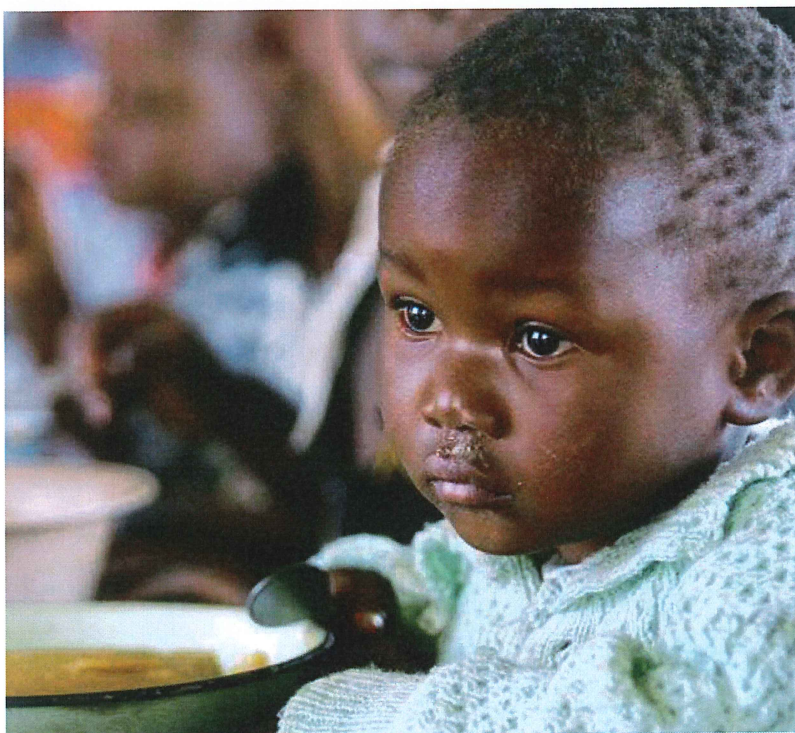


CRISIS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA NO LONGER JUST ABOUT **FOOD**

By Scott Drimie



IN 1992, Southern Africa experienced a food crisis, the result of widespread drought. A decade later, a similar crisis has brought many in the region to unparalleled levels of hardship. But this time the hardship is not just about lack of food. The term for this new phenomenon is 'entangling crises', or a series of related hardships that requires robust and creative thinking about relief, rehabilitation, livelihood and development.

The key difference between 1992 and 2002 is that the latter crisis can be attributed to a number of factors, among them structural imbalance, governance, economic and social decline, HIV/AIDS and, to a lesser extent, drought. This produced a substantial emergency response but also drew attention to the overall plight of Southern Africa, where poverty and food insecurity are on the increase, compounded by a worsening HIV/AIDS situation.

A number of reviews and reports have attempted to shed light on this complex mix of factors and to gauge appropriate policy responses. For instance, Oxfam-GB has embarked upon a process to better understand the underlying causes of the regional humanitarian crisis and how to mitigate its recurrence.

This report made it clear that increasing numbers of households are now less able to cope with even relatively small crop losses and food price increases. Unless the underlying causes of such long-term threats are addressed, more frequent and severe humanitarian crises in

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Southern Africa will be inevitable. This challenge requires immediate relief as well as long-term development to reduce conditions of political, socio-economic and environmental vulnerability that leave the region open to even relatively modest external threats such as an unexceptional drought.

Standard practice focuses on social and economic development, punctuated by occasional emergencies that require short-term relief until people get back on track. The advent of AIDS in particular has steadily eroded the livelihood base of millions of people.

This raises an imperative for aid agencies to seriously consider their medium- and long-term assistance priorities, beyond fragmented development support such as food donations. For example, disaster reduction should be factored into relief and rehabilitation operations.

In crisis situations across the world, the usual response has been for aid agencies to bring in emergency relief along with new implementing teams, largely as a separate process to existing long-term development projects. Calls for better integration between these processes have a long history in development literature.

Oxfam suggests simultaneously implementing relief and development programmes in an integrated fashion, with the understanding that humanitarian aid will be necessary in an emergency. Part of this challenge will be the reluctance of donors and aid agencies to continue relief strategies over extended periods of time.

In this context, aid agencies responding to the crisis should adopt a fast-track recovery combined with longer-term development. For instance, rather than limiting relief to the delivery of seeds and tools, aid agencies could provide treadle pumps and support for training in small-scale irrigation, along with a credit package for irrigation clubs.

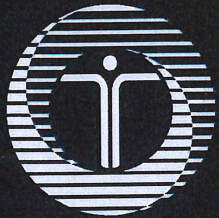
This type of approach has been summed up by the UN to recognise, assess and respond to the immediate humanitarian needs (such as food, water, healthcare or education) caused by the entangling crisis, while simultaneously planning programmes to restore government, community and household capacity.

Active partnerships with a broad range of aid organisations should be established so that relevant expertise and support are secure and sustainable. 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. •

Dr Scott Drimie is a Senior Research Specialist in the Integrated Rural and Regional Development (IRRD) Research Programme of the HSRC. His report, 'The Underlying Causes of the Food Crisis in the Southern African Region: Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe', will be published by Oxfam-GB in the next few months. For a copy of the report, e-mail sdrimie@hsrc.ac.za.

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