

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning from Malawi

1. Malawi, 2002: hundreds and perhaps even thousands of people die as a result of hunger;¹ millions suffer severe food shortages and see their longer-term development prospects undermined. Southern Africa, 2003: more than 15 million people are in need of emergency food aid and 24% of adults are HIV-positive.² The whole region's longer-term development is undermined. As the UN agencies recently stated: "While the world's attention is currently gripped by events in other regions, Africa is in crisis with thousands of people dying silently each day."³

2. In October 2002 a number of us visited Malawi to find out about the humanitarian crisis. Malawi is in a desperate state. We saw shocking levels of poverty: villagers with little food and no possessions beyond the second-hand clothes on their backs; people in the capital, Lilongwe, scraping a living by breaking rocks for 40 kwacha—around 25 US cents—per day or selling used plastic bags and bottles by the roadside. We met children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, sitting on dusty walls in the countryside, looking lost, unsure of what to do, or who would look after them. We visited hospitals full of patients with HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, which lacked basic equipment and medicines, where people were dying on beds on exposed balconies, and where many of the doctors and nurses were HIV-positive. We also met Government Ministers and officials. Some were battling against the odds to respond to the crisis with the help of donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations; others seemed more concerned with a constitutional debate over whether to allow the President to run for a third term.

3. Thankfully, we also saw signs of hope. We visited a village which had improved its prospects by setting up seed-stores, live-stock enclosures, and a water-pump with the assistance of an NGO. We were shown how to use the water-pump, and a man told us how proud he was that his wife chaired the water-pump management committee. We saw too, in the sweltering heat, the determination of people working to build a bridge to link their village to market, as part of a cash-for-work programme. We met workers at an HIV/AIDS project, who were seeking to change attitudes as well as care for people. We visited a school, full of girls and boys keen to learn. We saw starter packs of seeds and fertiliser being distributed to farmers eager to plant, and were shown a winter crop of maize by villagers rightfully proud of their efforts, and their new treadle-pump. We heard about the efforts of a large commercial farm to diversify its production, and to work in partnership with local smallholders. We heard too about the well co-ordinated efforts of NGOs, Government and donors to respond to the crisis and to provide food aid to the needy.

¹ There are no official estimates of hunger-related deaths in Malawi in 2002. ActionAid, Save the Children Fund (UK) and Traidcraft cite a figure of "at least 500-1000" (Ev 113, 45, 124). This figure comes from Stephen Devereux, *State of disaster: The causes, consequences and policy lessons from Malawi*; see www.actionaid.org/newsandmedia/the_malawi_famine_of_2002.pdf – copy placed in House of Commons Library. In another article, on the basis of information provided by local NGOs, Stephen Devereux suggests that a figure in the range of 1000-3000 may be more accurate; see Stephen Devereux (2002), "The Malawi famine of 2002", *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin*, vol. 33, no. 4, p. 70 – copy placed in House of Commons Library.

² Southern African Development Community (SADC), Food Agriculture and Natural Resources, Vulnerability Assessment Committee, *Regional Emergency Food Security Assessment*, December 2002 – see www.sadc-fanr.org.zw/; Ev 1, para 4 [DFID memorandum].

³ United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Southern Africa's humanitarian crisis: Heads of the major humanitarian agencies call for action*, 20 January 2003. Available at www.reliefweb.int

4. This inquiry is not just about Malawi, but it is coloured largely by our experiences there. We saw during our visit vulnerable people heading towards crisis. We learned about the sources of vulnerability—poverty, poor governance and inappropriate policies, and HIV/AIDS. And we saw the efforts of donors, NGOs and international organisations working—where possible, with Government—to avert a coming crisis, to ensure that short-term assistance supported longer-term development, and to help people to move towards better livelihoods.⁴ The causes of poverty and the sources of vulnerability vary across southern Africa. But the issues we learnt about in Malawi are replayed, in different forms, with different emphases, and in different combinations, across southern Africa.

Report outline

5. Our objectives in undertaking this inquiry have been: to understand the emerging crisis; to examine the response of the international donor community including the Department for International Development; to add what impetus we can to the international response; and, to learn and disseminate lessons which might help to prevent, and/or improve responses to, future crises. We continue in chapter 2 by outlining the current situation across the countries of southern Africa. In chapter 3, we examine the ways in which poverty, poor governance and inappropriate policy, and HIV/AIDS have increased the vulnerability of communities in southern Africa to shocks. In chapter 4, we examine the effectiveness of Famine Early Warning Systems in southern Africa, and the adequacy of the international community's response. In chapter 5 our focus expands, as must that of the international community, from the response to the current crisis, to efforts to enable people in southern Africa to move towards food security and sustainable livelihoods, whilst also responding to the challenge of HIV/AIDS. In conclusion, we highlight the lessons we have learnt, particularly as regards the roles and relationships of different organisations, and issues of governance and accountability. We urge our audience, Ministers, politicians and government officials—in rich countries and poor—to do what they can, now, to minimise the effects of the crisis, and to help to sow the seeds of future sustainable development in the region.

⁴ A livelihood is simply a way of making a living. It may include a combination of livelihood activities, for instance some subsistence farming, selling a few vegetables, and some wage labour during the dry season.