



Lessons from the Current Food Crisis in Southern Africa

Steve Wiggins

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Food Security in Southern Africa

Causes and responses
from the region

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LESSONS FROM THE CURRENT FOOD CRISIS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Report on SARPAN/CARE/IFAS meeting

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Learning lessons

The food crisis in Southern Africa that stems from the crop failures of the 2001/2002 crop season has, not surprisingly, prompted much reflection on the causes of the problem and policy responses. Several official donors and NGOs have set in motion reviews, including, for example the EU and CARE International. Academics have started formal research, including a review of relief efforts by Georgetown University. In the region, overall reviews have been initiated by networks such as Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) and Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPAN).

In the UK, groups at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, Imperial College at Wye, University of East Anglia, the Natural Resources Institute, Greenwich and at the Overseas Development Institute have conducted reviews.

On reflection of the papers and presentations at the workshop there is considerable similarity in the appreciation of the nature of the current food-related crisis in Southern Africa, the analysis of the causes, and in identification of key policy issues. The exceptions to what might be seen as a regional pattern appear in the cases of Angola and Mozambique, both country cases marked by ruinous wars, and in South Africa, distinctive for its urbanisation and relative wealth.

What follows is an attempt to synthesise the findings and arguments presented at the meeting, organising the material by the crisis and its causes, the responses of those affected directly and of government and donors, and the policy issues arising.

The current food security crisis and its causes

The current crisis can be seen starkly in the figures produced by the Regional Vulnerability Assessment Committee in December 2002. For the six countries covered by the formal emergency, 15.2 million people are considered to be in need, or 26% of the population of those countries, requiring food aid amounting to 735kt (000 tons) for the period December 2002 to March 2003.

Most assessments of the crisis see it as much as crisis of livelihoods, or of development in general, as a simple food shock. Typically authors distinguish between the longer run, or structural factors, that create vulnerability for particular social groups, on the one hand; and the immediate causes, or triggers, for the problems of the crop season for 2001/2002 and the following consumption year 2002/2003, that constitute shocks that hit vulnerable households.

Long run problems

Over the last twenty years or more, the countries of Southern Africa have struggled to develop their economies, create jobs and incomes and allow their citizens to construct livelihoods that would lift them out of poverty and reduce their vulnerability to shocks. Development models and strategies have disappointed and failed across the main production sectors of Southern African economies mining, industry, and agriculture.

Mining, that has provided wealth for Angola, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (as well as Botswana and Namibia, two countries that are not part of the current crisis and are not considered in this review) has faltered. The problems of Zambia began in 1974 when the copper price fell sharply, dramatically reducing foreign exchange earnings and government revenue. The mines of South Africa, and to a lesser extent those of Zambia and Zimbabwe, for decades during the twentieth century drew on labour from their own rural areas as well as those of most of the surrounding countries. But during the 1990s jobs were shed in the mines, with foreign migrant workers losing their posts. For countries such as Malawi, (southern) Mozambique, Lesotho and Swaziland the impacts were strong. Remittances that underwrote consumption back in the home areas as well as providing funds to buy farm inputs, hire farm labour and tractors, and to invest in cattle, dried up. Through the labour market this affected not just the households that contained migrants, but also their neighbours who were often hired to work on the fields of migrant households.

The urban and industrial economies have been plagued by too little investment and business expansion to provide jobs for those entering the labour market. The cities that once enjoyed moderate prosperity and provided formal jobs have seen widespread formal unemployment, with a proliferation of low-return informal jobs typically petty trading in streets and markets.¹ As formal jobs have been lost in the cities, wages have fallen in real terms. Consequently remittances from the urban employed back to family in their villages of origin have been cut back. So much so, that in some cases such as

¹ Note that street trading is not necessarily the lowest paid occupation: casual wage labourers may earn less. Indeed, capital is needed even for petty trading, so not all can enter this work. (Steinberg & Bowen 2003 on the case of Luanda)

Zimbabwe, it is reported that flows may be in the other direction, as the rural households send supplies to support their urban cousins.

The disappointments of the mining and industrial economies has meant that most countries in Southern Africa have become more dependent on agriculture to provide jobs, incomes and foreign exchange. Agricultural development, however, has not been sustained. In the 1970s and 1980s many countries adopted farm policies in which the state, through parastatals, played a major role in organising production. Government agencies typically bought produce and marketed it; supplied fertiliser, seed, chemicals, and machinery services; offered extension advice and veterinary services; while public banks offered seasonal credit at often subsidised interest rates. Prices of inputs, credit, and outputs were often controlled, and usually set uniformly for the whole country and throughout the year. Under these policies, there were some impressive increases in production. During the 1980s in Zimbabwe, for example, maize production from smallholder farms was doubled in less than a decade. Distant provinces of Zambia, such as Eastern and Northern, also saw remarkable increases in the amount of maize marketed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Malawi in the 1980s saw a 'green revolution' in smallholder maize production, as farmers adopted packages of hybrid varieties of maize and manufactured fertiliser.

But the model was seen as flawed, owing to the high operating costs of the parastatals and the public subsidies involved, to the inflexibilities of the controls on prices and marketing, and to the monopoly status of the state agencies that allowed some to operate ineffectively and inefficiently. Moreover, the models stressed commercial farming. In some cases, such as Malawi, there was a clear bias in agricultural policy towards the interests of the large-scale estates and their burley tobacco production. Similarly in Angola and Mozambique large state farms were favoured over smallholdings. But even when the strategy recognised the potential of smallholder farming, there was a concentration of resources on smallholders in the more favoured agro-ecological zones, and on those farmers with the resources and means to expand production 'master farmers', 'emergent farmers', 'small-scale commercial farmers' and the like. When small farms did increase marketed output, the bulk tended to come from a small fraction of the smallholders.² The majority of small farmers marketed little if any produce, and indeed, many were net buyers of food, depending on farm labouring and non-farm activities to provide cash to buy food. Their poverty, and their position as net food buyers, was barely appreciated by those making agricultural policy.

² Scoones et al. 1996 report that in the drylands of Zimbabwe as many as 40% of households may sell no crops, whilst 10% of farmers generate half the crop sales.

The state-led approach was dismantled throughout the region in the 1980s and 1990s, under regimes of structural adjustment and market liberalisation. It was hoped that closing down, or privatising, the parastatals would not only cut the costs to government and the country as a whole, but lead to more efficient markets as private agents would replace the state agencies in their functions and competition between them would provide a spur to efficiency. But the results to date have been meagre. Private traders have been reluctant to collect crops from small farmers in distant villages, and unwilling to supply fertiliser and seed in small packets to remote farms. Banks have more or less ceased to provide credit to smallholders who have consequently faced a liquidity problem at planting time. And very few small farmers have the funds or inclination to pay for extension advice, or even for veterinary services. Although the liberalisation of the 1990s has seen some successes – for example, export horticulture from Zimbabwe, large-scale cotton farming in Mozambique, and smallholder burley tobacco production in Malawi – these have been restricted once again to the better-resourced farmers in accessible farming areas with good soils and rains. Elsewhere farmers have not had the means to take advantage of any market opportunities. Indeed, in the more distant zones, such as the outlying provinces of Zambia, many farmers have turned inwards, focusing on crops such as sorghum, millet, sweet potato and cassava for their own subsistence and to supply the immediate local markets.

Hence most countries have seen the bulk of their rural populations left dependent on farming, and rain-fed farming at that, barely managing to subsist at poverty levels in years without shocks. They have been left highly vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather, as well as to those arising in the economy and from government policy. In addition, in some areas, an increasing rural population has put increasing pressure on arable land and on the grazing and woodland resources. In such areas, southern Malawi being one of the most acute cases, many households today find themselves with the use of plots of less than one hectare, making just meeting household subsistence needs difficult, let alone imagine producing surpluses for the market.

Economic disappointments have left governments without the revenues to invest, to provide services, or to subsidise their economies. Foreign exchange has been at a premium, leading either to shortages or to depreciating currencies that have raised the cost of imports and tended to stoke the fires of inflation.

³ In this case, however, the cereals were apparently not lost to Malawi. Most of them, allegedly, stayed inside the country and later were bought back by the food reserve agency at a higher cost than their sale price. The circumstances and details of this trading are under official investigation.

Last, but not least, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has placed a major burden on households and their livelihoods, and made them all the more vulnerable. It has also deprived government and private enterprise of large numbers of trained and experienced staff.

Vulnerability and social differentiation

The medium and long run processes outlined have left large fractions of Southern Africa's population not just poor, but also vulnerable to shocks that threaten to drive them into outright destitution.

Some policy-making has tended to see fairly homogenous groups of potential victims, above all a rural population that normally feeds itself from its own farm production. The papers repeatedly presented a different picture, one of considerable and important differences amongst the poor.

In rural areas, the poor and vulnerable may be seen in two groups.

One groups are those who are economically disadvantaged, those lacking land, tools, and oxen to farm, those lacking formal education and skills that offer the chance of the better-rewarded non-farm jobs. These households regularly buy in food, paid for by working on the farms of others and in non-farm jobs. A particular example is the 400,000 or more households that used to work on the large-scale commercial farms of Zimbabwe. For net buyers of food, the key point in food security is the price of staple foods.

The other group consists of those whose disadvantage lies in social and health conditions. Since they were also often economically disadvantaged as well, they were especially vulnerable. They include:

- ❖ Women and girls expected to carry out domestic work as well as to farm and earn incomes, often restricted in mobility by social norms, often with less education and formal skills than men, usually with insecure rights to land and other resources, with much less chance of getting credit, more susceptible to HIV/AIDS infection, sickness and death;
- ❖ Children given their acute needs for regular meals, their vulnerability if their parents were sick or to die, and liable to be pulled out of school and to lose their education. The fate of HIV/AIDS orphans was highlighted. They often had to fend for themselves and care for their sick parents. There were sad reports of 'lost childhoods'; and,
- ❖ Those unable to work or to move, including the elderly, the disabled, the sick, and those caring for those sick (especially the carers in households with members suffering from HIV/AIDS).

A telling statistic came from Zimbabwe: that one third of households surveyed claimed that they could not afford to buy grain even at the (low) official price.

If most of the focus was on the fate of the rural poor, there was growing awareness that the urban poor were hard hit as well. Much less was known about the degree of hardship and the coping strategies of those living in urban and peri-urban areas compared to the rural areas, in almost all the countries of the region.

The immediate causes of the crisis

These include drought throughout much of the region during the 2001/2002 crop season, but also include flooding (Mozambique, Malawi), as well as frosts and hailstorms (Lesotho). All told, the weather during that season was, in many parts of Southern Africa, the worst for farming since the severe drought of 1991/1992. Consequently farm output fell. Food prices have risen, often well ahead of the levels of inflation. In Lesotho, for example, maize prices rose by 45% in 2002, against an overall inflation of just 14%. Crop failures have also meant less work on farms, depriving the near-landless of incomes.

Zambia was also hit by loss of cattle to disease, so that crop farmers have lacked animal traction.

In some cases the problems have been exacerbated by government policy. In Zimbabwe, the fast-track resettlement of the large-scale commercial farms has led to large areas remaining unplanted (as much as 38% in the current season 2002/03), partly since the resettled farmers have not had access to inputs. In Malawi the decision to sell off most of the grain reserve in 2001, leaving only some 4kt in store (compared to a usual minimum of 60kt), deprived the government of cereals supplies.³ And in Angola a government that enjoys buoyant revenues from oil spends a pitifully small amount on poverty alleviation and social services.

Dramatic as some of these triggers are, the papers presented insist that it is not so much the triggers but the underlying vulnerability that has allowed these shocks to create the degree of distress seen.

Responses to crisis: coping strategies

Much of the response to the crisis has been at local level, by the households and communities affected. Indeed, a problem in vulnerability assessment is that it is easy to state that so many millions have run out of food before half the consumption year has passed, but much harder to say just how many are in

that position in a normal year. It is likely that the poor and the poorest are only too familiar with food insecurity in any year, let alone one of widespread crop failures.⁴

Perhaps the most common way to cope reported is cutting down on food consumption, by reducing portion sizes, and skipping meals. In some cases the foods eaten have changed, as people have looked for cheaper but less preferred foods, including collecting wild foods from the bush.

Otherwise, households try to cut non-food costs. Spending on drugs and medical care has been reduced. Children have been taken out of school, both to save on school fees, but also so that the children can help to find work or take care of household members while the adults go out for work. There are widespread reports of enrolment falling.

Some families have coped by selling off assets, above all their livestock. This compromises their future security as well as depriving them of animal traction. But as so often when food is short, or costly, the livestock prices have fallen relative to cereals. In Zimbabwe, for example, a cow could be had for less than 300kg of cereals by December 2002, compared to the best part of a ton in normal times.

Households have looked for additional work to earn income, often taking up very lowly rewarded tasks such as collecting wood and water. Some of these activities involve migration, that increases the risks of contracting HIV. For women and girls, prostitution may be a desperate resort to earn cash, again making infection all the more likely.

In some countries, such as Lesotho and Malawi, an increase in livestock theft has been reported, as well as theft of food crops from fields.

Coping is all the more difficult for the households suffering from social and health disadvantages. For these groups many of the coping strategies simply were infeasible, so that any small shock was likely to plunge them into destitution, hardship and hunger. For them food-for-work schemes could not help, since they had not the time to participate. Starter packs of farm inputs were only valuable in as much as they could be sold to neighbours for cash or exchanged for food.

⁴ Aliber & Modiselle's study of the impact of rising maize prices on the poor in South Africa revealed a bimodal distribution of experience amongst the households interviewed. About one third of households never worried about feeding themselves; but another one third or so were almost continually worrying about food, reducing portions, switching to the lowest cost foods possible, skipping meals and desperately finding ways to feed themselves at low cost..

The most dramatic examples come from households with members sick with HIV/AIDS. Not only do they lose the labour of the sick, but that of those caring for the sick as well. On top of that they have to try and buy drugs, while at the same time those infected need extra food to boost their immunity. When food is scarce their sickness and decline intensifies.

Indeed, for households with HIV/AIDS there is vicious spiral that sees the household deprived of labour and income, liquidating assets to pay medical bills, reducing the area cultivated and the intensity of cultivation, and so spiraling down into destitution. Alex de Waal (2002) has dubbed the combination of a food crisis with HIV/AIDS as '*New Variant Famine*', a crisis so acute that it demands a much greater public effort to relieve it.

There is, however, debate as to how much of the current crisis can be attributed to HIV/AIDS. For the case of Zambia, in particular, there are questions about the numbers of households affected and the additional burdens imposed. There are also questions as to whether the downward spiral continues to destitution and death, or whether households can cope and the non-infected can recover from the effects of the disease.

Responses: government and donors

In several cases, governments were slow to declare an emergency and mount relief programmes. For example, in Zimbabwe, NGOs warned of the scale of the mounting problem in November 2001, but the government declared an emergency only in April 2002.

Some countries have not had strategies for food security, but only those for food production. In some cases it has been more or less assumed that a liberalised, and efficient, farm economy would produce sufficient food to meet domestic needs at low cost. This may not be justified. South Africa removed controls on food prices and subsidies to farming and the food chain in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but subsequently saw food prices in the 1990s rise faster than the general rate of inflation.

The main responses to the current crisis have been to import food, both commercially, as well as through the donor pipelines coordinated by the World Food Programme and by the Consortium for Southern Africa Food Emergency (CSAFE). The commercial imports far exceed those through donor channels: by January 2003 commercial cereal imports to the six countries of the Emergency Programme amounted to 1,359kt, with another 689kt planned for the 2002/03 marketing year, while the donor imports were 395kt with another 367kt in the pipeline.

The imported cereals have been distributed sometimes as donations, at other times in food-for-work programmes. Targeting the food to the needy raises difficulties. Some governments, most notably Zimbabwe, have been accused of favouring their political supporters and ignoring those seen as opponents. But there is simply not enough monitoring of food distribution to know if reports of specific instances reflect general trends or isolated abuses. NGOs have been widely used to distribute the grains brought in by WFP and CSAF. They have used community targeting, calling on locals to set the criteria for access to relief food.

In some cases, special feeding programmes have been set up to direct food to children and to those living with HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.

Less commonly reported are measures to affect food prices directly. Lesotho has subsidised unsifted maize meal to the tune of 30%. Zimbabwe has adopted administrative controls on the prices of key basic goods, including maize and maize meal. This has had mixed results, with food becoming unavailable at the official price, and only obtainable on the parallel market at prices, in the case of maize, at 18 or more times the official price.⁵

Some countries have distributed packs of seeds and fertiliser to farmers affected by drought, most notably in the case of Malawi, where the targeted inputs programme reaches as many as one million farmers. Zimbabwe has also just (early 2003) set up a scheme to fund inputs to farmers in the fast-track resettlement areas.

The accent on food in response and vulnerability assessments

The overall pattern of response, both by governments and donors, has been a focus on food imports and food production despite the Emergency Programme including in its appeal the need for medicines, despite WFP's assertion that the Programme is as much about saving livelihoods as saving lives.

The Vulnerability Assessments carried out regionally and for each country, under the auspices of SADC (specifically the Food, Agriculture and Natural

⁵ Inflation is running at very high levels in Zimbabwe. The government has set official prices for many basic goods, including maize and petrol. The foreign exchange rate, unusually for the region, is fixed at Z\$55 to US\$1. A parallel rate exists for currency, of around Z\$1,500 to US\$1 (January 2003). Establishing the price of maize, set officially at Z\$11/kg but with parallel prices of Z\$200/kg (January 2003), then, in internationally comparable terms generates four possible figures from US\$0.01 to US\$3.64/kg, or US\$7 to US\$3,636/ton. The figures for the official selling price at the official exchange rate gives maize at US\$200 a ton; while the parallel price at the parallel rate gives a figure of US\$133 a ton. Both these figures are well below the reported delivery cost of imported maize at Harare, of around US\$240 a ton. It seems, then, that in both official and parallel markets, maize was being sold at below the import parity level, implicitly subsidised.

Resources secretariat), reflect a tension between an appreciation of the wider nature of the crisis as one of livelihoods in peril, and the narrower agenda of forecasting how much food to import through donor channels. The Assessments use two methods to estimate needs for assistance. One, most commonly used, looks at food balances at household level: opening stocks, harvests, plus food obtained through sales of assets, through working for cash, and through gifts, borrowing, labour exchange, etc. and compares this to consumption needs. The gap between the two then becomes a basis for estimating food aid imports. The other approach, applied fully so far only to the cases of Swaziland, Mozambique, and Lesotho, looks at how vulnerable people obtain their food in a normal or baseline year, assesses how the shock or trigger of the current crisis will have affected those means of obtaining food, and uses the insights to plan assistance.

Since the Emergency was declared in 2002, the vulnerability assessments have progressively tried to add more information on nutrition and health, and in particular on the impacts of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Full incorporation of this data and its analysis has not yet been achieved, but is expected to appear in the next round of assessments for May 2003.

Despite the increasing sophistication of the assessments, the headline figures that come from them are the numbers in need of the assistance and the volumes of cereal gaps. But these lay the assessments open to a telling question: the assessments arrive at very large cereal gaps that for the six countries at January 2003 was given as 544.5kt and yet anthropometric surveys of children show few signs of malnutrition running at levels above those that apply in normal years. It may be that the assessments are inaccurate and exaggerate food needs.⁶ But it may also be that people have done more to cope than expected, above all by cutting back on cereals consumption by both eating less and switching to alternative foods.⁷

Policy issues arising

In looking at the longer run causes of the current crisis, it was apparent that fundamental elements of a development strategy had proved elusive. In general, all of the countries reviewed had struggled, above all in the 1990s, to achieve economic growth sufficiently strong to raise incomes and alleviate poverty, or to generate growth with a wide distribution of the benefits.

⁶ One source of error is informal movements of grains across borders. The shipments from northern Mozambique to southern Malawi are well known, but there are also reports of considerable amounts moving across the borders of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi's borders with Zambia and Tanzania.

⁷ This question depends on seeing the crisis in terms of physical availability of food, with the risk that for sheer lack of food, people will starve and die. But if the crisis is seen as one of livelihoods at risk, of potential destitution and

Given that agriculture was the major employer in most of the countries reviewed, the disappointments of agricultural development were acutely felt. Although different voices advocate, variously, the merits of low-input sustainable agriculture, large-scale commercial production of export crops, smallholder green revolutions, etc., there are few models of demonstrable success that has been achieved without (apparently) unsustainable government support. Those exceptions usually concern farms located in the best agro-ecological zones, with good access to markets, and well-endowed with infrastructure for example, parts of Mashonaland, Zimbabwe, the line of rail in Zambia, the irrigated valleys of southern Mozambique, etc. But outside of these areas, in less accessible area often of lower natural potential where the majority of the rural population live, it is far less easy to recommend agricultural development strategy with confidence.

It was also apparent that policy-makers and implementing agencies were grappling with the technical details of food policy. For example, policy for strategic reserves of cereals provokes as many questions as answers. Should reserves consist of financial assets, to buy in extra imports when needed, or physical stocks kept in country? In either case, how large should the provision be? And what should be the policies for buying in and selling off the stocks? Much work has been done on early warning systems for harvests and food stocks, and vulnerability assessments in general. But the methods are still being perfected, and questions remain over how best to link their findings to policy-making. Although in practice ways have been found to distribute food aid, questions arise over the degree to which assistance is targeted and if so how this can be done.

A major point in debate is the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Will this, as de Waal has claimed, have such severe impacts that it forces us to rethink food security policy and to reconsider the extent to which households and communities can cope? Or is the challenge one that might be met by adding to and modifying current approaches, for example by adding supplementary feeding programmes and health care to affected households? Good work has been done to outline qualitatively the likely impact of the pandemic on rural economies and societies, but the quantitative magnitude of the impacts remains to be defined. Until more precise information and understanding is achieved, it will not be clear whether indeed the current crisis is a 'new variant famine' or not.

hardship (but without substantially increased death rates), the role of food aid can be seen in a different light. It is needed not to save lives so much as to alleviate hardship and to put downward pressure on grain prices, so that households need not bankrupt themselves to obtain food, or put themselves at risk to obtain food (e.g. women being practically forced into prostitution). What may, then, be needed is a better model of grain and food markets on the one hand, and of the ability of the very vulnerable households to command food on such markets.

In discussion at the meeting, the question of how to convey research findings to policy-makers arose, and how civil society could participate in debates on food policy. In the papers, especially that on Angola, it was reported that those suffering the effects of the crisis had little or no voice in policy-making circles.⁸ Some agencies, such as CARE International, would like to see food security taken on board as a right, something that governments and societies are legally obliged to ensure on behalf of all citizens. But it is clear at currently such ideas are a long way removed from the practice of policy making in most countries of the region. If access to food is to become a right that is respected, several papers argued, then local civil society will have to organise and advocate, to put pressure on the political system.

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⁸ In South Africa, poor consumers when interviewed or consulted in focus groups, sometimes said that they were happy to have the chance to get a message to government about their plight.