

Regional Vulnerability and Food Insecurity: Unravelling the Entangling Crises?

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1. Introduction:

In 1992, the Southern African region's food security crisis was the result of an extreme global El Niño event, which triggered widespread drought conditions. The sizeable reductions in regional food production did not, however, lead to famine. A decade later, a food crisis in the same region has led to unparalleled levels of hardship for many southern Africans. This has resulted from a range of "entangling crises" such as rainfall failure, widespread disruptions in food availability, failures of governance, extreme levels of prevailing poverty and the continuing erosion of livelihood strategies through HIV/AIDS.

Despite widespread acknowledgement that the humanitarian response was a result of a complex web of "entangling crises", a general perception persists that this was a food crisis caused primarily by drought. Evidently there is also sensitivity that the situation was grossly exaggerated and that the rhetoric and imagery of famine were completely misplaced. As organisations consolidate and assess their response, it is evident that, generally speaking, many individuals were not adequately supported at the outset with an accurate analysis of the underlying causes to ensure a better response overall.

Although the United Nations and a range of international development agencies have repeated the need for ongoing support for the southern Africa livelihoods crisis, an appeal that competes with the demands of the Tsunami relief, there is an over-riding impression that the crisis is over. In the "wake" of this crisis, many organisations are taking a sober look at their range of interventions in the recent past amidst the growing realisation that a long process has undermined the resilience and livelihoods base of many of the regional population. Indeed, countries like Malawi and Zambia are beginning to struggle once again during the January / February "hungry season". The brutal relationship between eroding livelihoods and weakened traditional safety nets, increasing vulnerability to food insecurity, and the scourge of multiple waves of HIV and AIDS, will continue to raise difficult challenges for relief and development practice in the region.

To sum up, the crisis has complex origins not all of which are well understood at present. This presents a challenge in trying to take action to ensure that a similar crisis does not occur the next time there is a shock to the food economy.

2. Key Concepts:

In order to critically examine the recent response to widespread food and livelihoods insecurity and to gauge new approaches, it is useful to re-examine the definitions of some key concepts.

Food security is commonly said to exist when people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Achieving this is understood to involve:

- Ensuring that a wide variety of food is available in local markets and fields (availability);

- People have enough production or money to purchase a variety of foods that are nutritionally adequate and culturally acceptable (access); and
- Food is stored, prepared, distributed and eaten in ways that are nutritionally adequate for all members of the household in an environment that supplies appropriate care, clean water, and good sanitation and health services (utilisation).

Household livelihoods insecurity is defined as inadequate and unsustainable access to income and resources to meet basic needs (including adequate access to food, potable water, health facilities, educational opportunities, housing, and time for community participation and social integration) (drawing on CARE-International). Livelihoods insecurity is the inability of a household to meet its basic needs (or realise its basic rights). These needs include adequate food, health, shelter, minimal levels of income, basic education and community participation. Livelihoods are insecure when households lack secure ownership of, or access to, resources and income earning activities, including reserves and assets, to offset risks, ease shocks, and meet contingencies.

Vulnerability refers to the degree of exposure to factors that threaten the well-being and the extent to which individuals, households and other social groups can cope with these factors. In the case of vulnerability to food insecurity an important distinction is drawn between transitory and chronic food insecurity. Transitory food insecurity occurs when there is a temporary inability to meet food needs, usually associated with a specific shock or stress such as drought, floods or civil unrest. In contrast chronic food insecurity occurs when people are unable to meet their minimum food requirements over a sustained period of time. This is usually associated with slowly changing factors which have increased people's exposure to shocks or else decreased their ability to cope with the effects of these shocks – essentially increased their vulnerability.

The recent and ongoing livelihoods or food crisis seems to have been one that, while provoked by an initial shock to the *availability* of food, has become more one of *access and entitlements* for the majority of the affected population. This has made the degree of social differentiation in the rural areas – something not always clearly appreciated in official policy thinking – more apparent. Those vulnerable to food insecurity, it seems, fall into one or both of two marginalized groups. One group is made up of the economically marginalized who lack land, capital and tools, livestock; literacy and other formal skills. They make up a 'working poor' and an 'under-employed poor'. The other group is socially marginalized by gender (women and girls), age (children, elderly), and by illness or disability. Often also economically marginalized, they form the core of the chronically poor, often unable to work, and usually having fewer coping options. The marginalized are usually net buyers of food, even in a good farming year. Although their numbers are not well known, they may represent from one- to two-thirds of the rural population.

3. Eroding Livelihoods?

It is evident that livelihood strategies in the region have been steadily eroded over the past two decades. Remittances, particularly from mining, that underwrote consumption back in the home (usually rural) areas as well as for providing funds to buy farm inputs, hire farm labour and tractors, and to invest in cattle, dried up as the sector faced increasing economic pressures and restructured (see Wiggins, 2003b).

This was compounded by a decline in formal jobs in many regional cities along with falling wages in real terms, which effectively cut back on the urban remittances flowing back into the rural areas. Economic stagnation in many of the regional economies left governments without the revenues to invest, to provide services, or to subsidise their economies.

Coupled with this, inadequate agricultural policies, which favoured large-scale commercial enterprises, did little to underpin a small farmer sector ensuring that they marketed little if any produce and were largely net buyers of food, depending on farm labouring and non-farm activities to provide cash. Regional agriculture faces major challenges including unfavourable international terms of trade, mounting population pressure on land, and environmental degradation. Over the past two decades there have been profound transformations in livelihood systems in Southern Africa, set in motion by Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes, the removal of agricultural subsidies and the dismantling of parastatal marketing boards (Bryceson and Bank, 2000).

As a result of these and other issues, many African households have shifted to non-agricultural income sources and diversified their livelihood strategies. Despite the evident diversification out of agriculture, rural production remains an important component of many rural livelihoods throughout sub-Saharan Africa. 'African rural dwellers ...deeply value the pursuit of farming...food self-provisioning is gaining in importance against a backdrop of food inflation and proliferating cash needs' (Bryceson, 2000, cited in Cousins, 2001). Participation in "small-plot agriculture" is highly gendered, with women taking major responsibility for it as one aspect of a multiple livelihood strategy¹.

Another issue that is related to increasing vulnerability in the region is the recognition that this is affecting some individuals and groups more than others. Vulnerability is not uniform across communities. Many papers reflecting on the crisis have repeatedly stressed the greater vulnerability of women and girls, of children — especially those orphaned by AIDS — of the elderly, the sick, the disabled, those without education or formal skills, the landless (including the former permanent farm workers of Zimbabwe), amongst others (Wiggins, 2003a). In order to understand the reality of vulnerability on the ground (in order to develop effectively targeted interventions) a disaggregated approach to rural communities is required and an understanding of power relations within these groups, with a commitment to reaching those who are most at risk. In particular, a focus on gender relations is crucial in this regard.

Hence most countries have seen the bulk of their rural populations left dependent on rain-fed farming, barely managing to subsist at poverty levels in years without shocks, leaving them highly vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather, as well as to those arising in the economy and from government policy (Wiggins, 2003a). The increase in the number of vulnerable households meant that any crisis, whether it be due to climatic shocks, civil disturbance or economic mismanagement, becomes increasingly difficult for the communities to absorb.

Devereux has argued that the recent crisis, caused in his view by three major factors – AIDS, market liberalisation and governance failures – suggest that new needs for social protection are emerging, which are different from the past (2003). These factors, which all impact negatively on informal social security systems, are generally compounding the poverty and vulnerability of people throughout the region. However, the likelihood of social protection being provided by national governments in the short-term is not promising, as major constraints exist such as fiscal austerity within state institutions. In addition, given the close linkages between chronic and transitory food insecurity, the challenge arises how best to support people through short-term crises while reducing their long-term vulnerability.

4. Social Protection and Safety Nets:

The ongoing crisis has thus focused much attention on the need for social protection and safety nets, as evidenced from its prominence in recent debates and discussions, and in responses that are beginning to

¹ Access to land-based natural resources remains a vital component of rural livelihoods particularly as a safety net. In this context, land tenure becomes increasingly important for the diverse livelihood strategies pursued by different households.

unfold in the region. For example, DFID's planned Regional Hunger and Vulnerability Programme, has a major focus on social protection².

Social protection is increasingly seen as a precursor to effective growth, providing an essential boost to human resource development, rather than a competitor for investment. The notion of safety nets has received renewed interest since 2000, driven predominantly by donor agencies (notably the World Bank) and repackaged as *social protection* (SARPN, 2004). This entailed broadening the concept to include interventions directed at both chronic and transitory poverty by:

- Protecting poor people who have a chronic incapacity to work or earn (for reasons of age or health), and
- Mitigating the vulnerability of the working poor to short-term shocks such as droughts, floods and illness.

However, the capacity of regional institutions, not least national governments, to implement social protection (for non-contributory pension systems) is extremely limited given the co-existence of a high incidence of poverty and vulnerability with scarce government resources. Questions of affordability mean that it is not realistic to expect comprehensive nationally owned social protection systems for many countries in the region in the medium to long-term. Existing social protection occurs within a rather *ad hoc* framework, as the institutions, programmes, and partnerships required to address concerns of food security and social protection in a coordinated, integrated framework are evidently weak or non-existent.

Therefore there is a need to advocate a more pragmatic, narrowly defined focus on those interventions that are likely to have the greatest impact in addressing chronic and transitory food insecurity within the fiscal and institutional realities of a given context and time. A diversified set of safety nets, under the broad social protection framework, can provide an important part of the search for solutions to food insecurity and poverty.

5. Case Studies and Field Experiences:

It is clear from the analysis provided that the situation facing southern Africa is one of chronic food insecurity and is not a crisis resulting from drought or rainfall shortages. The reality is that this is not a "traditional" food crisis, which is transitory in nature, but a long-term development challenge with immediate humanitarian relief and rehabilitation required. The erosion of livelihood strategies in parts of the region due to the "entangling crises" requires robust and creative thinking about "new" strategies that combine relief, rehabilitation and development beyond a chronological approach. Social protection and safety nets are likely to play a key role in this.

Experiences or case studies across the region can provide useful lessons for how (and how not to) engage with this crisis and may provide insights into "new" ways of working.

5.1 Agricultural Relief Aid (seed distribution): moving from handouts to development

A recent report on the distribution of relief seed and fertiliser in Zimbabwe notes that despite the frequency of such programmes, little is known about their efficacy (Rohrbach *et al*, 2004). The report reflects on research undertaken to assess the distribution of agricultural relief aid, which reveals that while the inputs were generally well used, the targeting of households destined to

² This section draws heavily on the Scoping Study undertaken by the Southern African Regional Poverty Network, which has fed into the development of the unfolding RHVP.

receive relief need improvement. While many NGOs have explicit criteria for the selection of needy households, these lists are difficult to implement in practice. Consequently there was little difference in the poverty levels of households that received relief inputs compared with those that did not receive these inputs. The targeting of relief inputs, if they are to have more effective longer-term development impacts, could be improved through better information sharing on needs and relief activities of NGOs.

The reports also notes that much of the relief seed appears to have replaced stocks available on local markets, including seeds saved by many households from previous harvests (despite grain shortages and ongoing drought). Farmers did, however, benefit from the distribution of new improved seed varieties (if and when they received adequately adapted varieties accurately labelled and distributed).

Bringing the issue of relief, rehabilitation and development into focus, the report also found that the major determinant of the area cultivated by poorer households was not the availability of seed relief, but access to draught power. A key inference from this data is that concentrating on improving access to draught power rather than distributing seed would be more effective in expanding areas under cultivation. In addition, the provision of technical assistance provided with agricultural relief programmes needed to be strengthened.

Overall the evidence strongly suggested that agricultural relief needed to move away from an emphasis on handouts to encompass more explicit development goals. Many of the households most severely affected by poor rains or socio-economic constraints would likely remain chronically poor unless they were more methodically assisted with improved varieties, better extension advice and strengthened markets. In other words, concentrating more on the quality of the assistance rather than on the numbers of households reached and input packages delivered.

5.2 *Simultaneously approaching relief, rehabilitation and development: Oxfam-GB (Malawi)*

Adopting a "fast track" recovery combined with longer-term consolidation and change in order to "drive down" prevailing vulnerability conditions have been widely suggested as a way of engaging with the existing crisis. The key issue here is about doing things with immediate, tangible impact that are more compatible with development and do not undermine it. The integration of development into an emergency response, rather than limiting it to delivery of seeds and tools, could be facilitated through, by using an example from Oxfam in Malawi, the provision of treadle pumps and support for training around small-scale irrigation along with a credit package for irrigation clubs. This type of approach has been summed up by the UN as to recognise, assess and respond to the immediate humanitarian needs (such as insecure access to food, water, health care or education) caused by the "entangling crisis", while simultaneously and equally urgently planning programmes both to reverse the accelerating erosion of government, community and household capacity and to confront food insecurity and poverty (2003).

To succeed in this type of approach a more robust understanding of the underlying situation is required along with creative and pragmatic responses through ongoing development programmes to increasing vulnerability. In particular, active partnerships with a broad range of organisations should be established to ensure that relevant expertise and support is secured. If these types of interventions were successful, government partners would have realistic examples from which to learn for their own interventions and be encouraged to recognise their obligations to their citizens.

5.3 *Sustainable livelihood strategies: building with communities*

Greater emphasis is needed on livelihood recovery activities for households and communities, which are relevant to local needs. Long-term sustainable livelihoods should be built upon to address the problem of over-dependence of maize in a region with erratic rainfall. Thus greater crop diversity and sustainable farming methods become essential. Empowering people to diversify their livelihood strategies becomes the imperative with interventions around non-maize alternatives, credit, and the development of markets, amongst others. A range of interventions already exists that focus on seed provision, the rehabilitation of irrigation systems, kitchen gardens, fish farming and livestock rehabilitation, winter/summer cropping, canal rehabilitation, and cash for work initiatives. So the question is raised: what to do differently with these interventions? A few possible options include:

- Ensure that effective communication systems are in place to allow information and opinions to flow upwards from communities. Apart from creating ownership and effective participation such systems would also ensure an early warning structure was in place.
- Through a number of initiatives attempt to strengthen government capacity to facilitate the re-development of multiple livelihood systems based upon agriculture. Part of this would be to encourage the rehabilitation of rural infrastructure to allow access to remote areas and to enable institutions to adapt to fast-changing conditions.
- The promotion of rural development policies more generally that looks beyond agricultural production at the systems in which the sector is based. Thus a focus on agrarian reform would ensure that a broader basket of options was open for consideration within policy discourse.

Experiences garnered from such interventions should be widely disseminated particularly if successful lesson learning is to be engendered within the organisation. Better links at regional and country level will contribute to increased programme learning and more robust strategic development.

5.3.1 Moving towards social protection: some thoughts for the future

Safety net interventions should build upon existing government welfare and social programmes wherever possible and ensure that local participation and community control are characteristic of the processes. Such interventions should be focused on income maintenance or asset strengthening to enable households to maintain or re-establish their productive capacity. Experiences from countries that have established safety nets should be harnessed in this regard with a particular emphasis on learning for the region.

When some type of direct welfare support is needed cash transfers should be considered. Cash has been found to generate a range of benefits not normally associated with food, including income and employment multipliers, investments of earnings and non-farm enterprises, stimulation of trade and food price stabilisation. It is possible to use food aid as a safety net but overall it is much less efficient than cash. However, if, in a specific situation, food aid has been shown to be the best way to provide immediate support for certain types of households, it should be input through community based or public welfare systems and it must not undermine commercial production or imports. In the context of Southern Africa, with active trade and (usually) regional surpluses, externally sourced food aid should logically be used only as a last resort. Specific recommendations include:

- General food distributions may remain relevant in situations of acute food deficits, and contexts of high economical instability. The situation in the region, including the feasibility of a number of alternatives to general food distributions, should generally confine this type of intervention to targeted distributions, complementary to other interventions.
- Direct financial support to Public Welfare Systems may be a good option to address the needs of the most vulnerable.
- Community based welfare systems such as the Oxfam Home Based Care project in Malawi are very relevant in the region as most countries have no public system in place to provide welfare services and because they can empower communities to address chronic problems and provide vectors to channel relief to the most vulnerable in times of crisis.
- For some vulnerable groups, Public Work Programmes (PWPs) are a relevant option in the medium term, especially since such programmes can be expanded in times of acute stress. The main limitation for PWPs is the capacity of local administrations for designing, planning and implementing projects. Thus, management and technical support could be provided to PWPs. Preparedness may include building up the capacity to expand the programmes for temporary periods.

5. Concluding comments:

It is clear from much of the experience and analysis of the past decade in Southern Africa that the situation must cease to be viewed either as a short-term crisis, and/ or as a "food security" problem. It is a chronic crisis of development with recurring episodes of acute needs, which must be addressed by donors, government and agencies from a long-term and multi-sectoral perspective.

Two major issues bear repeating in this context. Firstly, greater emphasis is needed on livelihood recovery activities for households and communities, which are relevant to local needs. Secondly, considering the high levels of chronic poverty in the region and the ongoing impact of HIV/AIDS, social protection and safety net programmes will be required to support the poorest in the community over the long-term. Despite the emphasis on the latter, there will be a continued need for food relief in some places, raising the challenge of having a range of options available in order to meet the needs of diverse challenges.

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