



EDITORIAL

HOW HAVE THEY SURVIVED?

A year ago the African Security Review 12(1) included three features on food security and humanitarian intervention in recognition of the food crisis facing the Southern African region. At the time, according to the United Nations' World Food Programme (WFP), 15 million people across the Southern African region faced potential life-threatening shortages of food. The tragic loss of millions of lives seemed imminent, even unavoidable. One year later, the crisis continues. Thankfully, the loss of millions of lives seems to have been averted, for the time being at least. This is no mean feat considering the depth and magnitude of the crisis. How have all these millions survived?

The answer is as complex as the crisis itself. Four possible reasons stand out. First, some have been rescued by shipments of international food aid. Second, others have developed ingenious survival strategies despite the odds stacked against them. Third, some have been helped by their own national or provincial government's intervention. Many others, however, appear to have received very little food or assistance and are probably unable to do much as their sources of energy and income dry up. A fourth reason is that the crisis may have been exaggerated or made to sound more desperate than it really was.

Food crises are difficult to talk about. Words such as 'famine' and 'starvation' are very emotive. Their exact meaning and extent is hard to pin down. They have been used so often and in so many different situations that they have lost much of their original meaning. Words like 'severe' and 'huge' give an impression but have

no accurate quantitative meaning that donors, governments or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can use for planning and analysis. Oddly, the financial markets face a similar problem. Falsely predicting 'huge' losses or 'substantial' profits can be misleading and even illegal. Stock exchanges have recently tried to link certain words to certain figures. For example, some have defined a 'substantial' loss as a loss of between 20% and 35%. Any higher or lower and a different word has to be used. Unfortunately, that sort of rough and ready solution is not easily available to emergency relief workers.

Experts and workers in the field seem to prefer broader terms such as 'humanitarian crisis' or 'food emergency'. At first these terms appear to be bland euphemisms that disguise the dire reality of people facing possible death from starvation. In fact, these new terms may actually be an attempt to recognise that the problem is often not simply about a lack of food. The life-threatening food shortage in Southern Africa has arisen from a complex mix of, amongst others, structural poverty, adverse weather conditions, bad policy and conflict. Only addressing the shortage of food is to miss the point, but it continues all the same because failure to do so would be monstrously inhumane.

Regional organisations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), global ones like the UN, and local NGOs have tried for years, with mixed success, to create mechanisms to deal effectively with looming food shortages. SADC's forerunner, the

Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference set up a Regional Early Warning Unit in the 1980s with this in mind. The Food and Agricultural Organisation and WFP are other examples. The WFP has been active in the past 12 months and their programme is certainly part of the reason that millions are still alive today in Southern Africa. The WFP uses food-related and non-food-related criteria to compile 'rolling regional assessments' of which areas are most vulnerable to food shortages. They have repaired railways, improved roads and leased locomotives to make sure that the meals reach the people who need them. Their network of trucks, warehouses, staff, offices, sub-offices and distribution points represents a fairly advanced system of disaster management.

Populations whose normal supply of food has been interrupted have adopted specific survival strategies. Cash remittances from abroad have become even more important sources of income with which to buy food, where food is available. Another coping mechanism is simply to move away to a place where food is more easily obtainable. Nature has played a part too. Wild cucumbers, termites, nuts and marula fruit have all provided alternative sustenance in the absence of maize and wheat. Time and energy previously devoted to education may now be spent planting, watering and harvesting. Despite the lack of rainfall or the damage by floods, the environment is occasionally benevolent and has certainly played a part in saving lives.

Another reason that many people have survived the current food emergency is because

of intervention by their own governments. Much has been said about bad government policies that may have exacerbated the shortages. But it remains true that many government officials in the region have taken a very active part in helping the vulnerable despite enormous difficulties. Mozambican ports have facilitated off-loading and movement of cargo. Malawi, Zambia and Swaziland have provided or loaned what maize they could spare for relief efforts. South Africa has also quietly provided huge support: assisting with logistics, donating maize and making warehouses available to relief organisations.

It has been suggested by some that the food crisis was exaggerated and that only very few people were ever really in any danger of starving. Arguments of this sort are impossible to prove and hard to rebut. We can and should question the data and doubt the motives of those who collect it, but those who work to prevent famine and other calamities can hardly be expected to avoid all emotive appeals. The proof, for those who insist on it before taking any action, is usually only available later as a list of the dead.

Large-scale loss of life seems to have been avoided in the short term; but the crisis, or whatever we choose to call it, has not abated. The losses of income, education and opportunity will be felt in rural households for many years to come. It is asking a lot of communities in crisis to consider long-term solutions. Perhaps the awareness of how close the region has come to catastrophe will provide the impetus for reform.