

Food security: what have we learned from the Southern Africa crisis

Elizabeth Cromwell

The Southern Africa humanitarian crisis that came to international attention in 2002 stemmed from an expansion of existing chronic food insecurity rather than a sudden disaster. In this, it offers useful lessons for how to manage such crises, which are increasingly part of the scene in other regions such as the Horn of Africa.

In the 1980s, everyone talked of 'food security'; economic liberalisation was the new development paradigm. Prevention of future food crises depended, it was held, on early warning systems, disaster preparedness, strategic grain reserves, intra-regional cooperation, and could be helped by implementation of the domestic and trade measures that had become known as the Washington Consensus. The belief was that such a framework would ensure the four key components of food security: availability, access, utilisation, and stability.

Indeed, in 1991–2 Southern Africa averted widespread acute food insecurity – despite a 65 per cent harvest shortfall. However, into the new Millennium, an estimated 16 million people in the region are permanently vulnerable to food insecurity, come rain come shine. To understand the difference we have to examine the major policy failures of governments and development partners.

Human vulnerability arises from the inability to cope



Family maize stock in Musenge village, Zimbabwe
(© IFAD/H. Wagner)

with natural, economic or social risks, and is usually defined in terms of inadequate assets. Today, an estimated 8 million people in Southern Africa (15 per cent of the population) are vulnerable to chronic food insecurity, and the same number again are vulnerable to transitory food insecurity. Policy, while concentrating on food *availability* has placed insufficient emphasis on *access* to food. The complex relationship between livelihood strategies and human vulnerability has also been poorly understood: until recently, most early warning systems in the region were based only on crop estimates.

HIV/AIDS is a significant cause of human vulnerability in the region and continues to undermine human capacity, from individual livelihood strategies to public sector service delivery. More than 30 per cent of adults are now infected in a number of countries and the epidemic has not yet peaked. But it is not the only significant cause. Decades of economic underachievement and poor service delivery, interspersed with shocks such as the 1991–2 drought, stretched many households' coping strategies to breaking point. And there is increasing recognition that social exclusion and other political failures also increase vulnerability.

The development model that believed **economic liberalisation** would bring immediate benefits, significantly underestimated the 'low-level equilibrium trap'. In other words, the historic lack of market opportunities, resources to invest, reasonable returns on investment and acceptable risks, impose powerful limitations on private sector activity. Not uniquely to Southern Africa, failures in policy design have been far outweighed by failures in **policy implementation** at national and sub-national level: substantial policy documents gather dust on Ministry shelves and are subject to expensive reviews and revisions before they even see the light of day. The current nature of the policy process is the problem, as it can easily be co-opted or by-passed.

ODI **OPINIONS** are signed opinion pieces by ODI researchers on current development and humanitarian topics.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not commit the Institute.

ODI **OPINIONS** may be cited or reproduced with due acknowledgement.

For further information contact ODI Public Affairs office on +44 (0)20 7922 0394 – opinions@odi.org.uk

The deterioration in **regional integration** between the 1991–2 and 2002 crises has been marked. In 1991–2, various institutions of the Southern Africa Development Community acted as conduits for information flow on needs assessments, maize procurement, and transport capacity, and in smoothing cross-border controls. By 2002, disagreements concerning replenishment of Community funding had paralysed key institutions and there has been little progress with other areas of regional integration. Given the various barriers to participation in international markets and the potential for much greater cross-border trade in food, this is a missed opportunity.

There are three main lessons.

Firstly, **market-based economic development** will not thrive in the region by the efforts of the private sector alone. Specific policy incentives which encourage NGOs and community-based organisations to mediate and support input, output, finance and credit markets are needed. In the short to medium term, until self-sustaining growth takes hold, economic strategies have to include market intervention to stabilise food availability and prices. New models for grain reserves and food price stabilisation are urgently required.

Social protection policies tailor-made for the specific needs of different categories of vulnerable people are also needed. What works for rural maize producers in Southern Malawi will not work and may actually be harmful for rural households in Lesotho whose livelihood decisions centre more on what is happening across the border. Furthermore, broader economic policies need to take social protection objectives better into account.

Secondly, the **relationship between development partners** needs to change. The \$30–40 government spending per head in the countries of Southern Africa is

equivalent to a high proportion of the annual income of much of the population living below local poverty lines. Over the past decade, this expenditure has contributed little towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals in the region. True, globalisation and HIV/AIDS have had a major negative impact but development partners could institute some changes such as the following with immediate positive effect:

- Greater focus on results-based management – specifically, greater use of hard evidence in identifying policy priorities and monitoring outcomes
- Encouraging competitive politics (and making greater use of civil society to do so)
- Developing more consistent donor relationships and recognising the impact – especially political – of some policies

Thirdly, there are lessons for **international humanitarian assistance**. There is only a limited role for internationally procured food aid in situations of chronic food insecurity and other forms of assistance such as cash transfers are often more appropriate, because of the need to improve food access as much as food availability. Regional sourcing of food aid (e.g. for school feeding, hospital rations) is more effective.

Each of these areas of action is vital: none can be postponed. Food security has to become an objective of fiscal policy and a priority for public spending. This requires changes in the relationships between development partners and the maintenance of aid flows to support these priorities. Will Southern Africa's development partners take up the challenge in the coming round of poverty reduction strategy reviews throughout the region?

www.odi.org.uk/food-security-forum