
Why is southern Africa hungry? The roots of southern Africa's food crisis

A Christian Aid policy briefing

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March 2003

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Executive summary

An estimated 16 million people have been affected by food shortages across southern Africa. In 2001 and 2002 many faced months of scarcity and a large-scale disaster was only averted by the relief efforts of governments, international agencies and local non-governmental organisations. The situation remains critical in Zimbabwe and southern Mozambique, where harvests have failed again and around six and a half million people are still in need. There are also huge needs in Angola after 27 years of civil war.

Drought, floods, and even hailstorms hit southern Africa in 2001 and 2002, destroying crops and triggering massive food shortages across the region. Only ten years before, southern African countries had experienced one of the worst droughts in living memory, destroying far more crops. But in contrast to today's crisis, with its millions of drought-stricken families, no one was reported to have died of hunger in the early 1990s and few people saw their livelihoods disappear.¹ Why, after a decade of UN-sponsored conferences, committing to promote human development, and more than a decade of structural adjustment programmes to boost national economies, are communities in southern Africa becoming ever-more vulnerable?

Most UN agencies and some bilateral donor agencies agree that the crisis in southern Africa has been long in the making, with wide and lasting repercussions. They are calling this a crisis 'unlike any other', 'complex', 'structural', and a 'new variant' emergency due to the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. Christian Aid believes that the hunger crisis is due to an explosive combination – chronic poverty, poor governance, market failure, soaring rates of HIV/AIDS and economic failure. Donors and governments also share responsibility as the crisis is heightened by lack of support for agriculture and rural livelihoods, and ill-advised and often ideologically driven donor policies. With this lethal combination of factors, what could have been a manageable food shortage has been turned into a crisis.

Chronic poverty

Between 65 and 73 per cent of the southern African population lives below the poverty line – a figure which is rising.² Many subsistence farmers experience endemic food shortages, especially during the few months before the next harvest is due. Even in years of normal rainfall, the time between January and April is known as the 'hungry season'; families cope by doing piecework to buy food and cut back on their meals. Families in Lesotho and Mozambique have been additionally hard hit by retrenchments in the mining industry and stricter immigration controls in South Africa, which have taken away their income from remittances.

Poor governance

Political leaders and governments have failed to build southern Africans' resistance to shocks. Resources earmarked to build infrastructure and support markets in remote areas have dwindled; in Malawi and Zimbabwe, the national strategic grain reserves have been mismanaged, and policies to boost the productive capacity of smallholders, especially those living with HIV/AIDS continue to receive low priority. Strong, accountable, well-resourced, inclusive and transparent state institutions and governance systems are needed to regulate staple food markets and provide essential services such as health, education and agricultural marketing, and to store and distribute strategic grain reserves.

¹ Christopher Eldrige, 'Why Was There No Famine Following the 1992 Southern African Drought?', *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin*, Vol 33, No 4, 2002.

² In 1996, 69.2 per cent of the population in Zambia was below the poverty line; by 1998, the figure had risen to 72.9 (Zambian PRSP). In 1999 68 per cent of the population were poor (defined as having monthly expenditures below M80) compared to 49 per cent in 1990 (Lesotho I-PRSP).

Market failures

Reforms in Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe have left in their wake a collapse in staple food markets and the inability to balance supply and demand in remote rural areas as state marketing arms and rural depots have closed. In these countries private traders have not materialised to fill the vacuum left by state marketing agents, leaving farmers with no market for their produce. While the withdrawal of guaranteed producer prices in these countries, with the exception of Zimbabwe, has led to price increases for some farmers, others, especially farmers in remote areas, are receiving lower prices than before. Experience shows that state intervention in staple food markets may encourage corruption and inefficiency. However, as an IMF evaluation of its Zambia programme showed, the withdrawal of public subsidies and marketing support can leave remote producers without buyers, thus increasing their vulnerability and poverty.

HIV/AIDS

Over the past decade, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has dramatically increased the vulnerability of small-scale farmers to production shocks. Many farming families have lost their most economically active members, including those who know best how to farm. To pay for funerals and medicine, families are forced to sell their assets; the task of caring for the sick means that women spend less time on the land. HIV/AIDS, coupled with poor governance, is the underbelly of the food crisis today.

Little support for agriculture

In many countries the withdrawal of subsidised credit and inputs such as seeds, tools and fertilisers has combined with declining government extension services and public investment in rural marketing to spur a decline in rural livelihoods. Despite this, the much-hyped, donor-sponsored Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers prepared by the governments of Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique and Lesotho fall far short of addressing rural development.

Lack of foreign exchange

Declining foreign exchange reserves, especially in Zimbabwe, have limited the ability of governments and private companies to import maize. At the same time, these governments, with the exception of Zimbabwe, continue to pay back old debts in hard currency to international finance institutions. At the same time countries such as the UK and the US, which have a huge influence on these institutions, are being asked to respond to the World Food Programme appeal for emergency funds. The WFP appealed for US\$507 million for southern Africa for July 2002 to March 2003. Meanwhile, Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia alone will have paid back US\$506 million in total debt service to multilateral and bilateral donors in 2002 and 2003, even after so-called HIPC debt relief.

The legacy of conflict in Angola

Angola, a country rich in natural resources, has been devastated by 27 years of conflict. Fighting has disrupted both the production and distribution and marketing of food. The conflict has led to a political culture of unaccountability, with oil revenues from multinational company oil investments kept separate from the national budget. The percentage of the budget spent on social services is also well below the southern African average and pitifully small, given the massive scale of need in the country. In 2001, spending on education was only 5.2 per cent³ of the budget in a country in which the primary school enrolment rate is only 29 per cent.⁴

³ UNDP, *A Decentralizacao de Angola*, Luanda, 2002.

⁴ T Hodges, *Angola from Afro-Stalinism to Petro-Diamond Capitalism* (Oxford: James Curry, 2001).

Zimbabwe's complex crisis

Zimbabwe is experiencing a complex humanitarian, political and economic crisis. Government land reform and redistribution have contributed to a significant fall in agricultural production over the past growing season. Land reform and distribution was and remains necessary in Zimbabwe. What is contested is how it is done, who benefits and the implications for agricultural productivity.

Since 2000, the economy has shrunk by 32 per cent; politically the country is polarised. Parliamentary elections in 2000 and presidential elections in 2002 were marked by widespread intimidation, harassment and violence, often state-sponsored and directed at the opposition. The electoral process itself has not been declared free and fair by all international election observers. The government is increasingly curtailing the independence of the police, military, media and judiciary; Amnesty International, as well as Zimbabwean human rights organisations, has documented human rights violations by the Zimbabwean government. New security laws curtailing the freedom of speech and assembly are contributing to a growing lack of government accountability and transparency.

Donor policies

Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and Lesotho are all highly dependent on donor funding for a major part of their budget revenue. International financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank wield great influence over the economic policies pursued by low-income governments, partly through the conditions they attach to loans, partly through the amount they contribute to the national budget, and partly through their formal and informal involvement in policy formulation. Bilateral and multilateral donors often have similar influence for the same reasons. The UK Department for International Development, for example, rates its policy influence in most southern African countries based on the percentage of funds it contributes to the national budget.⁵ International financial institutions, as well as some bilateral donors, have based their policy recommendations on the belief that overarching state institutions create barriers to economic development and poverty reduction. They therefore advocate a reduction or elimination of the role of the state in food marketing or public services such as rural extension. Poverty and social impact assessments are not undertaken prior to the implementation of such policies. Despite their role and influence on national policies, donors have been unwilling to take responsibility for the impact of their policies.

Donor responses to the current food emergency need to start with an acknowledgement of their responsibility, together with past and present southern African governments, for the increase in poverty and vulnerability in southern Africa. They must be willing to explore, together with southern African governments and citizens, pro-poor macro-economic, debt relief and budgetary policies, even where these differ from orthodox beliefs. Without these two steps, Christian Aid fears, the 'vicious cycle of vulnerability, crisis, and poverty'⁶ in southern Africa will not be broken. Unless the causes of this crisis are tackled, another bout of erratic weather will trigger yet another crisis, possibly on an even more catastrophic scale.

⁵ Supplementary memorandum submitted by DFID to the International Development Committee, House of Commons, in 'The Humanitarian Crisis in Southern Africa', House of Commons, IDC, 2003, Ev 15.

⁶ This analysis was adopted by the House of Commons International Development Committee, to which Christian Aid gave evidence in November 2002. Quoted in 'The Humanitarian Crisis in Southern Africa', Third Report of Session 2002/03, Vol 1, House of Commons, International Development Committee.

Roots of crisis

More than sixteen million people in southern Africa have been affected by food shortages. Six southern African countries have seen their food supplies disappear.⁷ In Zimbabwe, once the breadbasket of the region, the gap between national cereal demand and supply in 2002 was ten times higher than the average of the past five years; in Zambia it was one and a half times. In Malawi, Mozambique and Lesotho it was, respectively, 71 per cent, 61 per cent and 40 per cent higher. More than half the Zimbabwean population, over a third of the populations of Malawi and Lesotho, a quarter of all Zambians and one in twenty Mozambicans needed emergency assistance up to the harvests in 2003. However these harvests decreased again in Zimbabwe and southern Mozambique and millions in Angola are still reliant on food aid.

Bad weather conditions ...

Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and Lesotho experienced two or three consecutive years of flooding, drought and other erratic weather conditions, which contributed to reduced yields and the repeated failure of rain-fed maize crops. This, in turn, led to the year-on-year depletion of national grain stocks, including strategic national grain reserves. Zimbabwe experienced the longest mid-season drought in 20 years from the end of December 2001 until February 2002, leading to widespread maize crop failures in the communal areas that normally produce half of the country's maize.

Compared with the past five-year average, cereal production in 2001/02 was lower in all countries except Mozambique.⁸ The most severe drop in food production occurred in Zimbabwe, where in 2002 production was 65 per cent lower than the five-year average.

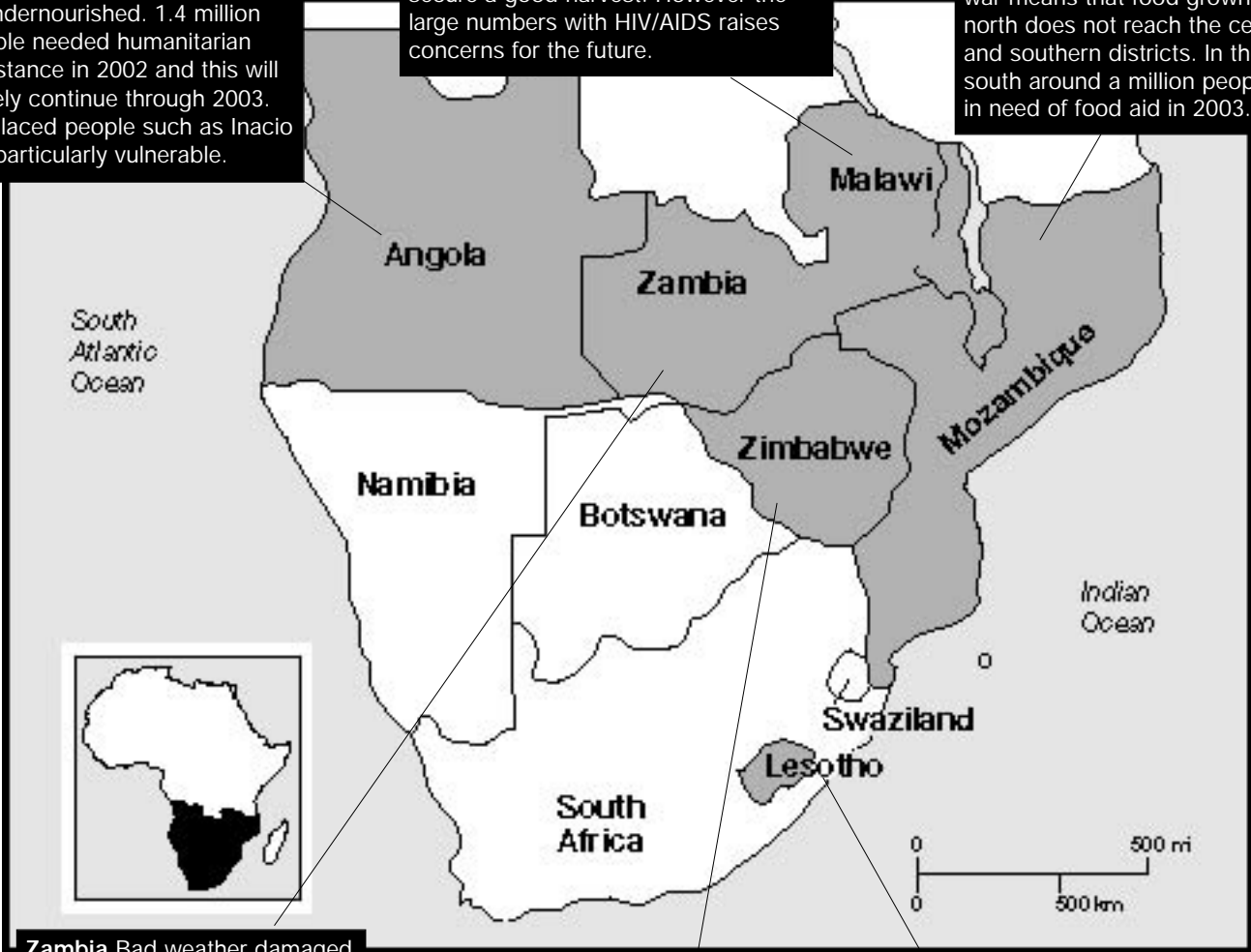
⁷ Zimbabwe, Malawi, Angola, Lesotho, Swaziland and Zambia.

⁸ Recorded national cereal production was down 29 per cent in Lesotho, 65 per cent in Zimbabwe, 33 per cent in Malawi, 15 per cent in Zambia, and up 5 per cent in Mozambique. (REWU, September 2002).

Angola Inacio Epanlanga is nine years old and so malnourished he can no longer stand up. Inacio lives in a camp for people displaced by Angola's civil war, which ended in April 2002 after 27 years. The war disrupted the farming in a country in which 75 per cent of the population earns a living from agriculture. As a result, half the population is undernourished. 1.4 million people needed humanitarian assistance in 2002 and this will largely continue through 2003. Displaced people such as Inacio are particularly vulnerable.

Malawi Margaret Macheso ran out of maize in August 2002, after two consecutive harvests were damaged by floods and drought. To survive she gathered a local weed called denje. In Malawi 63 per cent of the population makes a living from smallholdings like Margaret and 65 per cent lives in poverty. Nearly one in four people in the district where Margaret lives is HIV-positive, which affects their ability to grow or work for food. In March 2003 most people in Malawi did manage to secure a good harvest. However the large numbers with HIV/AIDS raises concerns for the future.

Mozambique Farmers in southern Mozambique have lost four or five harvests in a row. This is devastating for people in a country in which nearly 70 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line and 83 per cent makes a living from smallholder agriculture. Although the north has not experienced shortages, the destruction of roads and railways in the civil war means that food grown in the north does not reach the central and southern districts. In the south around a million people are in need of food aid in 2003.



Zambia Bad weather damaged crops in 2001 and 2002. Widespread poverty and a high rate of HIV/AIDS have weakened people's ability to cope with the crisis. 80 per cent of the population live below the poverty line and one in five people are HIV positive. 2.9 million people needed food assistance up to March 2003 and problems remain in the south of the country.

Zimbabwe Evelyn Sumba and her husband have six children. In August 2002 she told Christian Aid they did not have any food from their harvest. Instead the family made do with wild fruit and drank water because it filled their stomachs. Her husband spent days without food so that the children could eat. One of the worst droughts in ten years has triggered a crisis made worse by HIV/AIDS and the collapse of the economy. 68 per cent of the population makes a living from agriculture, which means they have been hit hard by bad harvests. In 2003 harvests have failed again and around 5.5 million people are in need of food aid.

Lesotho 650 000 people, 30 per cent of the population, are in need needed assistance leading up to the harvest in 2003. Most of those affected lived in mountain areas where 80 per cent of the population is poor and nearly one in three adults is HIV positive. Heavy rains and severe hailstorms affected crops last year in a country already coping with high unemployment and inflation. The recent harvest was also poor in some areas and so needs will continue until at least early 2004.

... have pushed over millions of people who already live on the edge.

The food crisis in southern Africa has been long in the making. Almost two-thirds of the region's population lives below the poverty line and rarely has enough to feed their families well; up to two-thirds of all southern Africans live in rural areas, trying to make a living from often marginal land with little opportunity to earn wages; three-quarters of those living in rural areas also live below the poverty line. In addition, in some countries up to a third of the adult population is estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS; public funds for health, education and agricultural services have been slashed to pay off external debts; public legal, regulatory and social and economic institutions are weak, unaccountable and corrupt; food markets have failed to stabilise staple food prices for both producers and consumers; and agricultural and economic policies, often imposed by international donors, have neglected the needs of small farmers and poor households.

Crisis-affected countries in a snapshot ⁹

	Angola	Lesotho	Malawi	Mozambique	Zambia	Zimbabwe
% population living with HIV/AIDS	5.5	31	15	13	21.5	33.7
% population below poverty line	N/A	68	65.3	69.4	72.9	64.7
% population living in rural areas	65.8	72	90	80	60.4	64.7
Poor as % of rural population	N/a	80 (mountain) 70 (lowlands)	66.5	71.2	83.1	N/A
% population making a living from agriculture*	75	57	87	83	75	68
% population living from small-holder agriculture *	N/A	Majority	63.7 subsistence	Majority	76	N/A

*These include households who are wholly dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods (a minority) as well as households who are dependent on agriculture for a large part of their livelihoods.

⁹ Sources: UNAIDS, 'Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic 2002'; IPRSP, Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for relevant country; Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for relevant country; UNDP, *Human Development Report, 2002*; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Lesotho Country Profile, 2002*.

The livelihoods of a significant number of the region's population are therefore extremely vulnerable to external shocks such as floods or droughts. They face unimaginable risks in their everyday lives – but their resilience in the face of consecutive floods and droughts has been gradually worn down. As the National Vulnerability Assessment Committees explain, 'those most affected by the current crisis are poor, have few assets, few entitlements and are therefore highly vulnerable to livelihood failure'.¹⁰

Most subsistence farmers rely both on their own production and on the market to fulfil their food needs. When they experience a production shock, they become even more dependent on money-based transactions. In Zimbabwe in 2002, for example, an estimated 90 per cent of households relied fully on food transfers and purchases for their food needs, a far higher percentage than in other years.

Families across these six southern African countries used to boost their incomes with remittances from family members employed as migrant labourers on farms or in mines in South Africa. Retrenchments in the mining industry and stricter immigration controls have reduced this very important source of income. This has hit the Lesotho economy particularly hard, given the large number of men from Lesotho employed in South African mines. Unemployment rates stand at 40 per cent. Households in southern Mozambique have also been hit by reduced employment opportunities in South Africa. Women farmers in southern Mozambique, for example, can no longer afford to employ others to help them prepare and harvest their fields. However, remittances from towns and cities have not dried up completely and still remain an important source of income to rural households.

Many farming families already live in chronic food insecurity...

Poverty is both a cause and consequence of chronic food insecurity, a term used to describe the situation in which households do not routinely have access to sufficient nutritious and culturally acceptable food necessary for a healthy life. In southern Africa, a large percentage of the population reduces its calorie intake between December and March every year – the 'hungry season'. This is because many families run out of maize and cannot afford to buy sufficient amounts. The causes of seasonal hunger include market failure, weak, corrupt or non-existent public and private institutions, chronic poverty, and lack of opportunity to earn off-farm income that provide sufficient cash to buy maize at inflated prices.

In Malawi smallholder farmers, who constitute about three-quarters of the population, experience a hungry period every year.¹¹ In Zimbabwe, farmers in the semi-arid communal areas that grow maize neither produce enough to last them for a year, nor earn enough income from other sources to make up the shortfall. A significant number of children in all six countries showed signs of chronic malnutrition even before the crop failures of 2001 and 2002.¹²

Chronic food insecurity is also the result of low productivity and yield. Smallholder farmers in all six crisis-affected countries are unable to produce enough food because of declining soil fertility, increased pressure on the land from population growth and the

¹⁰ SADC, Regional Food Security Assessment Report, Harare, 16 September 2002.

¹¹ WFP, Malawi Emergency Programme Overview, p 1.

¹² Stunting levels (height for age) in Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe were between 35 and 45 per cent in 2002, according to the Regional Food Security Assessment Report, SADC Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Vulnerability Assessment Committee. According to UNICEF, in 2000, 59 per cent of children under five in Zambia were malnourished, 49 per cent in Malawi, 44 per cent in Lesotho and 27 per cent in Zimbabwe.

dependency on chemical fertilisers.¹³ Often farmers only know how to replace lost nutrients in the soil through chemical fertilisers but cannot afford them, leaving the soil depleted of essential nutrients.

...and after two or more crop failures they can no longer cope.

'Coping' is a term used to describe the ways in which people respond to an external shock to help them endure the consequences over a *short* period of time – normally the hungry season. Consecutive crop failures force households to 'cope' over a much longer period. In Malawi since August 2001, poor households have reduced their food portions and skipped meals, eaten wild foods, and sold livestock, tools and household implements to buy maize in the local market. They have even pulled children out of school to help gather food, and left their farms to look for *ganyu*, or casual work. The daily wage for this type of work has averaged MK20 (less than 15 pence) for the past five years, despite massive increases in the price of maize. Maize prices were five to six times higher in 2002 than they were the previous year.¹⁴ And in 2001, prices were already two and a half times higher than they were in 2000. Many villagers had used up their harvest by July 2002 – their silos remaining empty until the harvest in April 2003. They were reduced to eating a local weed, *denje*, which they gather from the bush and pound to make a bitter porridge. A Christian Aid partner reported in mid-2002 that they had never seen people eating these foods before.¹⁵ The same has been happening in Zimbabwe since April 2002. There, a recent survey found that 86 per cent of households were regularly limiting the size of portions or number of meals a day and around half were going whole days without eating.¹⁶

It is impossible to live a productive and active life when a person's major nutritional intake comes from foods found in the wild, which may not have the right nutritional content, and when they are forced to cut overall calorie intake for long periods at a time. Inadequate nutrition gives rise to increased health problems and erodes the immune systems of people living with HIV/AIDS. This in turn reduces the ability of villagers to prepare land and plant seeds. Certainly this was the case during the October-November 2002 planting season.

In Malawi, the market for casual work is becoming more competitive as an increasing number of people are seeking work – the sick, the elderly and those who are ill with AIDS-related diseases are the first to be pushed out from this market as they are unable to compete with the young and able bodied.¹⁷

People are reverting to desperate measures to stay alive. In some areas they are wiping out their assets through distress selling. The price of livestock, for example, has fallen dramatically as those forced to sell far outnumber those who can afford to buy. In Zimbabwe, livestock prices fell by 80 per cent between July 2001 and July 2002, and then a further 47 per cent between August and December 2002.

¹³ Organisations such as Christian Aid's partner, the Women's Border Area Development Programme, are promoting organic fertilisers to increase yields. But these schemes are still relatively small scale.

¹⁴ Malawi National Vulnerability Assessment Committee, 'Malawi Emergency Food Security Assessment Report', Lilongwe, 16 September 2002.

¹⁵ Interview with Philip Mtshobwa of the Likulezi Project, August 2002.

¹⁶ SADC FANR Vulnerability Assessment Committee 'Zimbabwe Emergency Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment Report', December 2002.

¹⁷ In Malawi, competition among destitute households for *ganyu*, or piece work, was observed during a Christian Aid visit to drought-affected areas in August 2002.

HIV/AIDS infection has increased their vulnerability...

Food is absolutely necessary but today it will not solve the problem. Because of ... the HIV/AIDS pandemic, this famine [is not] a normal famine. There is no end to it because people are too weak to plant, too weak to harvest. The problems won't go away with better weather.

Urban Josson, Unicef regional director, east and southern Africa¹⁸

Today, an estimated one in three adults in Zimbabwe, one in five in Zambia, one in seven in Malawi, and one in eight in Mozambique are living with HIV/AIDS.¹⁹ In Malawi the national estimate belies the reality at district level. In Blantyre, Salima and Nsanje, areas where Christian Aid partners are providing emergency relief, estimates are as high as 38.5 per cent, 21.8 per cent, and 25.7 per cent respectively.

In Zimbabwe and Malawi, the 1991-92 drought triggered a less severe humanitarian crisis even though less food was grown – less than half the 2001 harvest in Malawi.²⁰ According to many Zimbabweans, they were better off during the 1991-92 drought than today.²¹ This is partly because the emergency response was better managed, but also because far fewer people were living with HIV/AIDS.

The pandemic is gradually changing the demographic pyramid in southern Africa as it affects mostly those in the 15 to 49 age group – people who are in their reproductive and economically most productive years.

Across southern Africa, HIV/AIDS contributes significantly to a decrease in household food security, and will continue to do so. According to the FAO, an estimated 23 per cent of the agricultural labour force fell sick or died in Zimbabwe, 20 per cent in Mozambique, and 14 per cent in Malawi between 1995 and 2000 alone – and this was before the peak of the epidemic. It is estimated that seven million agricultural workers have died in southern Africa due to AIDS since 1985. Another 16 million are expected to die by 2020 if current trends continue.

When a productive member of a farming family becomes sick, less labour is available to prepare and tend to the fields, and plant the seeds. Yields are inevitably lower. With fewer family members capable of working the land, families also often reduce the area of land they farm or switch to less labour-intensive subsistence crops such as root vegetables. These crops have a lower nutritional and cash income value than maize.

When productive household members die, farming knowledge becomes lost to the younger members of the household. Those who are left – the young and the elderly – cannot carry on farming as before because of their lack of experience or physical strength.²² Remaining family members also lose income from the sale of surplus products or remittances and therefore lose the ability to buy food on the market. This is happening at a time when lower economic growth (and economic collapse in Zimbabwe) has caused remittances from urban family members to fall, further reducing their incomes.

¹⁸ Quoted in 'Southern Africa: Humanitarian Emergency "More than a Food Crisis"', IRIN, 8 November 2002.

¹⁹ UNAIDS, 'Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic', 2002.

²⁰ This view is shared by the Institute for Development Studies, in a report, 'The Malawi Famine of 2002: More Questions than Answers', July 2002

²¹ Based on interviews conducted by Christian Aid journalist Judith Melby in drought-affected areas of Zimbabwe in September 2002.

²² See Stuart Gillespie and Lawrence Haddad's comprehensive survey of literature on the impact of HIV/AIDS on agriculture in 'Food Security as a Response to HIV/AIDS', IFPRI, *Annual Report*, 2001/02.

The impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in rural communities is visible through the increasing number of AIDS orphans and child- or women-headed households. In southern Africa women produce most of the food for local consumption and typically carry out labour-intensive farming.²³ They are also the traditional caregivers. When family members fall ill with HIV/AIDS related illnesses, therefore, land often lies untended as women cannot meet both demands.

AIDS orphans are generally cared for in communities or by extended family members. This has increased the burden on households that have limited income and food supplies. Child-headed households, an increasing phenomenon in affected countries, are the poorest and least able to cope with external shocks. AIDS orphans are more likely to miss out on education opportunities and other services provided by the government. Government extension programmes, for example, do not target child-headed households.

A balanced, healthy diet is important for people living with HIV/AIDS to help them perform basic tasks or to continue tending to crops. Current food shortages are weakening their immune systems and accelerating the onset of illness and even death.

Given its slow-onset and complex nature and causes, its invisibility at the household level, and the long-term nature of possible solutions, governments and donors have not responded to HIV/AIDS as an emergency. Present prevention and treatment interventions, however, will not ensure food security for HIV/AIDS-affected households, especially in rural areas. Instead, they should receive support for long-term rehabilitation in the form of subsidies, training and affordable or free access to basic services and inputs to revive agricultural production in food scarce countries.

Lack of food also spreads HIV/AIDS. In an effort to survive, women engage in sex to earn money or food, thus spreading the virus wider. Offering sex for food or money, however, is not new for many poor women, who often have no other means of survival.

Agricultural policies have failed to increase their food security...

Governments in all six countries have largely ignored small-scale farmers for the past decade. Both national expenditure and donor assistance for agrarian development declined significantly over a period of 20 years. World Bank lending for agriculture slumped from 31 per cent of total lending between 1979 and 1981 to less than 10 per cent between 1999 and 2000. Total bilateral and multilateral grants and loans for agricultural development declined from US\$145bn in 1988 to US\$8bn in 1999.²⁴ According to the FAO representative in Malawi, 'if we want to avoid a future food crisis we need more investment to achieve [agricultural] productivity.'

The governments of Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Lesotho plan to enhance food security as part of their donor-sponsored poverty reduction strategies. But these are woefully inadequate. PRSPs focus mostly on ways to increase agricultural yields. However, policies to reduce the vulnerability of farmers and households to risks are equally important. This would include building assets, diversifying livelihood strategies, cultivating staple crops better adapted to the climate, and providing social safety nets and public support for marketing activities.²⁵

²³ SARDC-WIDSAA, 'Beyond Inequalities: Women in Southern Africa', SARDC, Harare, 2000.

²⁴ U Otzen and S Neubert 'Only Swift Agrarian Development will Create Poverty-reducing Economic Dynamics in Africa', *Quarterly Journal of International Agriculture*, Vol 40 No 4, 2001.

²⁵ Gareth Williams and Alex Duncan, 'Food Security and PRSPs: A Rapid Assessment of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and Their Relevance to Food Security Problems', April 2001.

In Lesotho agricultural productivity has been falling for 30 years. According to the WFP, 'without serious long-term interventions it is highly probable that crop production could cease altogether over large tracts of agricultural land.' Soil erosion, soil degradation and the decline in soil fertility need to be reversed. The government of Lesotho's food self-sufficiency programme, based on the use of chemical fertilisers, has contributed to soil degradation²⁶ and its provision of subsidies for the use of tractors for tilling the soil has promoted soil erosion. According to the WFP, the government extension system is unable to deal with these challenges; it is understaffed, lacking in motivation and short of transport. Nonetheless, the Lesotho government's Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper does not specify any improvement in extension services.

In Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, maize harvests of small-scale farmers have declined as farmers have seen a virtual collapse of all of their essential support mechanisms: the erosion, simultaneously, of state credit, subsidies for agricultural inputs, public investment in agricultural marketing and the provision of government extension services.

In Zambia, halving of the land under maize cultivation has gone hand in hand with the elimination of subsidised credit for maize and fertilisers. The withdrawal of government distribution and procurement agents has not led to the emergence of dynamic private entrepreneurs servicing remote rural areas. This has depressed production. The Zambian PRSP acknowledges that the 'initial impact of liberalisation on Zambian small farmers has been negative due to the limited opportunities to access both agricultural inputs and credit.'

In Zimbabwe, after initially trying to integrate communal farming into the formal economy, the government reduced support to this sector and started focusing more on cash crops as part of the World Bank-sponsored Enhanced Structural Adjustment Programme in the early 1990s. Although support for communal farmers continued, it was wholly inadequate. Extension services were reduced while a static budget had to service increasing numbers of farmers.

The Zimbabwean government's present land reform and resettlement programme is not likely to enhance the future food security of resettled farmers. Resettled farming households lack adequate technical and extension services, tillage units, agricultural inputs and capital and they lack access to social, economic and marketing infrastructure. The programme has left out important groups of landless households such as farm workers.²⁷ It is also unclear whether the households targeted for resettlement are indeed landless. Finally, resettled households are cutting down trees on newly occupied farms – both for building huts and to use as firewood. This is compromising the quality of land both for future crop cultivation and livestock breeding.²⁸

The government of Malawi has admitted in its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper that it 'has not been focused on its role as a service provider to farmers'. It has invested too little in rural infrastructure and irrigation, without which productivity will remain low. Malawian small farmers have been unable to buy sufficient quantities of chemical fertiliser to improve agricultural yields, partly due to confusing government-led and donor-sponsored input subsidy programmes. 'Malawi is in a perpetual state of food emergency. Most farmers don't produce food for more than four months. We are living

²⁶ The low rainfall in Lesotho means that the constant use of chemical fertiliser leads to a residue in the soil, leading to a high acidity which restricts plants' take up of nutrients. Paulo, Christian Council of Lesotho

²⁷ Only 1.7 per cent of farm-worker households were resettled between June 2000 and July 2001 as part of the Zimbabwean government's fast-track land resettlement programme.

²⁸ Based on observations by Christian Aid journalist Judith Melby on a visit to drought-affected resettlement areas in Zimbabwe, September 2002.

on the edge, all the time. Addressing the transitory food crisis does not address the underlying problem, which is the low productivity of agriculture.²⁹

Staple food markets have failed to provide affordable food...

Market failures occur when traders fail to respond to demand signals or when prices rise excessively because of market fragmentation, speculation or hoarding. Most of southern Africa has experienced food market failures, which discourage staple food production and distribution, but also destabilise staple food prices for producers and consumers. Efficient food marketing systems are needed in order to store and distribute food so that it is available year-round and at reasonable prices. The private sector may play a role in the long term in redistributing food surpluses, but in the absence of well-functioning markets in southern Africa the state needs to retain a key role as a catalyst for food markets.

Private traders and businesses have not stepped into the gap left by the withdrawal of parastatal marketing agencies from remote rural markets in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Entrepreneurs in all these countries are more interested in doing business in urban and surrounding areas. Instead of the guaranteed price they used to receive for their crops, farmers now have to accept whatever prices they are offered. In Mozambique, maize producers in the north have no market information, their individual bargaining capacity is very low, and they are physically cut off from the rest of Mozambique.

Contributing to the fragmentation of food markets is the lack of rural feeder roads and inaccessibility of main roads and bridges during the rainy season. This is true in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In Mozambique, there is the additional problem of the almost complete lack of infrastructure linking the maize-deficit south to the maize-surplus north. Distribution of food from surplus areas to deficit areas is costly, and this cost has to be carried by farmers.

In Malawi, traders and food speculators with the necessary capital and contacts bought large quantities of maize when the National Food Reserve Agency (NFRA) sold off its stocks in 2001, at the same time as a bumper maize harvest went on sale country-wide. They predicted food shortages later that year and hoarded their stocks, thus creating an artificial shortage. When the Malawian Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC) lifted the ceiling price on maize in October 2001, prices shot up by as much as 350 per cent in some areas, putting the price of maize out of reach of ordinary families.

In view of these market failures, government-regulated buffer stocks and trade interventions, if appropriately designed, are important instruments. All six affected countries still maintain a national strategic grain (wheat and maize) reserve. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s stocks in these reserves were usually the equivalent of at least three months' consumption. A national strategic grain reserve is an essential safety net, particularly in countries that do not have ready access to sufficient foreign exchange to purchase grain on international markets.

National grain reserves, however, are expensive to maintain and their operational costs have become a financial drain on government budgets in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Moreover, grain reserves in all six countries have been characterised by inefficiency, political manipulation, corrupt and bad management, high transport costs, and lack of technical capacity, capital and infrastructure. This has deprived vulnerable

²⁹ Quoted in Stephen Devereux, 'State of Disaster: Causes, Consequences and Policy Lessons from Malawi', Action Aid, June 2002.

households of access to food during this crisis. Christian Aid partners in Malawi have called for a review of the management and operations of the NFRA.³⁰

Excessive government intervention in staple food trade can contribute to market failures and is risky. In Zimbabwe, the government ban on private-sector maize imports has fuelled maize shortages and pushed up prices on the parallel market to three times as high as those controlled by the Grain Marketing Board (GMB). The government GMB maintains an almost absolute monopoly on the buying and selling of maize. By contrast, the Mozambican government's release of food aid on the market since the war seems to have stabilised the price of whole wheat in the south of the country. The Mozambican government also allows imports from South Africa to offset grain deficits in the south.³¹ For most of southern Africa, with the exception of Mozambique, declining levels of foreign exchange reserves have created serious difficulties in importing maize, both to restock grain reserves and for emergency distribution. Zimbabwe has seen the worst decline in foreign exchange reserves from US\$266.5m in 1998 to US\$78.6m in January 2001 (due to government land reform policies), followed by Zambia, which saw a fall from US\$222.5m in 2000 to US\$124.6m in January 2002 (due to a dramatic fall in copper prices).³²

In addition, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique continue to pay scarce foreign reserves to service very old multilateral and bilateral debts. Despite the Highly Indebted Poor Country initiative, these poor countries still transfer large sums of money to international finance institutions controlled by the very donors who are now scrambling to raise funds to respond to the crisis. The WFP appeal for July 2002 to March 2003 was for US\$507 million. Even after so-called enhanced HIPC debt relief, Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia alone will have paid back \$506m in total debt service to multilateral and bilateral donors in 2002 and 2003.³³

As Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia have bought more of South Africa's maize surplus, maize prices regionally have rocketed. Maize is the region's staple food, and the single biggest crop. In most years, maize production in South Africa and Zimbabwe is sufficient to meet domestic requirements as well as that of some neighbouring countries. Normally, Zambia and Malawi do not supplement their maize supplies with commercial imports.³⁴ Lesotho and Mozambique, however, normally rely heavily on imports from South Africa to fill their food gaps. In Lesotho this is due to a limited resource base. Mozambique could theoretically be food self-sufficient but, as discussed, is undermined by its fragmented national market.

Since the onset of structural adjustment lending, members of the donor community (including the World Bank and DFID) have been reluctant to support the state or state-related institutions in regulating staple food markets. Their fears are largely based on three legitimate concerns. First, there have been numerous examples of parastatal mismanagement. Second, none of these governments collect sufficient revenue through aid, taxes, loans or debt relief to sustain medium-term subsidies. Third, donors fear, government domination of staple food marketing may crowd out small and medium

³⁰ In Malawi, CISANET, a civil society food security network, has also called for a review of the GMB, as has the Council of Churches in Zimbabwe.

³¹ 'Successes and Challenges of Food Market Reform: Experiences from Kenya, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe', Michigan State University, International Development Working Papers, No 72, 1999.

³² IMF, *International Financial Statistics*, May 2002, pp 31-32.

³³ Figure drawn from IMF and World Bank, 'HIPC Initiative: Status of Implementation', April 2002.

³⁴ Between 1986 and 1996, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia produced up to 90 per cent of their maize requirements domestically. J Van Rooyen, 'Regional Food Security and Agricultural Policy in Southern Africa: A Challenge of Policy Conversion in Diverse Settings', *Development Southern Africa*, Vol 7, No 1, March 2000.

private entrepreneurs, who mostly do not have the access to subsidised grains accorded to large industrial millers. This is especially true in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Zambia.³⁵

However, some form of government intervention is clearly needed in crisis-affected countries. The challenges are many: to regulate distorted markets and create new ones, thus ensuring stable food supplies and distribution; to align demand more closely to supply; to regulate private market actors; and to protect the production capacity of households with few assets and low resistance to external shocks.

Government actions to assist these groups would include access to affordable credit as well as controls on staple food prices during times of steep price increases.

Donors and governments have tried to persuade farmers not to grow maize, a rain-fed crop, in unsuitable non-irrigated or semi-arid areas. This is a legitimate concern, but support for small farmers to grow maize should be withdrawn in stages, and only if public programmes are in place to encourage the cultivation, marketing and consumption of alternative indigenous staple crops.

Inappropriate donor policies have increased vulnerability ...

All the crisis-affected, apart from Zimbabwe, are categorised as heavily indebted poor countries. They are dependent on one or a few commodities for foreign exchange earnings and have small, disintegrated markets. Dramatic fluctuations in commodity prices and the increase in oil prices during the 1970s have led them down the seemingly never-ending path of donor dependence.

The loans given to governments by the World Bank, IMF and other donors to restructure their economies and fund imports, have come with strings attached. Governments have had to reduce unsustainable fiscal deficits by cutting back state expenditure on public services and food, rural credit, agricultural subsidies, and state marketing boards for agricultural produce.

Donors have based these recommendations on the belief that a key cause of low economic growth and poverty in sub-Saharan Africa has been the power of state institutions that have created barriers to the development of a strong private sector. The recommendations were more or less the same in every country: reduce the role of the state in agricultural marketing, eliminate state subsidies, and encourage small-scale and commercial export crops. This was based on a belief that smallholder farmers would produce more if prices for crops were higher at the farm-gate.

Two decades of stop-and-go implementation of liberalisation policies have led to deeper and more widespread poverty in many southern African countries. Across the region, state agricultural marketing boards, which in the past have guaranteed countrywide and cross-seasonal markets and minimum prices for farm products and often for consumers, have been dismantled or commercialised as part of the economic reforms governments had to undertake in return for loans from the World Bank and IMF. Governments no longer gave subsidies for fertiliser and other agricultural inputs. This policy, together with national currency devaluations, has led to a massive increase in the price of tools, fertilisers and seeds, making them unaffordable to most small farming families.

A recent World Bank study showed that, in Zambia, access to animal draught power has been a key constraint to higher agricultural productivity and household welfare. 'Policies

³⁵ For an analysis of subsidies, see 'Successes and Challenges of Food Market Reform: Experiences from Kenya, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe', Michigan State University, International Development Working Papers, No 72, 1999.

to foster accumulation of these assets and to provide complementary public goods could have a high impact in terms of poverty reduction and productivity,' the Bank concluded.³⁶ Yet, in clear contradiction to this finding, the World Bank earlier advised the Zambian government to introduce user fees for farmers to access communal dip tanks, used to control tick infestation, as part of its structural adjustment programme. Because of cutbacks in government expenditure farmers were expected to take over the maintenance of communal dip tanks and pay for the chemicals they required. The sudden decision to withdraw government resources has left dip tanks in disrepair and led to a substantial increase in animal deaths. This has drastically reduced draught power available to farming households in the southern province, the area most affected by food shortages.³⁷

Under World Bank-sponsored structural adjustment reforms the Zambian grain marketing authority has been replaced with the much smaller Food Reserve Agency. This was intended to stimulate private actors in the food market. However, a lack of infrastructure has made it uneconomical for private traders to do business in remote areas and people have been left with no access to markets to sell their produce or buy inputs.³⁸ An independent IMF evaluation found that the liberalisation of the state marketing board contributed to a 30 per cent increase in rural poverty between 1991 and 1994.³⁹

In Zimbabwe, the share of marketed crops from communal areas has declined by half during the 1990s, partly due to the closure of GMB outlets in 'non-viable', mainly communal, areas. In addition, real budget allocations for extension services and research and development were reduced as part of the 1991 Enhanced Structural Adjustment Programme. According to a study sponsored by the UNDP, traders alone have benefited from liberalisation.⁴⁰

Malawi has one of southern Africa's longest-running structural adjustment programmes. It has aimed to liberalise prices and therefore increase the prices farmers receive for the produce. Agricultural output, however, grew only 1.4 per cent between 1980 and 1992, showing that farmers did not respond as expected to higher farm-gate prices. This is partly because fertiliser subsidies and state marketing functions were cut back at the same time, curbing their ability to plant and sell crops.⁴¹

Over the past five years, widely fluctuating donor policies on the provision of free agricultural inputs have exacerbated Malawi's humanitarian crisis. In 1998 DFID and other donors sponsored a government 'starter pack' programme, which distributed free fertiliser and maize seeds to all of Malawi's 2.8 million smallholder farmers. This led to a bumper maize crop in 1999 and 2000. In the 2000/01 planting season this programme was reduced to 1.5 million and in 2001/02 to only one million households. Donors said that they were concerned about the programme's unsustainable costs and the creation of

³⁶ K Deininger and P Olinto, 'Why Liberalisation Alone has not Improved Agricultural Productivity in Zambia', World Bank, Washington DC, April 2000.

³⁷ Thomson Kalinda et al, 'Resources, Household Decision-making and Organisation of Labour in Food Production among Small-scale Farmers in Southern Zambia', *Development Southern Africa*, Vol 17, No 2, June 2000.

³⁸ Peter Henriot, 'Governance and the Challenge of Food Security'. Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection, Zambia 2000

³⁹ K Botchwey, et al, 'Report of a Group of Independent Persons Appointed to Conduct an Evaluation of Certain Aspects of the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility', IMF, 1999.

⁴⁰ Godfrey Kaneyenze, 'The Implications of Globalisation on the Zimbabwean Economy: Background Paper to the 1999 UNDP Report', February 2000.

⁴¹ Chilembwe, E.H., 'Agricultural Sector Priority Constraints, Policies and Strategies Framework for Malawi', Malawi Sector Investment Programme, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, November 2001, Nthara, K. 'What needs to be done to improve the Impact of ADMARC on the Poor? Phase 1 report', Oxfam, May 2002

a culture of dependence. This sudden, unannounced swing in policy, based on short-term financial considerations rather than medium-term food security planning, has given confused signals to fertiliser traders who did not plan for major fertiliser shortfalls in Malawi. Shortages in 2000 and 2001 therefore pushed prices up to unaffordable levels, especially for smallholder farmers who had planned on free inputs.⁴²

In 2002, DFID and the Norwegian government supported the provision of inputs to two million small farmers, but delays in the final decision to go ahead with the programme meant that inputs reached farmers too late for the normal planting season in October. Farmers were able to use the inputs only because the rainy season started later than normal.⁴³ In the absence of affordable credit for small-scale farmers, subsidies for inputs are essential. The fluctuations in donor support for input programmes in Malawi over the past five years have disrupted farmers' ability to plan, thus contributing to household vulnerability.

The policy advice offered, and economic conditions imposed, by the IMF have further exacerbated Malawi's crisis. On the advice of the IMF (backed by the World Bank, EU and DFID) the Malawian government set up an independent national food reserve agency (NFRA) in 1999 to take over the management of the strategic grain reserve. The IMF and other donors advised the government against capitalising the body; instead they wanted it to operate on a cost-recovery basis. To pay for operational costs and maize purchases from ADMARC the agency took out loans from commercial and government banks at interest rates of up to 56 per cent. The NFRA had been unable to service this large debt, which has grown to about £7 million by June 2000.⁴⁴

In 2000 the IMF advised the NFRA to reduce its near-full capacity stocks to around 30,000-60,000 metric tonnes of maize, enough to feed the entire Malawian population for two to three months, and to use the proceeds to pay back its debts, pay salaries and cover running costs and replenish old maize. It also advised the Agency to sell the maize abroad to avoid depressing local prices. According to the IMF, it based this advice on a study financed by the European Commission which recommended that the Malawi government should not maintain a large buffer stock of maize but should instead rely on international reserves 'to finance any maize imports needed to prevent food shortages'.⁴⁵ This study was never widely distributed or debated in Malawi. It is unclear, for example, why Malawi should rely on international reserves in a food crisis, given well-known transport problems and the difficulties experienced by the WFP in raising funds in times of crisis. Moreover, given the halving of the starter-pack programme during the 2000/01 planting season, and the known difficulties of importing maize into Malawi, this recommendation, based on short-term financial considerations, was short-sighted and irresponsible. The IMF has defended its position by maintaining that it gave the wrong advice based on wrong government crop production forecasts, which predicted a food surplus for 2001.⁴⁶

The IMF withheld crucial balance of payments support in May 2002, citing as the main reason the government's bailing-out of NFRA and ADMARC 2000 and 2001, at twice the cost of the health budget, which meant that Malawi failed to meet the budget target

⁴² Stephen Devereux, 'State of Disaster: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Lessons from Malawi', ActionAid, June 2002.

⁴³ When this was discussed at a meeting between DFID, the chair of the International Development Committee and Christian Aid representatives on 16 August 2002 in Lilongwe, funds for the inputs programme had not yet been approved.

⁴⁴ Stephen Devereux, 'State of Disaster: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Lessons from Malawi', ActionAid Malawi, June 2002.

⁴⁵ IMF, 'Malawi: The Food Crises, the Strategic Grain Reserve, and the IMF', Washington DC, July 2002.

⁴⁶ FEWS NET, June 2001.

agreed with the IMF. The IMF stated that 'the parastatal sector will continue to pose risks to the successful implementation of the 2002/03 budget. Government interventions in food and other agricultural markets ultimately led to the NFRA and ADMARC taking heavy recourse to budgetary financing, crowding out more productive spending.'⁴⁷ Even though the IMF has no official mandate to reduce poverty or improve food security, this sort of action goes against its professed desire to play a greater role in poverty reduction and change its ways of dealing with low-income countries.

Donors too often mistakenly base their advice for market reform on the most optimistic assumption of market liberalisation, namely that once the state has withdrawn from marketing and price setting, new and efficient market processes and institutions will emerge to provide opportunities for farmers, traders and consumers to trade in surplus produce, and that crop prices would rise because of competitive buying, providing farmers with an incentive to grow more. Experience in southern Africa has shown that this has not occurred. It is not hard to see why. Some of the reasons include: governments' inadequate investment in rural transport and infrastructure; farmers' lack of access to market information; the inability of producers to boost their bargaining strength in producer associations; and the lack of effective private sector institutions. In addition, poverty and social impact assessments of the kind now advocated by the World Bank were never conducted prior to the recommendation of policies aimed at reducing the role of the state in managing markets.

Overseas aid forms a major part of Malawi's, Mozambique's and Zambia's budget revenues; bilateral and multilateral donors therefore wield disproportionate influence.⁴⁸ While Christian Aid continues to advocate for more and better quality aid, it is concerned about the impact of donor decisions and views on local political processes. An unintentional effect of foreign aid is that government bureaucracies tend to be answerable primarily to donors (and, by implication, to taxpayer concerns in donor countries), while they fail to respond to the needs of their own citizens. This situation poses special challenges to the donor community. First, donors should stop exercising their influence outside the formal process of engagement in these countries. This practice has become evident during the poverty reduction strategy process, where macro-economic policy conditions have been agreed between donors and finance or other ministers outside the formal, albeit flawed, poverty reduction strategy process. Second, they should take responsibility for mistaken and damaging policy advice given in the past. Third, they should desist from imposing conditions such as privatisation and trade liberalisation on governments and should instead support participatory and democratic governance and policies aiming to reduce poverty and transform production structures in these countries.

Environmental shocks bring collapse only to systems that are already weak owing to poor governance...

Poor governance has exacerbated the scale of the food shortages, especially in Malawi and Zimbabwe.

In Malawi, irregularities occurred in the sale of food reserves held by the NFRA in ADMARDC silos in 2001 because of a lack of good management and accountability. All, instead of a strategic amount of reserves were sold off; there are concerns that senior politicians were involved in purchases⁴⁹. Malawians, including Christian Aid partners,

⁴⁷ IMF, 'Malawi: 2002 Article IV Consultation: Concluding Statement of the IMF Mission', Washington DC, 14 May 2002.

⁴⁸ In Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, overseas aid averages 27 per cent of Gross National Income (World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2002).

⁴⁹ Stephen Devereux, 'State of Disaster: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Lessons from Malawi', ActionAid Malawi, June 2002.

have called for a full independent audit of the NFRA to uncover where the food reserves went. The government's completed audit still leaves many questions unanswered. The Malawian government, to its credit, has set up a commission of inquiry in response to claims of widespread corruption and fraud in government bodies.⁵⁰

Zimbabwe used to be a breadbasket of southern Africa. This was partly because of high levels of production by large-scale commercial farmers, most of whose farms were, not coincidentally, in fertile areas. However, the government's land reform programme has severely disrupted production on commercial farms, and led to a reduction in the area of maize planted on commercial farms by 61 per cent during the 2001/02 planting season. Large-scale commercial farms produced 44 per cent of maize in 1998/99, 38 per cent in 1999/2000 and 26 per cent in 2000/01.⁵¹ The land reform programme has not only reduced the total amount of maize available in Zimbabwe, but has also led to a reduction in foreign exchange reserves from tobacco and cotton exports, putting pressure on food imports.

In 2000 the Zimbabwean Grain Marketing Board were late in paying farmers for their grain; allegations of corruption were made. Farmers were therefore reluctant to sell their maize to the GMB in 2001. The national strategic grain reserves therefore ran out of grain in early 2002.

In Zimbabwe, the GMB and government ministries have grossly neglected the country's semi-arid areas (all affected by food shortages), where most of the rural population live and earn their main livelihood. These areas have not been well integrated into mainstream markets. The needs of their inhabitants, between 70 and 80 per cent of whom live in poverty, are not articulated through the political process. Recent research indicates that there has been a steady decline in living standards and consumption in these areas. Increasing numbers of farming families have been retreating back into subsistence, partly because of the inability of households and communities to rebuild assets lost during the 1991 drought.⁵²

In Malawi and Zimbabwe poor political leadership, together with a culture of non-accountability; state repression of political opposition; the ruling party's ill-advised and politically expedient land reforms (in Zimbabwe); and the well-documented decline in state capacity, as a result of IMF and World Bank-sponsored policies to cut back the state sector – all have created a fertile ground for relatively minor set-backs to turn into a major crisis.

In Zimbabwe the crisis is compounded by larger economic and political factors: the government's land reform policies; its redirection of budget resources to the war effort in the Democratic Republic of Congo; increased domestic borrowing; and disinvestment, partly fuelled by political violence. Before the onset of the food crisis, the inflation rate was touching 100 per cent; it has now almost doubled. Budgets are increasingly diverted to pay local commercial banks in what has become an unsustainable domestic debt burden. Massive job losses are affecting both urban and rural households dependent on remittances from their families working in urban areas. Even where maize or other essential foodstuffs become available on the market, poor households can no longer afford to buy it. The Zimbabwean government is reportedly withholding maize at GMB

⁵⁰ 'Malawi: Finance Minister Probed over Sale of Maize Reserves', 8 January 2003, www.irinnews.org

⁵¹ CSO figures cited in E Bvurumuku, 'The Impact of Land Crisis on Food Security', FEWS NET in S Mpunga, W Jekemu and dG Ruswa (eds) in *Land: Facing the Millennium Challenges in Unity and Hope*, Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2001

⁵² See Kate Bird and Andrew Shepherd, 'Coping Strategies of Poor Households in Semi-arid Zimbabwe', Natural Resources Systems Programme, March 2002.

depots from individuals who do not carry the official party membership card. The government has also prohibited private traders from importing maize, thus contributing to the overall staple food shortage and preventing even people with enough money from buying maize. These factors have reduced dramatically the ability of all Zimbabweans to cope with crop failures in drought-prone, mostly communal areas, as they did in 1991/92.

Strong state institutions that are responsive and accountable to their citizens, uphold the rule of law, and implement agricultural policies to help and protect poor farmers are key to breaking the cycle of poverty and, with it, that of chronic food insecurity in southern Africa. While democratic cultures will take time and resources to develop, an immediate starting point is needed to enable the poor – those most affected by the current economic and political crisis – to press for solutions that would address their problems.

The international community and southern African governments' response to this crisis must therefore go beyond addressing immediate humanitarian need. Recovery and sustainable development are also crucial. If they want to avoid food crises in the future, they must develop policies that promote food security, including the promotion and protection of rural livelihoods, and crop diversification, as well as encouraging and practising democratic inclusive governance. Such policies must promote agricultural productivity, particularly among small farmers, infrastructure development, institution building, improved governance, environmental rehabilitation and more effective markets. Governments will need support to design and implement more effective famine early warning systems and to manage buffer grain stocks.⁵³ However, even the best early warning system will not prevent a crisis unless there is both the political will and the capacity, by governments and international donors, to respond to the warning signs, so that a food shortage does not become a humanitarian crisis.

⁵³ Many of these recommendations are echoed by the International Food and Policy Research Institute, 'Fighting Famine in Southern Africa: Steps Out of the Crisis', Washington DC, 2002.

War as a cause of humanitarian disaster: the case of Angola

Angola is facing a humanitarian disaster on a catastrophic scale after 27 years of almost uninterrupted civil war. According to the FAO, 1.4 million people are in need of food assistance. Up to four million people have been displaced from their homes; only half of these have been allocated land and are no longer dependent on long-term food assistance. The war has destroyed the livelihoods of most Angolans. In addition to basic healthcare, education and infrastructure, those affected by the war – especially internally displaced people – urgently need food, seeds and tools to rebuild their lives.

Angola was once self-sufficient in staple foods and even exported food. But now it relies on food aid. The armed forces of both sides in the war used rural villages to supply them with essentials such as food and water. This frequent loss of their harvest to combatants has led households to reduce the area they cultivate to the minimum needed to survive and removed any incentive to produce surplus crops for sale.

By the end of the war, large parts of the country were cut off by the combined effects of fighting and landmines. Virtually all commercial transport was by air, thus limiting bulk transport and pushing up the cost of food. The very high demand in Luanda resulted in much of the limited production of vegetable and staple crops in the country being flown or sometimes trucked to Luanda, where they fetched a much higher price than at the point of production, leaving remote areas short of available food. Food markets in the rest of Angola are highly fragmented, mainly because of the appalling condition of even the main road arteries linking major cities.

After independence the Angolan government made some effort to encourage rural development. However money was diverted away from agriculture to fund increasingly sophisticated weaponry as the armed conflict turned from guerrilla to conventional warfare.

During the last phase of the war, between 1998 and 2002, humanitarian access to the opposition force UNITA-controlled areas was reduced or prevented altogether. The warring parties rejected repeated requests by UN agencies for 'humanitarian corridors'. This increased large-scale population displacements, with communities fleeing both attacks and the lack of means to survive, leaving behind land and assets.

From late 2001, government anti-guerrilla tactics aimed specifically at depriving the military wing of UNITA of its rural support. These tactics included the burning of village fields that could be used to feed UNITA combatants. This resulted in reduced productive capacity in rural areas, causing mass food shortages among local populations. Displaced people from these areas were malnourished before the ceasefire but the end of the war did not change the situation. International agencies arriving in quartering areas for ex-UNITA combatants and areas newly accessible after the ceasefire reported mortality rates up to ten times the 'accepted' emergency threshold.

The 27-year civil war has led to a political culture of unaccountability and corruption. Oil revenue from multinational oil companies is kept separate from the general budget – most oil money has been used to fuel the war effort. With its enormous potential wealth, Angola need not be entirely dependent on donors to support agricultural and post-conflict reconstruction. Angolan civil society, however, will need support to build its capacity to monitor sources of government revenue and to track whether the money is helping to reduce poverty and increase food security

Conclusion and recommendations

Across southern Africa, millions of people are on the edge of survival. People are selling their last remaining assets or simply going without meals. Young women are being forced into prostitution; crime and theft are on the rise as people become increasingly desperate.⁵⁴ While erratic weather conditions have triggered southern Africa's crisis, it would not have reached this scale if there had not been widespread poverty and HIV/AIDS, poor governance, ill-advised donor policies and failed staple- food markets.

The international community and southern African governments' response to this crisis should therefore go beyond addressing immediate humanitarian needs to supporting long-term recovery and sustainable development. Many donor governments and agencies have already committed themselves to this course of action. The European Commission has acknowledged that 'governments need to address the underlying structural causes of poverty'. According to the FAO, 'this emergency merits a sustained and comprehensive package of relief and recovery efforts.'

Improve rural livelihoods

Agricultural and rural livelihood policies need to address chronic food insecurity and put in place ways of responding to shortages before they become critical. Long-term food security strategies that address the problems of over-dependence on maize in a region with increasingly erratic rainfall need to be developed. Greater crop diversity and sustainable farming methods are essential for maintaining consistent future yields. Many households, especially those that rely on maize, experience shortages every year. If the rains fail, these shortages can become critical.

1. ***Governments and donors should support programmes to develop appropriate and diverse farming strategies such as alternative indigenous staple crops in drought-prone regions.*** Dependence on maize, a rain-fed crop, as a staple food increases the vulnerability of households to droughts. Indigenous grains such as sorghum and millet, as well as roots and tubers, are better suited to southern African climatic conditions. Programmes to promote crops and livestock need to be tailored to the particular conditions farmers are facing, including variations in climatic patterns.
2. ***Early warning systems in affected countries should be improved to provide adequate warning of the onset of a food crisis.*** The assessments of organisations working in rural areas alongside communities should form part of national production forecasts to avoid delays in calling for an emergency response. Better systems for root and tuber crop assessments (which cannot be detected by satellite) need to be put into place.

⁵⁴ 'Regional Emergency Food Security Assessment Report', 30 January 2003, Southern African Development Community Food Agricultural and National Resources Directorate Vulnerability Assessment Committee.

3. ***Donors, international NGOs, national governments and local organisations and institutions should coordinate their actions*** to improve long-term interventions to enhance food security and increase agricultural productivity. SADC needs to be strengthened to ensure it provides proper regional coordination in responding to food shortages.
4. Government institutions should be strengthened and rural infrastructure developed to enable access to remote areas.

Address HIV/AIDS

The massive scale of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern Africa presents a new challenge to southern African governments and societies and to the donor community. With the rate of infection as high as 30 per cent in some areas, harvests continue to decline because of the loss of productive workers and the increasing numbers of child-, female- and elderly-headed households.

5. ***Governments and donors should develop and fund agricultural rehabilitation and long-term agricultural and rural livelihood development programmes that respond to the specific needs of households affected by HIV/AIDS.*** These should include: special extension services and care and support programmes for child-headed households; targeted access to affordable (or free) credit and inputs; and income support to extended families.

Address failures in staple food markets

Staple food markets have failed to provide people with affordable food.

6. ***Governments and donors need to ensure that agricultural marketing bodies work effectively for poor farmers.*** These bodies need to be better managed, more accountable, better capitalised, and complement private-sector activities in food and agricultural inputs markets. This means they should be well managed, accountable and well resourced. Marketing boards also need to work in conjunction with the private sector to ensure that all have access to food and agricultural inputs at appropriate prices.
7. ***Governments, SADC and donors could explore more cost-effective and sustainable means of storing grain to complement existing national grain reserves.*** These could include a range of solutions, from village-level food banks to jointly managed regional grain reserves.

Promote accountable and transparent governance

Transparent, accountable and well-resourced government institutions are better able to manage staple food markets and market institutions, and to implement agricultural policies that respond to the needs of small and vulnerable farming households.

8. ***A culture of accountable, transparent and democratic governance needs to be encouraged in affected countries*** through constructive engagement by donor governments and by increasing support for civil-society organisations as well as parliamentary and other bodies of democratic oversight.

Improve agricultural and rural development policies

Governments and donors have invested too few policy and financial resources in agriculture and rural development over the past decade.

9. ***Food security and the protection and promotion of rural livelihoods should be given priority in the donor-sponsored anti-poverty strategies of Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia.*** More government revenue, donor aid, and private sector resources need to be allocated to advice and extension services for smallholder farmers, to provide vulnerable households with affordable inputs and credit, and to build and maintain a rural infrastructure that would facilitate transport and marketing of agricultural produce.

Improve donor policies

However, responsibility for policy decisions does not lie solely with southern African governments. International donors wield disproportionate influence on national decisions. Their advice, which has been implemented to varying degrees, to reduce budget deficits, eliminate price and agricultural inputs subsidies, eliminate agricultural marketing boards, and encourage export crops has maintained and in some countries increased the vulnerability of small farmers, their families and other poor households to erratic weather. While donors have been quick to point to the failures of governments in southern Africa in protecting the livelihoods of poor people, very few have been prepared to acknowledge their own complicity in the long-term making of the current humanitarian crisis in southern Africa, or to consider how to ensure that macro-economic policy reforms do not create or perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'while governments have failed themselves to tackle fundamental weaknesses of governance practice, fiscal and economic management, international assistance over the past ten years has equally failed to work strategically in the region to tackle issues at the root of the widespread poverty.'

10. ***Donors should not pressure governments to implement agricultural policy, trade and institutional reforms unless independent poverty and social impact analyses of these reforms have been completed.*** These include the introduction of user fees, elimination of subsidies, and the commercialisation or privatisation of parastatal marketing agencies. The findings of these assessments should guide donor advice

to governments.

11. ***Donor institutions should accept responsibility in cases where the conditions of their policies have increased the vulnerability of poor farmers and their households, particularly in cases where the sudden liberalisation of agricultural markets (in Zambia and Malawi for example) has taken away markets from vulnerable small producers.***

12. ***Donors should remain consistent in their support for subsidies for inputs, based on a long-term plan.*** Fluctuations in subsidy policies in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, partly due to changes in donor views, sent confusing signals to growers and traders. The result, inevitably, was high fertiliser prices and lower production.

Southern Africans do not have to face starvation. There is nothing inevitable about hunger in a region that could feed all its people. But if the causes of today's crisis are not addressed the region will be unable to break the cycle of poverty, vulnerability and crisis. Donors and governments in the region need to work together to ensure that future erratic weather does not push the region to the brink of starvation again.

Glossary

ADMARC – Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation

FAO – Food and Agriculture Organisation

HIPC – Highly Indebted Poor Country

NAMBOARD – National Agricultural Marketing Board

NFRA – National Food Reserve Agency

PRSP – Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper

SADC – Southern Africa Development Community

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNITA - Uniao Nacional para a Independencia Total de Angola

WFP – World Food Programme