

FOSENET : NGO Food Security Network

Assessment of the Food Situation in Zimbabwe February / March 2003: SUMMARY

The National NGO Food Security (FOSENET) involves 24 non government organisations that collectively cover ALL districts of Zimbabwe, and all types of communities. FOSENET members subscribe that food distribution in Zimbabwe must be based on a platform of ethical principles derived from international humanitarian law:

- o The right to life with dignity and the duty not to withhold or frustrate the provision of life saving assistance;
- o The obligation of states and other parties to agree to provide humanitarian and impartial assistance when the civilian population lacks essential supplies;
- o Relief not to bring unintended advantage to one or more parties nor to further any partisan position;
- o The management and distribution of food and other relief with based purely on criteria of need and not on partisan grounds;
- o Respect for community culture and values of solidarity, dignity and peace

As one of its functions FOSENET is monitoring food needs, availability and access.

Fosenet monitoring for February 2003 is drawn from **132 monitoring reports** from **53** districts in February 2003 and **147 monitoring reports** from **58** districts in March 2003.

The reports indicate a small improvement in *rural* food security in March 2003 due to some harvest yields of pumpkins, vegetables and green mealies and due to widening relief cover. These yields were reported to have had little noticeable effect yet on household food stocks.

In urban areas the situation is reported to have worsened, with increased food needs and reduced supplies, little or no access to relief or harvested food and poor GMB supplies.

Increased movement for food was reported with migration for food reported in 26 (45%) districts. Significant urban to rural movement was reported in March, with urban people seeking relief or harvest foods. This is a costly survival strategy given the high transport costs.

Seed distribution was reported to have been late and inadequate. Reports suggest that crop yields will be poor to average, due to erratic, late rains and poor access to seed and fertilizer. Fertiliser and seed costs were high: Reported fertiliser prices reached up to Z\$2 000 in periurban and rural parallel markets. Maize seed prices reached up to Z\$10 000 / 10kg in rural parallel markets.

GMB deliveries were reported to have remained erratic and low during February and March 2003, with political bias in access to GMB food reported in half the districts in the country.

Commercial maize meal supplies continue to be reported to be limited and erratic with cost and backdoor 'leakages' major barriers. Prices of food in parallel markets are reported to have increased by up to 167% between January and March 2003.

Food in parallel markets is reported to be primarily coming from GMB (41% districts), from millers and from other private sales (28% districts). Relief food was reported to be filtering into parallel markets in four districts. The profit margin of selling GMB grain in parallel markets has widened from \$490 /10 kg in July 2002 to \$4 200 / 10kg in March 2003, highest in urban areas. GMB grain sales in parallel markets undermines subsidies to control prices and turns public funds into private profits.

While reported barriers to accessing relief are few, these relate primarily to exclusion from lists, absence of relief in urban areas, transport and logistic problems and inadequate provision for rural civil servants not accessing GMB maize. The reports indicate problems with people being left off lists and with political control of local relief agents in some districts.

Households are consuming a range of foods not normally consumed. Some, such as watermelons and grass seeds have little nutritional value, while others, such as wild mushrooms and cassava, have potential harmful effects. Treated seeds were being consumed in one district.

Two thirds of districts reported that households are selling assets for food, including TVs and radios - vital for communication- livestock - vital for savings, security and draught power - household furniture and production equipment. These sales signal that current food scarcities will have much longer term effects on urban and rural household poverty.

In contrast to such individual coping strategies, in half the districts communities reported taking collective, social strategies. These included representations to officials or local leaders over food issues, including theft of food; solidarity support of vulnerable groups with food or transport; working on roads and bridges to facilitate food access and on projects to improve local food production.

These strategies reflect and reinforce Fosenet ethical principles that food security be based on community values and dignity. They are reported, however, to have received inadequate positive support or response. Investment is needed to shift individual coping mechanisms that have harmful effects towards social responses that strengthen community solidarity and power.

The February - March round signals the potential for local harvests to improve rural area food security – and the likelihood that in many areas expensive and inadequate seed and fertilizer access will combine with erratic rains to undermine that potential.

Together with small flows coming from harvests, in rural areas relief is reported to provide the major source of food security. In urban areas severe constraints to GMB and formal market deliveries and high parallel market prices indicate an urgent need to unblock the urban food supply chain, whether through markets or relief. Urban vulnerability is causing urban to rural migration to seek relief or harvested food, adding further costs to urban households.

This round also highlights the contrast between the harmful impact of leaving poor households to 'fend for themselves' and the positive social and community efforts being made in some areas. Collective responses are reported to be hampered by lack of transparency and responsiveness from state structures, political intolerance and exclusion and lack of investment and information.

This round highlights the need to ensure ethical and equitable food access in urban areas and to strengthen community mechanisms to protect and widen ethical approaches to food access.

FOSENET welcomes feedback on these reports. Follow up queries and feedback to FOSENET, fsmt2@mweb.co.zw