

# FOOD SECURITY, VULNERABILITY AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Several countries in Southern Africa are presently facing acute food security issues. Nearly 13 million people in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe are involved in a food crisis which requires about 3 millions tons of cereals to ensure food security for everyone.

Food security is considered differently when the focus is on the macro or the micro level. On the macroeconomic level, food security means that enough food has to be available to cover the population's whole nutritional requirements. On the micro level, i.e. for the households and the individuals, three conditions need to be respected: sufficient food at the macro level, stability in the supply, and a regular access to the corresponding availabilities for all households and their members.

At the beginning of year 2003, the current level of food availability was insufficient to cover the needs of Southern Africa. Therefore food aid was required. The situation has worsened since and the overall coverage of food requirements is not yet totally covered, even with the support of external food aid. This situation increases the risk of famine.

Various reasons can explain this situation; they differ from one country to the other. However, a common origin is drought and, to a certain extent, the difficulty of adaptation to new changes in weather conditions. Secondary causes could also be quoted such as the cyclones (Mozambique), a depressed economic environment (Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Swaziland), uncontrolled price variations (Malawi et Mozambique) and public policies that tend to reduce the agriculture productivity (Zambia, Zimbabwe).

Within this context, the main concern is to avoid people falling into chronic poverty insecurity, i.e. into a situation where they will suffer from hunger, with all the

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negative consequences on health, social relationships and economic productivity. Such a challenge is still part of the fight against poverty since the lack of food for survival remains a key feature of absolute poverty. But the first objective is to prevent people from reaching this turning point beyond which they would begin to suffer from hunger. This implies putting a particular focus on those categories of people that have the greatest chances of reaching such a point, i.e. the most vulnerable. Therefore, taking into account the dimension of vulnerability is, in fact, the clue for the design of food security policies.

This is even more true nowadays, since this vulnerability dimension is presently exacerbated by the increasing prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa, which jeopardizes people's capacity to conduct their own lives correctly and raises the issue of social sustainability in the long term. Therefore, reducing vulnerability and ensuring social sustainability are two fundamental issues directly related to the problem of food security. These have to be considered when designing public policies aimed at avoiding food insecurity.

### **1. Vulnerability as a Key Issue**

The lack of food is one of the most acute forms of absolute poverty, when poverty is defined in terms of lack and non-accessibility to basic goods. To avoid such a situation various measures are usually included in the design of food security policies. Some of them are preventive, i.e. they are implemented *ex-ante* through policy decisions which include, for instance, the regular follow-up of crop production, the setting-up of early warning systems, the constitution of food stocks and buffers, the reinforcement of regional exchanges, etc. Others measures are set up *ex-post*, i.e. in a curative way, to overcome the crisis when it starts. They include actions such as food distribution – through meals in schools, food-for-work operations, etc. - and the call for external humanitarian aid. All these measures are aimed at avoiding the surge of famine.

In such a situation, it is important to know what groups of people have the greatest chance of falling into chronic food insecurity, i.e. are the most vulnerable. Vulnerability can be defined as the probability of an individual (or of a household) of seeing its overall standard of living worsen when confronted with a dramatic event. This worsening can be, for instance, the falling into poverty traps after the lost of a job or suffering from hunger when an increase in market prices prevent the purchase of adequate food. With this definition, the most vulnerable an individual (or a household) is, the greater its probability of falling into a crisis situation, when a risk becomes a dramatic event.

This focus on vulnerability, which is complementary to the poverty one, implies first, identifying the threats and, more generally, the risks that people may encounter and, second, assessing their capacity to cope with the consequences of the related dramatic events. Since both the distribution of risks and the capacities to deal with these risks varies deeply from one group to the other, some people are more vulnerable than others. More generally, the level of vulnerability, as well as the level of poverty, is unequally distributed among the whole population.

Some groups can be naturally considered as the most vulnerable. This is the case, for instance, with disabled people, children, pregnant women, etc. For the others, the level of vulnerability varies according to gender, age, activities, location, etc., i.e. according to the risk they may be confronted with and the capacity they have in hand to overcome it. A capacity which is related to their level of education and health, their social networks, assets, level of income, etc. Statistical surveys and analytical refinements are generally required to estimate what their level of vulnerability is and to classify people between more or less vulnerable groups.

The capacity of resilience expresses the capacity of overcoming any crisis and consequences of dramatic events. Therefore, reducing the vulnerability of individuals and households implies increasing their capacity of resilience. This can be done by improving their access to appropriate goods and services, by increasing their resources and assets, by developing their capabilities, etc.. As a result, when confronted with crisis, they have in hand the opportunity to sell some of their assets in order to get the needed resources, to use information in order to find appropriate solutions, to refer to social networks for help, and so on.

## **2. HIV/AIDS Prevalence Increases Vulnerability**

This issue of food insecurity is presently exacerbated by the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the corresponding countries. For instance, Malawi has a prevalence rate of 15%, Lesotho 31%, Swaziland and Zimbabwe 33%.

HIV/AIDS increases the household's vulnerability since it slowly destroys the basic individual's capabilities, i.e. their capacity to do things, by increasing the difficulty of going to work, cultivating fields, meeting their peers and, more generally, living correctly. In fact, it attacks insidiously the core of the person's capacity of resilience. The consequences in terms of production deficit and decrease in earnings are severe. The U.N. estimates that 9.6% of Zimbabwe's agricultural labour force was lost in the year 2000, and 5.8% in Malawi where 70% of the households suffer a decrease in their labour force due to the disease. In Zimbabwe, the production of cattle by smallholders decreased by 29%, by 49% for vegetables and by 61% for maize, in households where somebody died from AIDS. An adult death usually results in a 45% decline in the household's marketed maize but, when the cause of death is identified as AIDS, the loss is 61%. If the wealthiest households can hire extra workers to manage and cultivate their holdings, the poorest smallholders cannot earn a living and have to take their children out of school to look for a job and bring money home.

In the meantime, social relationships tend to be reduced and even the emerging of associations to help those in difficulty does not compensate this loss. Social capital, i.e. the networks of social linkages, as well as human capital, i.e. the health of parents and the education of children, whether they are considered as private or public goods, are totally jeopardized by the situation.

But, the most serious consequences long term come from the breaking up of entire families. This was observed in several districts in Zimbabwe, in the year 2000, where two thirds of the households who lost an adult woman essential for family life disintegrated and their members were dispersed. Consequently, the number of orphans increased with grandmothers becoming the heads of families with only children and, even more, with children-headed households that now have to be considered for social and preventive actions.

In this context, the fundamental role of the family, which lies in the transmission of life experiences, global knowledge, life skills and know-how, becomes impossible to maintain. The early death of the parents prevents the transfer of knowledge and skills to their children. Those, growing up as orphans, have less opportunity and more difficulty to learn how to manage a holding, cultivate a field, and prepare adequate nutritive food. More generally, the transmission of capability, i.e. the capacity to achieve objectives, is not correctly ensured anymore. Such situations raise new issues vital for the future of societies: the issues of sustainability and, more precisely, of social sustainability.

### **3. Linking with Social Sustainability**

Sustainability implies by definition that development policies aim to answer the needs of the present generation without compromising the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own future needs.

Within this framework, three interacting spheres are usually considered when examining conditions for sustainable development: the economic, social and ecological spheres. For each sphere, there are peculiar sustainability rules. For instance, economic sustainability requires a regular self-maintained growth, based on a series of balance principles and investment rules in order to optimize growth and avoid putting into debt future generations. With the same spirit, ecological sustainability, through the analysis of ecosystems, requires protection of non-renewable resources, reduction of pollution, repletion of destroyed resources; thus transmitting an equivalent level of resources to future generations and guaranteeing them a quality of life, at least, equal to ours.

Social sustainability relates to the social dimension of sustainable development. It implies that “the various economic, social and ecological policies being implemented in the context of development should not generate negative consequences or social dysfunctionings that destroy the social cohesion, jeopardise human and social capital and reduce people’s capability of improving their well-being presently or in the future”.

For the three spheres, a common condition needs to be respected to ensure sustainability: the transfer of a correct level of potentialities, resources and capacities from one generation to the next. This means that the present generation has to transmit to the next generation a level of potentiality (in terms of resources of capital, assets or benefits of any kind) at least equivalent to the one they benefited from, in order to reach and equivalent standard of living. It implies protecting people’s capacities of accumulating resources and generating potentialities.

Because of wide spread HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa, nothing ensures that these conditions will be respected in the near future. HIV/AIDS breaks the chain of knowledge and capabilities transferred from one generation to the other, as well as the labour sharing between generations. As a result, the family survivors, who are usually orphans and elderly people, may be not able to manage the farm correctly due to their lack of knowledge and experience. This situation does not ensure the acquisition and transmission of knowledge; it reduces the traditional and social linkages, generates losses in human and social capital, and makes the social sustainability of development totally uncertain.

## **Conclusion**

Food insecurity raises the issue of vulnerability. People who are most vulnerable are those who do not have enough capabilities – meaning a combination of assets, potentialities and capacities – to overcome the probability of falling into chronic food insecurity. In this context, increasing their resilience, i.e. their capacity to overcome the crisis, through the reinforcement of their own capabilities remains a feasible solution.

Unfortunately, HIV/AIDS introduces a constraint in this context because the epidemic destroys, little by little, people's capacity in such a way that even the social sustainability of development is under threat. This raises the level of anxiety concerning the future of the society.

Within this context, one may think that the current food crisis in Southern Africa could be related, at least partly, to the decrease in people's capability. It becomes difficult for them to earn an income through agriculture or a salaried work, to get a regular education, to ensure correct health, to reinforce or maintain social and family relationships. For these reasons, some authors now refer to the surge of a new variant of famine<sup>2</sup>.

This means that, besides the classical famine due to insufficient availability of food (i.e. the Malthusian approach) and the famines due to the lack of accessibility by default of rights (i.e. the Sen's approach) or by market failure (i.e. the Ravallion's approach), a new form of famine is appearing as a result of the destruction of people's capacity to acquire knowledge and maintain social linkages.

This assumption is still debatable, but becomes so realistic that it has already inspired the action of UNICEF and the World Food Program in relation to local NGOs who are involved in the fight towards chronic food insecurity.

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<sup>2</sup> "New variant famines" de A. de Walle et J. Tumushabe dans leur rapport "Food security and HIV/AIDS" produit pour la coopération britannique (DFID).

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