

## SOUTHERN AFRICA ASSESSMENT

### *Food security and HIV/AIDS*

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#### **Introduction**

The year 2005 is being touted as the one in which Africa stakes its claim on the international agenda, topping the list of priorities for the Group of Eight (G8) the European Union (EU) and, increasingly, US foreign policy. Indeed the continent has received better media attention in recent months, stimulated by reinvigorated peace processes and the G7's agenda for poverty eradication in Africa that is led by the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, poverty and hunger still characterise life for most of the continent's inhabitants who are denied agency over their livelihoods as a result of a complex mix of reinforcing structural, political and environmental factors. Commenting on recent initiatives for debt relief for African countries, World Bank's James Wolfensohn said he hopes that 'there is a recognition now on behalf of the rich world that they cannot continue to be rich if the world is destabilised by poverty'.<sup>1</sup>

The following pages identify HIV/AIDS and food insecurity (particularly in rural areas) as the two most severe and interrelated humanitarian issues currently facing southern Africa. It is argued that the current situation must be contextualised as an 'entangling crisis' of climatic factors, chronic poverty, the failure of economic and political governance, and the impact of HIV/AIDS on the ability of individuals to respond independently.

#### **The chains of poverty**

The foregrounding of human security as a way of ensuring global stability (through preventative action) is gaining momentum, particularly by major aid donor countries. But with only ten years left to meet the 2015 deadline for the millennium development goals, there is an urgent need to reassess the most pressing issues facing African states and the communities that comprise them. Speaking at the launch of the 'Make poverty history' campaign in London's Trafalgar Square, Nelson Mandela commented that 'like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings ... While poverty persists there is no true freedom.'<sup>2</sup>

Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where the number of people living in extreme poverty has almost doubled, from 164 million in 1981 to 314 million today. Thirty-two of its 47 countries are among the world's 48 poorest nations.<sup>3</sup> Placing this in international context illustrates the extent of the challenge facing Africa. According to a 2002 Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report, approximately 842 million people were undernourished between 1999 and 2001. Of this number, 10 million were in industrialised countries, 34 million in countries in transition and 798 million in the developing world.<sup>4</sup>

While the increasing emphasis on regional cooperation favours a human-centred rather

than a military-centred view of global security, it highlights the vast differences in development capacity between individual countries within specific regions. This is particularly true of countries in southern Africa whose forms of governance range from traditional monarchy to constitutional democracies on a continuum from de facto one-party rule, unclear division between legislative, administrative and judicial functions to decentralised functions and popular civil society participation.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this uneven political development has implications for the socio-economic development of the region.

### Overview and current needs of the region

The period between 2002 and 2003 saw one of the most severe food crises in southern Africa, triggered by the lack of rainfall in key agricultural areas. The resulting acute food shortage affected approximately 15 million people, half of whom were children, in six affected countries: Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe.<sup>6</sup> Four of these countries officially declared the situation a national disaster and sought international aid. With the exception of South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, all southern African countries are listed by the UN FAO as food-deficit areas.<sup>7</sup> Since agriculture

continues to dominate these domestic economies and is the most weather-dependent of economic activities, the impact of an environmental disaster extends far beyond individual loss of livelihood and impacts on overall food accessibility as entrenched lines of supply are disrupted. The year 2004 was no different in terms of food shortages, however, the mix of the spillover effect from the previous year and new environmental forces limiting recovery significantly.

The summary of events below provides a brief overview of events in southern Africa that occurred in 2004 and are still being monitored. The information has been collated by the United Nations Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Support Office (RIASCO).<sup>8</sup>

As the traditional 'lean season' (January to March) gets under way this year, aid agencies warn that the humanitarian crisis will persist if an integrated approach to food security is not implemented. According to January estimates by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET), food security in Zimbabwe is deteriorating to the extent that 5.8 million people are in need of food aid. Twenty years ago this precarious situation would have been considered a contradiction in terms for a country that had a history of being a net exporter of agricultural products. Moreover, food security

- Eleven southern African countries sign off to the 'Kobe Disaster Reduction Declaration'.
- Heavy rainfall destroyed crops in Lesotho while extremely hot conditions are now posing a threat to other, humidity-prone crops.
- A tsunami hit Seychelles on 26 December 2004, destroying vast areas of coastline and infrastructure. An appeal for US\$8.9 million has been launched to help the country to recover.
- A devastating storm in Swaziland cost 30 people their lives and made more than 200 people homeless.
- Cyclone Ernest and tropical storm Felapi killed at least 17 people and left 11 000 people destitute. Response to the affected people is under way.
- Malawi experienced flooding and hailstorms in 11 districts and army worm attack in four others. Over 400 people were displaced and a further 4 500 affected. Response is under way.
- Zambezi River levels in Mozambique have been alarmingly high, causing some flooding. The government has released some of its emergency funds to assist the victims. The situation is currently under control. River levels in other parts are currently not alarming.
- Flood alerts have been issued for the Caprivi region in Namibia and some flooding has occurred. The situation is being monitored closely.
- Floods have been reported in the northern province of Zambia, affecting 2 500 households. Alerts have been issued for the lower Zambezi. Assessments are currently being undertaken. The VAC issued a report identifying 176 000 households as extremely food insecure and in need of assistance.
- Floods have been reported in Muzarabane district in Zimbabwe. A response is underway. In a separate incident, a train carrying chemicals derailed near Gwanda, spilling some of its content. The situation was responded to immediately and been brought under control.
- The rainfall outlook for February – April 2005 reports above normal rainfall for the northern parts of the regional and below normal for the southern parts.

problems are exacerbated by rising staple food prices coupled with the very slow progress in the attainment of planned official imports.<sup>9</sup> Despite forecasts of normal weather, the FAO have highlighted the following priorities for southern Africa for 2005:<sup>10</sup>

- In Zimbabwe, high prices and shortage of maize in certain areas are causing serious food security concerns. Continued widespread shortages of key inputs such as seeds, fertilizer, fuel and farm power are expected during this planting season. Some 4.8 million people, about 40% of the total population, are in need of emergency food assistance.
- In Swaziland and Lesotho, large sections of the populations lack access to food and require emergency food aid and agricultural inputs, mainly due to the impact of drought in 2004.
- In Angola, food assistance is needed for up to 717 000 returnees and other vulnerable people, notwithstanding the good harvests in 2004.
- In Malawi, about 1.3 million vulnerable people, including those affected by crop failures and HIV/AIDS, require emergency food assistance, estimated at 56 000 tonnes of cereals during the 2004/2005 (April/March) marketing year.

## Food security

At this point it would be pertinent to revisit the question of what food security is. And why is a region that is not historically regarded as 'disaster prone' increasingly reliant on international aid to meet the basic needs of its population?

The right to food is unquestionably a fundamental human right. Certainly it has been affirmed as such by numerous international declarations relating to human development, not least of them being the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, there is no consensus on the causes of challenges to the right to food (for example food shortages), and the question continues to be a burning issue. Early attempts at conceptualising food insecurity and the accompanying impoverishment of communities reduced the problem to a supply-demand imbalance. Therefore it is not

surprising that the approach emphasised the need to increase agricultural output through the use of technology in the vein of much early modernisation theory.<sup>11</sup> More recent analyses of the chronic nature of the crisis have begun to shed light on the complex link between immediate food needs and the broader governance crisis at state level. Food security is not just a matter of immediate availability of food, but 'a failure of livelihoods to guarantee access to sufficient food at the household level'.<sup>12</sup> According to the 1996 World Food Summit Plan of Action, 'food security exists when all people at all times have physical access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for a healthy and active life'.<sup>13</sup>

### Judging the severity of food insecurity

A population or livelihood group is considered acutely food insecure if:

- people experience a large reduction in their major source of food and are unable to make up the difference through new strategies;
- the prevalence of malnutrition is abnormally high for the time of year, and this cannot be accounted for by either health or care factors;
- a large proportion of the population or group is using marginal or unsustainable coping strategies; and
- people are using 'coping' strategies that are damaging their livelihoods in the longer term, or incur some other unacceptable cost, such as acting illegally or immorally.

Source: Overseas Development Institute<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, food security entails three levels of activity: production, distribution and consumption, and thus early warning and strategic planning must include all three levels. Thus it is equally important to consider production incentives and parameters for commercial and subsistence farming, together with the accessibility of these products and the nutritional value of consuming them. By acknowledging these connections appropriately we will begin to move from reactive policies to preventative safety nets that have long-term capacity building effects. At regional level the Southern African Development Community (SADC) set up a coordination unit on food security issues based in Harare in 1997. The

unit's overall objectives extend further than the definition set out by the Rome Declaration by including a need to ensure that 'households have the capacity to acquire food by means of their own production or through cash purchases'.<sup>14</sup>

In addition it aims to ensure that the natural resource base is conserved in the process of acquiring food. The reference to the purchasing power of households is a positive acknowledgement of the inextricable link between structural macro-economic factors and chronic poverty. This is particularly pertinent to the discussion of agriculture and HIV/AIDS, as will be explored in greater detail below. More recently, in December 2004, the SADC Executive Secretary, Prega Ramsay, said the SADC had to come up with a strategic action plan to boost food availability and accessibility, promote food emergency preparedness and trade, and improve long-term investment in the region.

### Food security and agricultural planning

The environmental trigger for the southern African crisis of 2002–2003 included a mix of drought throughout the crop season, flooding in Mozambique and Malawi, and intense frost in Lesotho. Devastating in its impact, it serves as an illustrative example of the extent to which the inability to respond to changing weather patterns can compromise the long-term sustainability of livelihoods. An Oxfam study into the underlying causes of the crisis encapsulates this relationship in describing the impact of the drought on Lesotho saying,

... the tiny mountain kingdom of Lesotho represents some of the key problems that turned a drought – a relatively regular and survivable event – into a humanitarian disaster. At the heart of the tragedy is the unrelenting impoverishment of people, who have exhausted coping measures, are marginalised in the economy, and have few opportunities for recovery.<sup>16</sup>

It is maintained that the 2002 case highlights an underlying long-term developmental crisis rather than a classic emergency crisis and that the 'key difference between 1992 and 2002 is that the latter crisis can be attributed

to a number of factors other than climate, among them structural imbalance, governance, economic and social decline, HIV/AIDS and to a lesser extent drought'.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore important to differentiate between seasonal and chronic shortage of food, where seasonal shortage may not lead to hunger because of the resilience of the population.

Moreover, the reality that only 6% of arable land in the SADC region is irrigated (and largely in South Africa), the rest being rain-fed, means that appropriate interventions must take place in order to mitigate the impact of poor rainfall. Indeed, as research shows, meteorological drought is a phenomenon which does not necessarily lead to a famine or even to a food shortage; it is the overall vulnerability of the state in terms of poor governance through bad or non-committal policies that must be seriously considered as part of the food security debate. As the *Economist* notes in its report on the 2002 famine in Somalia, 'bad weather is rarely enough on its own to kill large numbers of people. Famine usually requires bad government too'.<sup>18</sup>

### Structural impacts: economic liberalisation

Whereas the African Union's roadmap in the form of the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) calls for the integration of Africa into the global economy, the reality of trade in Africa suggests that it is the unequal economic integration that should be of concern. Economic liberalisation in the SADC region, without the appropriate interventions, has contributed to the long-term decline in livelihoods. With the exception of South Africa, the gap created by the removal of agricultural subsidies (which would otherwise allow farmers to reinvest in the maintenance of their land and equipment) has not been filled by the private sector, but has led to a contraction of agricultural output. There are some important similarities between countries in the region in the context of the strong push for economic liberalisation and an accompanying decline in social welfare. Livelihood strategies have been eroded over the past two decades. Remittances, particularly from mining, that underwrote

consumption back in the home (usually rural) areas as well as providing funds to buy farm inputs, hire farm labour and tractors, and invest in cattle, dried up as the sector faced increasing economic pressures and restructured.<sup>19</sup>

The FAO reports that in the 1980s the area under cultivation in Zambia was about one million hectares. In 1999 this area had been reduced to 585 000 hectares, representing a decline of 23% mainly because of the removal of agricultural subsidies.<sup>20</sup> Moreover the liberalisation of maize prices led to variability of prices, causing the most vulnerable to sell their produce immediately to meet cash needs. Thus food security also refers to the ability to purchase food without compromising the individual's resource base. The most economically disadvantaged members of society are the hardest hit by natural disasters.

The contradiction between an agricultural dependent economy (SADC region) that is not supported by governmental intervention and a substantially subsidised but relatively small agro-industry (EU) adds to the structural barriers to ensuring food security. Agricultural subsidies stimulate overproduction in Europe and export dumping, which essentially lowers prices of key commodities, and thereby marginalises African producers from participating in both the domestic and global market. The Mozambican sugar industry is often used to demonstrate the extent to which EU subsidies and dumping can harm smaller African economies. Although Mozambique's predominantly rural economy has an impressively low production cost for sugar at less than 286 pounds per tonne, subsidies given to the EU as a high-cost producer of sugar have ensured that the EU competes as the second largest sugar exporter in the world.<sup>21</sup> Needless to say, this gives the EU significant leverage in terms of setting the world price for sugar. Moreover, the possibility of intra-continental trade is obscured because the EU dominates trade with other African countries. Thus the costs of these subsidies in terms of income and development opportunities lost are huge.<sup>22</sup>

And while African farmers are increasingly being told to diversify their markets as a way of maintaining competitiveness, it is evident that increased food security for southern African

producers cannot be considered outside the debate on global agrarian reform. Moreover, countries such as Namibia, Swaziland and Lesotho that placed considerable focus on textile manufacturing as a source of growth are now facing the prospect of deepening mass unemployment and stress as a result of the ending of the multi-fibre agreement that gave them access to key European and US markets. Since the ending of the agreement at the beginning of 2005 it is estimated that 15 000 jobs will be lost in Swaziland alone.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the lack of vertical integration of the textile economy (from yarn to the finished garment) means that they have little to fall back on. This grave situation only adds to the vulnerability of those countries to secure the livelihoods and food security of their people.

### **HIV/AIDS and food security**

The introduction of AIDS into the development equation presents major challenges to the ideals of a long-term strategy for poverty reduction and food security. This is largely because approximately two thirds of the population of the 25 most affected African countries depend on agriculture for their food security.<sup>24</sup> An FAO report on the impact of HIV on agriculture suggests that if four people for each of the 42 million people living with HIV are impacted on, the virus is assumed to affect 160 million globally. With the highest prevalence rate in the world, the consequent humanitarian crisis is particularly acute in southern Africa (seven countries in the region have prevalence rates above 17%).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the FAO estimates that by 2020 Namibia could lose up to 26% of its agricultural labour force to the virus, Zimbabwe 23%, Mozambique and South Africa 20% and Malawi 14%.<sup>26</sup>

The major impacts on agriculture include depletion of human capital, diversion of resources from agriculture, and loss of farm and non-farm income, together with other forms of psychosocial impacts that affect productivity.<sup>27</sup> When these factors combine, the lack of food and the lack of access to food begin to intensify. This view has been 'formalised' by activist and writer on humanitarian affairs Alex de Waal, who terms the phenomenon

'the new variant famine'.<sup>28</sup> De Waal argues that HIV/AIDS has altered the demographic profile of conventional famines by targeting young productive adults, and more women than men, which differs from the traditional victims of famines, namely the elderly men and children.

The implications for a gender bias towards women in the transmission of HIV are enormous, since this means that the care-giving capacity of communities is constantly eroded. The Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN) explains that the cycle of poverty and AIDS entrenches a system of chronic impoverishment: '[T]his weakened social fabric means that families cannot recover previous levels of social functioning, and may even resort to strategies that imperil them further, because the negative consequences of such remedies are not immediately apparent.' It must be noted that the overextension of community welfare is occurring at the same time as the withdrawal of the state at local level, leaving individuals to negotiate their own survival strategies that may undercut their ability to recover in the long term.

### The consequences of the new variant famine: overview

While the extent of the loss of labour owing to HIV/AIDS infection can largely be predicted, other changes in the agricultural profile of the region are not as obvious. Some examples of these changes are:

- **Shift in the type of food production:** The steady increase in cassava production as a substitute for labour-intensive crops such as maize has compensated for lost labour through HIV/AIDS in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe over a five-year period (1999-2000).
- **Increasing movement of people:** The seasonal nature of agricultural work means that this sector is highly dependent on migratory labour. This 'pool of labour' is often poorly catered for in terms of family-conducive accommodation, but on the contrary provides an environment conducive to casual and commercial sex that exacerbates vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Migration in search for food will also increase the risk of HIV/AIDS,

as mobile populations have little access to health services for preventative education.

- **Loss of transfer of knowledge of agricultural skills:** The average life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa is now 47 years, an average of 15 years less that it would have been without HIV/AIDS. But the impact of HIV/AIDS extends beyond the costs of treatment and lost labour, and affects the preservation of indigenous knowledge of farming techniques and biodiversity. As more sexually active 'breadwinners' fall victim to the virus, children are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring the maintenance of agricultural livelihoods. Without sufficient 'know-how' child-headed households are ill equipped to meet basic food needs. The Southern African Humanitarian Information Network (SAHIM) emphasises that indigenous knowledge and biodiversity are significant resources in rural communities, and become increasingly important as tangible assets when other resources dwindle.<sup>29</sup>
- **Weakening of institutional capacity:** The weakening of capacity refers to the weakening of agricultural capacity and the ability of general institutions to deliver services. As more staff stay away from work owing to opportunistic illness, the efficiency of a contracted workforce with expanded work will be tested to the maximum. Furthermore, communities with fewer adults have less 'surplus adult-time' to help others, undermining the cornerstone of African society – extended community welfare.
- **The exacerbation of gender inequalities:** Numerous studies and analyses of women and gender highlight women's lack of power to negotiate sexual relationships (or 'survival sex'), and inequities in income as some of the fundamental reasons for women's vulnerability to the virus. As such, women are most vulnerable not only to HIV/AIDS infection but also to the economic impact of HIV.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, young girls are more likely to be on the receiving end of the virus, as the burden of care-giving falls on the younger generation. This often means that female children are relatively more compromised in terms of long-term socio-economic development.

## Food aid: part of the solution or more of the problem?

It is clear from this overview that food insecurity, and its related problems of hunger and famine, is a symptom of deeper structural and political forces. The reliance of African countries on food aid as a stopgap measure has in itself become an impediment to long-term management of the situation. Certainly the use of 'food aid' as a form of secondary market to dispose of excess produce by industrialised nations should be critically evaluated. As agricultural oversupply found a conduit for disposal in the way of overseas food aid, therefore becoming an undisputed way of protecting northern agricultural interests.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the debate on whether genetically modified food should be accepted as aid has obscured the real and underlying causes of food insecurity. Together with HIV/AIDS the problem will not simply be solved through increasing food aid per se, but requires a considered response that must account for both external and 'man-made' impositions on communities.

Significantly, the emphasis must shift towards understanding the divide between subsistence and commercial farming so that both activities are adequately supported. This requires a disengagement by African governments from a passive reception of food aid to an adaptation of policy in support of agricultural development. Some of the strategies offered by Martin Rupiya, for example, include supporting national food producers and agrobusiness through education, extension services, improved seed selection and credit, together with improved irrigation and transport and distribution networks.<sup>32</sup> Investment in agriculture is critical to developing capacity for individual and community-wide livelihoods. To this end, it would be pertinent to consider the challenges to sufficient irrigation, considering the short rainy season that is relied upon to support crops through to harvesting. Statistics suggest that only 4.5% of land on the continent is under irrigation, compared to the 38.4% in Asia.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the use of food aid and land reform as political tools must be considered within the governance paradigm. Recent

reports from Zimbabwe suggest that the ruling party is influencing the Grain Marketing Board in Matabeleland South to distribute grain according to party allegiances. In the context of southern Africa the term 'land reform' has almost become synonymous with the land seizures in Zimbabwe undertaken by the Mugabe regime. However, considering the precarious state of humanitarian affairs in Zimbabwe, there is growing need to move beyond simple distribution focus to supporting livelihood through agricultural investment. Southern Africa would do well to take a leaf from the Indian experience, or what has been termed the 'green revolution'. The populous subcontinent has proved that external aid is not always the key to development. Ironically having been excluded from foreign food aid, the country developed its internal capacity to meet basic food security needs. By deliberately linking peasant production with commercial agricultural business India was able to avert the 'begging bowl syndrome' that has characterised the African development agenda.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the current mix of structural factors and external climatic changes will continue to destabilise livelihoods if an integrated approach to the issues of food security and HIV/AIDS is not adopted. It is imperative to sustainable development that issues of responsible government should be incorporated into seemingly unpredictable events such as the southern African famine. To this end, recent public statements on debt relief and poverty eradication by the UK government are seen as positive steps towards understanding the complex nature of humanitarian crises in the region. Latest research findings on the impact of global warming on Africa, for example, suggest that early warning systems are capable of alerting authorities to possible disaster, the key issue being to recognise that Africa's high vulnerability is a function of chronic stresses induced by poor or ineffective governance. The addition of HIV/AIDS as a multi-dimensional stress to the social and economic fabric of society requires urgent cross-cutting attention. The immediate and short-term emergency relief and long-term

development relationship must be reviewed to prevent a simple reactionary form of assistance, particularly food aid. To 'make poverty history' requires more than an increase in aid, but an understanding of the extent to which human insecurity is compounded by intensifying conditions of political, socio-economic and environmental vulnerability.

## Notes

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