer in Beitbridge, Zimbabwe<sup>34</sup> who lost over 60 herd of cattle might need assistance with restocking. In view of the multiplicity of

<sup>33</sup> FEWS, 2003

<sup>34</sup> Matabeleland South, where drought has decimated livestock herds

crises confronting governments in the region, this matter is unlikely to be prioritized by governments. There is an opportunity for NGOs and community based organisations to take the lead in this discussion.

The experiences of the last two years have demonstrated the importance of inter and intra-sectoral coordination. The implementation of food distribution efforts in Zimbabwe demonstrated a concerted effort on the part of NGOs in the coordination of their efforts. However, on occasion overlapping has still occurred. This has demonstrated the need for closer cooperation between governments and civil society at national, regional and at the international levels. Better compilation and reporting of data would significantly improve the coordination process.

Finally, there has been appreciable participation of private sector institutions in the mobilisation of food stocks. The levels of commercial maize imports in countries such as Zimbabwe and Zambia has raised the profile of the capacity that exists in the private sector. In this way, the largely untapped potential of private sector entities to contribute to developmental issues has been demonstrated. It will be in the interests of governments in the region to maximise on the momentum generated to date.

## **7. Conclusion**

The Southern Africa region is confronted with a uniquely challenging situation. The combined effects of the prevailing food crisis and the escalating HIV/AIDS pandemic, set in a background of chronic instability and vulnerability, have the potential to yield catastrophic results. This situation demands integration of short-term relief efforts intended to save lives with longer-term development interventions, all appropriately sensitized to the gendered nuances and the special needs of those affected by HIV/AIDS. These responses need to be back-stopped by appropriate policy reforms aimed at addressing existing structural and economic anomalies.

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