

Lesotho's food crisis: balancing humanitarian and development responses to food shocks¹

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The key question?

In the media, the term drought is being used almost interchangeably with famine in the context of the current southern African food crisis. Lesotho is cited as one of the countries affected by food insecurity and was the first to declare a national emergency. But what is the real picture in Lesotho? How much is the current food insecurity caused by drought compared with other longer term factors?

Drought and weather patterns

Rainfall was higher than in previous years. Thus, there was no drought in Lesotho: rather the heavy rainfall prevented farmers from getting into their fields, reducing the area they planted due to waterlogged soils. This alone was not the only climatic variation: early frosts and erratic hailstorms both contributed to a weather pattern which affected not only the land area planted but also adversely affected harvests. But this is not a new phenomenon: a long term review of livelihoods in Lesotho corroborates that people feel "livelihoods in Lesotho are increasingly threatened by drought or irregular rainfall; by other climatic hazards", regardless of whether climatic variation is actually increasing².

But even if there was no drought, has the erratic climate contributed to food insecurity in Lesotho?

The Lesotho Emergency Food Security Assessment Report (Sept 02) notes that nearly half of households surveyed had run out of cereal stocks. But this is not unusual - a CARE study in three villages in two southern districts in 1998 found that only 29% of households claimed they could feed themselves from their farming all year round – and this in a highly productive area. The average number of months per year over which these households could feed themselves was 6 – and this is still higher than the national average. It has been a long time (some authors suggest half a century³) since most Basotho can ensure household livelihood security through farming. This finding is common across the southern African region, with evidence from Malawi and Zambia, that millions of people do not produce adequate food in most years.

¹ This paper was compiled by CARE (the combined South Africa-Lesotho country office, and the Southern and West African Regional Management Unit, SWARMU) to raise debate relating to the vulnerability context in Lesotho. It was commissioned by the Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPAN) and finalised in December 2002.

² Livelihoods in Lesotho, CARE July 2001.

³ Stephen Turner, Livelihoods in Lesotho, CARE July 2001

So if climatic variation is a feature, and possibly an increasing feature, of Basotho livelihoods, and household food deficits the norm, is this year any different? The Emergency Food Security Assessment suggests so: it estimates that up to 36% of the population will require assistance up to March 2003. A total of 36 000 MT of cereal is estimated for the period Sept 02- March 03. But food insecurity does not classify as a famine - as measured by wasting of children under five which is estimated at around 7.5% of children (and not the 15-20% levels which are considered by WHO to be a nutritional emergency).

Business as usual?

So if there has not been a drought, and probably will not be a famine, is 'business as usual' in Lesotho an adequate response to the food insecurity? The answer to this question, from all parties regardless of their views on the food crisis⁴, seems to be an unequivocal "no". At the humanitarian level, blanket food assistance is not required but, instead, careful targeting towards the most vulnerable households which vary "substantially by socio-economic group, food economy zone, and district"⁵. The most vulnerable groups are identified as:

- Aged-headed households living alone or without a spouse;
- Female headed households, particularly the large number of very poor;
- Orphans living in households with a high dependency ratio; and
- HIV/AIDs victims and affected households.

While the current food insecurity can be responded to as a crisis requiring an international food aid emergency response, this single or series of climatic shocks within one growing season, must be viewed within a significant longer term growth in the vulnerability of poor people in Lesotho, which has multiple causes. Perhaps of greater concern than the measured 7.5% wasting, is the figure of 47% of children showing stunting (cf 46% in 2000), evidence of long term poverty and chronic vulnerability.

But what are the factors that are contributing to this long term vulnerability?

In response to a request from DFID, CARE put together a multi-disciplinary team to review the underlying causes of vulnerability in Lesotho and to develop a programme to assist in livelihood recovery in the worst affected areas⁶. This team spent time differentiating between the most immediate and short-term needs of the current food crisis, and the longer term requirements of improving the capacity of resource poor households and communities to improve their food and livelihood security. The list of identified underlying causes included the following:

- Loss of household income due to retrenchment and reduced employment (most notably

⁴ There are divergent views on the seriousness of the food insecurity in Lesotho, with some being skeptical about the calling of an emergency in an election year, others questioning the data used for estimating deficits and shortfalls in this year compared with other years. For example, MoACLR's own data show that the cereal harvests in 02 were only just below the long term (30 + year) average, but significantly lower than the bumper harvest of 00, which is used in some comparisons to highlight an acute shortage.

⁵ Lesotho Emergency Food Security Assessment Report, Sept 2002.

⁶ The team comprised Ministry of Agriculture, Cooperatives and Land Reclamation staff (Mpono Nketsi), CARE staff members Makojang Mahao, Gift Nt'sonyane, Jo Abbot and Tamara Rusinow, Ian Goldman and David Cooper of Khanya – managing rural change, Heather Garner from International Organisation Development, and independent consultant Vernon Gibberd. The project memorandum Livelihoods Recovery Through Agriculture Programme is available from CARE South Africa – Lesotho. **Contact: joabbot@caresa.co.za**

- South African employment);
- Reduced purchasing power due to much higher costs of food and inputs⁷;
- Increasing household expenditure on items associated with long term illness and death (highly linked with HIV/AIDs);
- Reduced land planted due to heavy rainfall, reduced use of inputs and chronic illness;
- Government policies on subsidizing inputs which encourage farming households to delay their planting to wait for inputs (which often arrive late); and
- Poor agricultural practices that result in low productivity.

This checklist indicates a range of underlying causes, many of which (e.g. climate, supra-national policies and processes), are beyond the direct control or influence of the Kingdom of Lesotho. Macro-economic and social ties between Lesotho and South Africa are central to the underlying causes. The devaluation of the Rand has severely inflated food and transport prices, meaning food is available in the markets and shops but its price is beyond the reach of many households. Jandrells supermarket chain reports that many of their shoppers make a 50kg bag of maize meal now last 5-6 weeks rather than a month. This indicates a household eking out a bag of maize over a 25-50% longer period, with obvious impacts on the nutritional status of family members.

As also identified in the emergency food security assessment, HIV/AIDS is beginning to heavily impact on Basotho livelihoods – with reduced labour for planting and farming but crucially increased expenditure on medical and funeral bills, diverting household expenditure from productive activities.

Interviews held as part of CARE’s review of underlying causes of vulnerability indicate the high number of orphan headed households: a recent UNICEF study estimated that 15% of school children are orphans. The Nutrition Unit within the Ministry of Agriculture reported finding 56 “double orphan” families with little or no means of support in a mountain village of only 200 families. And because many orphans fail to inherit land due to the death of their parents before they reach adulthood, they are effectively condemned to life-long vulnerability through a reduced asset base and no, or reduced, rights to land claims.

Informants from both the Ministry of Agriculture and the Lesotho AIDS Prevention Coordinating Agency indicate that maintaining current livelihood status in Lesotho would be a great achievement, considering that trends have been downwards for at least the last decade. With an HIV+ rate of up to 35%, any initiative “cannot expect to reduce absolute figures of vulnerability”, improve livelihoods or assist in eradicating poverty⁸. A dampening thought for the global community working to halve world poverty by 2015.

Ways forward

What are some of the ways forward within this context of increasing vulnerability for many Basotho?

- *Recognising the incremental downward spiral of households in Lesotho.* This cannot be addressed through an emergency food response alone, but requires a rethink in Lesotho’s

⁷ The price of a 50kg bag of mealie meal has gone up from R65 in 2000 to R180 this year

⁸ CARE project memorandum of Livelihoods Recovery through Agriculture Programme, Sept 2002.

macro-economic policies as much as its policies within key line Ministries, such as Agriculture. The current drafting processes for Vision 2020 and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper provide an opportunity for such a review of the allocation of national budgets and priorities across the sectors, with a specific focus on targeting the most vulnerable people;

- *Rethinking the government's safety net policies.* At a practical level, this should include a food security monitoring system that enables current harvests to be compared in a consistent and transparent way with both long and short term averages, and linked to the operationalisation of nutritional surveillance systems.
- *Strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture to implement its new extension policy,* which encourages the development of farmer associations with their own farmer extension facilitators. This is in line with similar extension initiatives within Zambia and Malawi, as well as pilot areas within Lesotho, which have been found effective in supporting poor farmers. This implies a coordinating and support function for government extension officers, responding to the needs of farmers' groups who are much more in tune with the local context of resource-poor farmers.
- *The provision of effective input and output marketing systems* that are suitable for smallscale farmers, and focus on providing safety nets to enable the poorest households to access seeds, other inputs and advice or support. The agricultural input supply policy and system should encourage development of the private sector who are discouraged by the current government subsidy policies.
- *A national effort to promote homestead food production by vulnerable groups and individuals,* favouring gardening methods requiring less (heavy) labour. This should have a specific focus on the production and dissemination of appropriate and robust seed varieties, for staples and vegetables, which are more resistant to climatic variation and which are currently not supplied through commercial seed marketing systems.
- *Development and dissemination of Food-based Dietary Guidelines for Lesotho,* that can inform the selection and promotion of appropriate homestead crops that are recommended for those who are chronically ill and for improved child nutrition⁹.
- *A review of the land policy,* to enable orphans to retain their rights to inherit land as well as enabling them to access land for homestead gardens, such as through linkages with the 'School Gardens' (and other institutional gardening) programmes.

Livelihoods Recovery

Some of these issues are included in the Livelihoods Recovery through Agriculture Programme, which being implemented jointly by CARE and the Ministry of Agriculture, supported by DFID. This Programme works to address some of the underlying causes of household vulnerability - by providing a development response to a humanitarian challenge and by supporting and strengthening enabling policies within Lesotho which enable vulnerable people to realise their rights to livelihood security.

The programme includes four elements:

- establishing a Challenge Fund to support the work of existing service providers

⁹ These are underway with the Food and Nutrition Co-ordinating Office (FNCO).

- promoting homestead food production by poor vulnerable households;
- strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture to roll out its policy of client-led agricultural extension;
- the development and dissemination of materials on good agricultural practices as promoted by different organisations in Lesotho (and in support of the new extension system), and
- an action-learning framework to understand how (whether and which) households are coping with the increasing intensity and frequency of shocks and the support mechanisms that can be provided by government and non-government agencies in the short and long term.

The Livelihoods Recovery approach is not new. Instead, it is a common sense way of dealing with food insecurity - and one that has been advocated by CARE in the Consortium for Southern African Food Emergency (C-SAFE) in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi and Swaziland: linking the saving of lives with improved health and nutrition, productive assets, and agricultural production and profitability.

Food insecurity can be addressed through direct means, such as food distribution. This is clearly necessary for the most vulnerable households. But it can also be addressed through a livelihoods approach in which vulnerable households are regarded as part of a community, and survive through strategies that include local production systems, local employment, reciprocity between households, and strengthened external support systems. This think piece highlights the importance of taking an integrated approach, exploring the underlying causes of a food crisis and supporting a combined humanitarian and development response to address them.