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Food security in Southern Africa: Changing the trend? Review of lessons learnt on recent responses to chronic and transitory hunger and vulnerability

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The analysis of food shortages in southern Africa in recent years has prompted questions over how far they are chronic and how far generated by crises. Answers to these questions allow the respective roles of developmental, relief and social protection measures to be identified. Whilst much progress has been made, especially in the quality of information available, there remain difficulties in several areas, such as taking initiatives beyond the pilot scale, building national capacity to interpret and act on vulnerability assessments (in ways other than simply supplying more food) and in enhancing the consistency between donor and government policy.

Policy conclusions

The food crises in southern Africa from 2001–02 onwards have prompted much reflection on their causes and dimensions. These are bound to be multiple, given the region's deep and worsening poverty, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and weak governance. While some progress has been made in rethinking policies and programmes to respond, there is still much to be done. There is a need to:

- Pursue responses which are more developmental and predictable than 'crisis'-driven, not least because of the region's chronic poverty.
- Re-design policies and programmes along the new thinking about food insecurity, taking them beyond issues of food availability. Food aid is still the main response to food crises.
- Pursue closer agreement, particularly between donors and governments, on such issues as social protection, the role of agricultural production, and the wisdom of public intervention in food markets. In some cases, donors need to be more prepared to engage with national concerns. By contrast, consensus has been reached on some issues such as the causes of crisis and response to HIV/AIDS.
- Take forward measures to reduce and mitigate risk in a region where droughts and floods recur.
- Scale up lessons from innovative programmes, especially in social protection and risk mitigation. The obstacles are not technical, but rather lie with convincing governments — and some donor officials — of their value.
- Re-focus attention on ways of building national capacity for delivering basic services: crisis responses are no substitute for development policy.
- Institutionalise the improvements in information systems generated by the Vulnerability Assessment Committees.

Introduction

This paper¹ reviews progress in addressing widespread chronic food insecurity since the 2001–03 crisis. It assesses changes along the sequence running from understanding of *problem*, to how this has been incorporated into policy, and to how *programming* has changed to align with the stated *policy* objectives and the underlying analysis.

Understanding food insecurity

Most analyses of the 2001/03 food crisis stress multiple causes. While harvest failures in 2001 and 2002 provided the immediate trigger, these hit a region suffering weaknesses in governance, its population ravaged by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and where poverty, often extreme poverty, was growing. The UN from 2003 on began to refer to

the ‘triple threat’ of food insecurity, HIV/AIDS and weakened capacity for governance. Table 1 identifies no fewer than four overlapping crises in the region.

While a general consensus has emerged that the crisis has several dimensions, some aspects are not always well appreciated, namely:

- While commonly presented as a ‘regional’ crisis there is strong evidence that the underlying causes — environmental, social and political — vary significantly between and even within countries. This implies the need for responses tailored to specific contexts, rather than a regional one;
- Appreciation of the relative severity of transient and chronic crises is still limited. Transitory needs associated with climatic triggers continue to command immediate and urgent attention. However, the majority of the hungry also suffer chronic hunger; and,
- Food insecurity is seen primarily as the result of inadequate food access. While poverty reduction is critical to reducing food insecurity, global experience suggests that health, sanitation, education — and especially that of females — almost certainly matter as well.

Policy debates

Analysis of the 2001–03 crisis has contributed to new ideas in four sets of development practice in the region: food security and nutrition policy; the longstanding distinction between relief and development activities; social protection; and, disaster risk reduction.

Most countries have redefined their **food security policies**, moving from a narrow focus on domestic self sufficiency where food availability is the aim, to an appreciation of access to food and its utilisation. Food availability, access and utilisation are now widely accepted as necessary, but not independently sufficient, conditions to ensure food security. This allows a wider range of causes to be considered, although in practice this new consensus has had relatively little impact on strategic choices and action plans. At national level, agricultural development is still seen as the primary long-term solution to food insecurity.

The distinction between relief and development interventions has been blurred. The chronic nature of the crisis in southern Africa has led to rethinking about the boundaries between humanitarian and development work, and how they interact. This positive development is broadly influencing how donors, NGOs and governments are organised, and the policies they pursue. At a minimum this has resulted in more flexible budget guidelines and a greater willingness to address underlying causes within the scope of a humanitarian response.

RIACSO, the UN Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Support Office, recognised this dilemma in responding to the 2005/06 crisis. The 2005 *Inter Agency Regional Humanitarian Strategic Framework For Southern Africa* proposed responding through safety nets, in conjunction with a nationally-led development response implemented at scale. Launching a parallel Consolidated Appeal Process in 2005 was avoided as potentially counter-productive to long term

Table 1: Dimensions of food insecurity and malnutrition in Southern Africa

Crisis	Who is affected	Consequences
	[Population of Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland Zambia & Zimbabwe: 57.5M]	
Temporary: harvest failure leads to higher prices for food staples	Farming households (and those in closely linked occupations, such as farm labourers, some food processors and traders) [39.8M]	Suffer a double blow: loss of real income from harvest failure, plus rise in food prices Cope by sale of assets, gathering of wild foods, children taken out of school, reduced meals, distress migration — poor are at risk of destitution Young children and other physically vulnerable likely to become malnourished
	Poor households who are not farmers [7.5M?]	Hit by higher food prices and may cope by reducing meals and going hungry Young children and other physically vulnerable may become malnourished
Chronic poverty	Working poor, without the assets, skills or opportunities to escape poverty [Not known: total extreme poor: 24.6M]	Unable to acquire enough food for a healthy diet Problems may be severe in hungry season before the harvest when poor farming households run out of their own food supplies, food prices are highest and credit access is limited
	Non-working poor, unable to work owing to age, illness, disability [Not known: total extreme poor: 24.6M]	Ditto Reliant on support from family and friends
	Young children living in poverty [3.9M in extreme poverty]	Ditto But also suffer from poor health conditions that contribute to malnutrition with consequences for their growth and survival Alarming high rates of child mortality
HIV/AIDS	Direct effect on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults in prime years, • Young children [4.7M adults HIV+; 0.4M children HIV+]	Illness and early death, particularly of women Costs of care in time and funds to affected households Reduction in on-farm labour For the poor, coping mechanisms often overwhelmed, households at high risk of destitution
	Indirect effect on households that are affected by the epidemic, having suffered a death, inherited an orphan, or offered support to a directly-affected household [say 25% of the population = 14.4M]	Costs of care in money and time, reduction in on-farm labour Care of children orphaned Reduced ability to cope with shocks [Costs throughout society and economy]
Governance and policy-making	Population of all countries	Political impasse in Zimbabwe with decline of the economy: economic contraction since 1998, v high inflation, unemployment, falling incomes, Increased poverty and vulnerability, loss of government capacity to maintain health and social welfare programmes Erratic and unpredictable government interventions in trade in food grains making private traders reluctant to import additional food

development, despite the prospect of generating an immediate and tangible response.

Considering how to protect people from both transitory and chronic poverty and hunger has led to mounting interest in **social protection**. While temporary problems may be alleviated by relief, tackling chronic issues requires more predictable forms of social assistance. And if assistance is to be dependable and predictable then it almost certainly has to become part of a national welfare system with funding included in national budgets.

Several donors and international NGOs have taken a keen interest in social protection, funding pilot programmes (see below), and advocating increased social protection. As a result early steps are being taken towards developing national social protection policies in Malawi and Zambia. National governments, however, are noticeably more ambivalent, concerned over the cost of providing widespread protection, the possibility of undermining community and family responses, and the difficulties of targeting the needy. Overall the development of a coherent social protection policy is proving to be a complex process. Building a national consensus and establishing a durable social contract will take time, and require both considerable consultation and a greater willingness to accept the validity of government concerns.

The crisis has directed attention to **disaster risk reduction**, including risk reduction and mitigation, emergency preparedness and response — a set of policy concerns initially promoted by the UN system at the global level and is now being rolled out at the national level. In practice, however, few sectoral policies yet integrate disaster risk reduction. A particular concern is mitigating the impact of local harvest failures on the prices of staple crops. When domestic harvests fail in the inland states of southern Africa, prices usually rise by two times or more — four times in Malawi in 2002 — causing acute problems for the poor. Opinion on how to resolve this is sharply divided. Some, including many governments, would like to see greater government intervention in markets backed by strategic grain reserves. Others, including several donors, worry about the cost of intervention and believe that it is possible to work with the markets. In the absence of consensus, grain prices continue to fluctuate unacceptably.

The introduction of the social protection and disaster risk reduction frameworks has generated creative thinking on the options for working across the ‘emergency’ and ‘development’ spectrum. Previously emergency response was more or less considered synonymous with dealing with short-term or immediate needs and development was considered to be dealing with longer-term underlying causes of poverty and vulnerability. However, the need for a more nuanced approach is increasingly recognised. Acute needs are not just a short-term phenomena — with the requirement for distinct and appropriate delivery mechanisms and forms of assistance; while transient problems require more than a transient response — especially in highly vulnerable areas.

These relationships, and the relevant responses, are summarised in Table 2. This illustrates the relationships between the different kinds of programming, rather than implies that these are distinct areas. Indeed, good practice requires integrated programmes. The review of programmatic responses found increasing evidence of linkages at the pilot level.

In general, amongst the donors the adoption of quantifiable targets in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the reduction of hunger and poverty — and the alarming lack of progress in sub Saharan Africa — has stimulated new ideas on the delivery of development aid and emergency assistance. Whether from a rights-based approach or on grounds of aid efficiency, greater government accountability is fundamental. The current willingness of external partners to provide unconditional humanitarian assistance, however, creates significant political disincentives to a government-led response. The challenge is to develop consensual plans of action that can be used to align resources from a variety of sources to implement national programmes.

Table 2: Types of Food Insecurity Responses

Temporal	Causal or Symptomatic Dimension	
	Immediate Needs	Underlying Causes
Transitory	1. Emergency response programs	2. Disaster risk management and emergency preparedness
Chronic	3. Safety net programs	4. Building long-term sustainable livelihoods programs

Programme responses

Despite the evidence of fresh thinking and policy debate, it is striking to see that, in practice, *emergency responses* apparently remain largely unchanged. Responses to the crises of 2001/03 and 2005/06 remained remarkably similar, dominated by large-scale food aid. An over emphasis on food aid is partly explained by the persistence of tied resources on the part of some donors. But it also seems that others fear that they cannot provide assistance at scale and quickly by other means — despite evidence from pilot programmes to the contrary.

While programme innovation has been considerable, it is still largely at pilot scale. To respond to persistent and chronic needs, donors and NGOs have piloted social protection, mainly through the use of cash transfers. A good example is the Kalomo District programme that provides the extremely poor with a cash payment equivalent to US\$6 a month. Evaluations have been positive, as they have for similar pilots of cash transfers. But there are clear limitations to their use: for example they are of little use when food prices are escalating. In comparison to other regions of the world there has been comparatively little experimentation with alternative forms of transfers (such as subsidies or fee waivers), or transfers conditional on human capacity development (such as health or education outcomes). Other pilots have involved the use of vouchers and commercial sales of food commodities.

The clear lesson is that there is no single ideal instrument for social protection, but that different means suit differing objectives and need to be tailored to specific circumstances.

National governments have also invested considerably in social transfers. However, these have been markedly different from the donor model. Time bound, productive transfers — such as agricultural inputs — have proved politically attractive, despite the operational difficulties associated with such schemes. A popular unconditional transfer is a basic old age pension, which has been incorporated into the national budget of several countries including Lesotho. This has several major advantages: targeting is simple, transparent, and socially acceptable; while implementation is commensurate with national capacities. Similarly strong arguments have been advanced for social protection targeted to children, in particular AIDS orphans.

Strong networks and coordination bodies have been established, as seen in numerous examples throughout the region for information sharing, coordination, harmonisation and joint implementation. Models of improved networking and coordination have spread swiftly and are being rapidly institutionalised, often under the leadership of national governments.

Several pilots have explored the potential of integrating ways of dealing with shocks and stresses into mainstream development programming, beyond the generic strategy of increasing household assets. These have looked at how risks of natural disasters can be reduced through community risk assessment and resilience building. Some apparently promising developments come from the work of

the World Bank in piloting the use of weather-based insurance and futures markets for grains. Initial results have been positive, but these have not yet been proven for the mixed farming typical of low income farmers, awareness of these experiences is limited, and they remain at pilot level. Overall there has been little progress in reducing risk levels, as demonstrated by the rapid escalation in emergency spending in Sub Saharan Africa.

Ultimately resolving the livelihoods crisis requires development. At the macro-level there is little evidence that budgets to respond to the chronic and structural aspects of regional food insecurity have increased to match recent political commitments by donors. Nor have the political commitments of national governments been matched by increased expenditure on key sectors such as agriculture.

As the boundaries between relief and development have been blurred, so 'emergency' resources are being increasingly utilised in protecting and building assets. This trend, however, risks running counter to fostering harmonised nationally-led development programmes.

Programmes of NGOs, UN agencies and government to improve livelihoods centre on enhancing agricultural productivity through improved technology use, water management, access to credit and markets. Again the more innovative interventions remain largely at pilot level. Despite often enthusiastic endorsements, evidence on impact remains sparse. In scope, these programmes tend to focus on crops, leaving livestock on the margins, and doing little for non-farm activities.

While the best of these programmes have the potential to benefit the poor and deserve scaling up, it is hard to envisage that these innovations will kick-start an economic transformation in rural southern Africa. Humanitarian responses cannot substitute for adequate long-term development. It is deeply worrying that there seems little agreement on how to achieve overall economic growth and poverty reduction in the region. Consequently chronic food insecurity is likely to remain an obdurate problem.

Information systems

Food security information is provided through various sources operated by governments, donors, multilateral agencies and NGOs. The most notable innovation in this field has been the development of the national and regional Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs). They have taken on the task of assessing needs, largely in rural areas, at regular intervals.

There is considerable consensus over the added value of the VACs. One of the most positive aspects in the handling of the southern Africa crisis has been a marked improvement in providing timely and credible emergency needs assessments, thanks to methodological improvements, building consensus and reinforcing the capacity of national governments.

VAC analyses, nevertheless, tend to focus on responses to acute and temporary conditions, with food to the fore. Transforming vulnerability information into concrete recommendations to address chronic conditions and underlying causes is technically challenging. It also moves into areas that are politically contentious, in contrast to the more non-judgemental humanitarian perspective. Consequently the VACs have remained more confident in providing technical recommendations that estimate and respond to emergency needs, than in informing wider development concerns.

Some would like to see the VACs widen the scope and improve the quality of analysis by, for example, including urban areas, distinguishing between transient and chronic needs, producing more accurate estimates, providing recommendations on wider responses, and evaluating the impact of previous interventions. Pressure to increase the complexity of the analysis, however, needs to be balanced against the ability to sustain the analytical capacity within a government system.

The fundamental challenge for VACs is probably political, rather than technical. Governments do not always show much interest in the assessment, and indeed they may be secondary clients for VAC analyses destined first and foremost to inform the donors. The challenge is thus to build accountability and responsibility for food security at the national level.

Conclusion

Thus, in short, since the outbreak of food crises in Southern Africa in 2001/02 policy-makers have become increasingly aware of the multiple dimensions of the problems, and in particular the way that temporary shocks have highlighted chronic poverty and food insecurity. Responses have, however, remained first and foremost emergency reactions with food aid prominent. Some more innovative attempts to address wider dimensions have been tried, but usually only in pilot programmes, promoted by donors and international NGOs but not always nationally owned. The challenge is to learn from these experiences, disseminate the results, and work towards national consensus on a broader response — that will also mitigate the impacts of any future events likely to trigger further food crises in the region.

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Endnotes

- 1 Based on: Maunder, Nick & Steve Wiggins, 2006, **Food security in Southern Africa**. Changing the trend. Review of lessons learnt on food security responses in Southern Africa, Report for OXFAM (GB), World Vision International, CARE, RHVP and OCHA