



Civil society experiences of monitoring food security in Southern Africa

Workshop report

24 May, 2005

Birchwood Conference Centre, Benoni, South Africa

Introduction and welcome

Sue Mbaya (SARPN)

Towards the end of 2004 the Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN) and Save the Children-UK (SC-UK) hosted a workshop that looked at the divide between humanitarian interventions and longer-term development work. The workshop emphasised the increasing importance being given to evidence and analysis as the basis for identifying the most appropriate policy responses. Linked to this are concerns that to have a developmental focus monitoring and assessment need to look beyond food security to livelihoods more broadly. The organisations represented in this room reflect these concerns in their work. They represent most countries in the region, sadly with the exception of Mozambique and Angola. The purpose of this meeting, through the five presentations and the ensuing discussions, is to share methodologies and stimulate learning across countries in SADC. We will reflect on the policy impact that we, as civil society organisations working in this area, have had while also reflecting more broadly on the challenges that food security policy presents. The workshop will also provide an opportunity for us to build stronger links with each other.

Gary Hawes (Ford Foundation)

The Ford Foundation has provided grants in South Africa since the 1980s although it only opened an office in the country in 1994. Grant making has focused on reproductive health and civil rights, with most of the grants going to civil society organisations. The Foundation is alarmed to see that bi-lateral funding for civil society seems to be on the decline in the region. It sees working with SARPN as a way to help strengthen and enhance the role of civil society. SARPN provides a way to distribute critical information that often does not get beyond government circles or multi-lateral development organisations. The gatherings SARPN convenes help civil society organisations to look at ways in which they can work together strategically and also work with governments in the region, which often under-estimate the role that civil society can play. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Commission for Africa (CFA) processes do not give a big role to civil society. The Ford Foundation would like to see greater appreciations of what civil society can achieve and what other players can achieve by working with it.

Presentation 1: The role of agriculture in the economy of Malawi

Vincent Gondwe (CISANET Consortium)

Cisanet is a civil society agricultural network with membership across Malawi, including farmers' groups and many non-government organisations (NGOs). The presentation will focus on Cisanet's experience in monitoring food security in Malawi, which is currently revising its food security policy as a result of the food crisis.

Agriculture plays an important role in Malawi's economy accounting for 30 per cent of GDP and 65 per cent of the income of the rural population, which makes up over 87 per cent of the population of Malawi. Agriculture also accounts for 82 per cent of foreign earnings. The rural economy faces many challenges

with high poverty levels amongst rural people. The average size of landholdings is 0.5 hectare (ha), and agriculture is labour intensive with low productivity and low levels of technology adoption. In the past the state played a big role in agricultural support, but more recently policies favouring market liberalisation have led to the removal of subsidies and the privatisation of state owned institutions. Despite opposition from organisations like Oxfam the government is still pursuing privatisation, which is not yielding improved results for the rural sector. Despite the importance of agriculture for the economy, the rural sector is not well represented in government and small farmers have little say. Cisanet was formed in 2001 to give civil society a greater voice.

Cisanet prioritises the following five areas:

- food and nutrition security policy development and implementation
- budget formulation and monitoring/tracking
- agricultural marketing
- livestock development (which had been sidelined by government policy) and
- small scale irrigation development.

Cisanet was involved as the voice of civil society in government's review of food and nutrition security policy. It consulted farmers around the country, consolidated their views and presented them to government. Cisanet also held a workshop to refine and harmonise the indicators being used by NGOs to monitor development impact and outputs. It produced a consolidated set of ten impact indicators and ten output indicators. Government has committed itself to providing financial and technical support for the use of these indicators. The organisation attends sessions of the parliamentary budget committee and identifies key areas needing attention. It is working on inputs into policy formulation and on monitoring implementation.

Monitoring of agricultural extension services identified problems including a shortage of extension workers, lack of transport and training for extension workers and the impact of deaths from HIV/AIDS. In addition the work plan for extension services lacks focus on priority areas. Distribution of seeds and fertiliser has improved harvests but targeting remains a problem. Despite the favourable response to the programme government has stopped it. Although farmers see irrigation as the most important input, only 32% of pumps have reached targeted farmers. The rest remain in the government offices.

Cisanet's successes include establishing dialogue with government, identifying areas that need capacity building, incorporating communities into food and nutrition security policy processes, developing monitoring indicators and securing government commitment to supply technical support for monitoring. The challenges facing Cisanet include the fact that government is sometimes inflexible, Cisanet's own anticipation of problems, the standardisation of monitoring methodology and the commitment of its members.

Discussion and questions

Q: Was the review of food and nutrition policy a government initiative or was it Cisanet's idea?

It was a government initiative resulting from the food crisis. Cisanet identified the weakness resulting from the policy being drafted by a team of experts without civil society involvement and intervened to address this situation. Cisanet provided the consultants with an input based on community consultations.

Q: Are the indicators intended to monitor government, the World Food Programme (WFP), NGOs of Cisanet's own members? Who funds Cisanet?

Cisanet's monitoring is based on its members and on the forum. It helps members to monitor their activities. Government has agreed to focus its monitoring on the impact indicators identified by the consortium. Some NGOs are interested in taking part in monitoring activities with government providing technical support. NGOs have been asked to identify areas in which they need training.

Government has asked members of the consortium to monitor the output indicators in their own areas. Members can use their own indicators as well as those agreed on by the consortium. The forum agreed that

every organisation, including government, should use the policy indicators. The policy is now in place but implementation has not yet started.

Q: Are you monitoring food security levels on the ground or policy implementation?

Policy implementation. The government has set out the policy and they are in the process of disseminating information about it. A summary document has been distributed across the country and monitoring has started but the information has not yet been consolidated.

Q: How do you monitor the budget?

Cisanet looks at the coverage of extension workers, at how different departments formulate projects and how government devises its budget. We make presentations to civil society on how government develops the budget, looking at different steps and identifying where to intervene. We also make suggestions on what should be included. Finally we look at implementation, at reasons for failure and at what changes need to be incorporated into the next budget.

Q: The role of small-scale farmers is very important for food security in Malawi. Does government have a policy to encourage commercial farmers to increase food production to improve food security?

Cisanet's membership includes large farmers and it has links to the commercial sector. However it recognises the need to focus on small-scale farmers to address issues of equity. Poverty is on the increase and large farmers are able to represent their views to government.

In the past the focus was on cash crops. Following the hunger crisis there is now greater focus on food production.

Q: The earlier question on funding for Cisanet was not answered. If people are all working on a volunteer basis how do they manage?

People have to make a sacrifice but the organisation does have a secretariat. Funding comes from well wishers. Oxfam and DFID are represented on the board. However, the organisation does not have stable funding.

Q: Cisanet has linked food security to nutrition. What response has there been from civil society? Do most organisations have competencies in both areas?

Not really. Cisanet has identified training needs through a questionnaire. It is developing a database of programmes and projects in the country. Civil society's role in monitoring is based on the fact that it is closer to the community. At present we are engaged in fire fighting and trying to work out how to identify which problems to focus on in our work.

Presentation 2: Civil society experiences in Zambia

Helen Samathabele (Programme Against Malnutrition)

The Programme Against Malnutrition (PAM) works in rural areas with small-scale farmers. Poor economic performance in Zambia has had a negative affect on health and education services and there are high levels of unemployment. The government adopted the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) to help revitalise sectors like tourism and agriculture. Recently Zambia qualified for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) programme and the intention is to use savings from debt servicing to support education, health and agriculture.

Seventy-five per cent of the population depends on agriculture, which is mostly dryland agriculture with almost no irrigation in the small-scale sector. There are 5-800 000 small scale farmers cultivating between 0.5 and 9 ha, about 120 000 emergent commercial farmers cultivating 10-20 ha, 25 000 medium farmers with 20-60 ha and 2 000 large scale farmers, most of whom have converted from crops like maize and millet to

flowers and other export crops. This has had an impact on food security. Production of maize, the staple crop, has not increased over the last fifteen years and at times has only met half the country's needs. Food security is fragile and unstable: the causes include droughts, floods and low levels of investment in infrastructure and technology.

Households lack access to improved techniques and extension officers display little interest in helping people. The results include poor food preservation and management, while livestock diseases mean that animal draft power is not available. Subsidies for small-scale farmers were removed as a result of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). There is high unemployment due to privatisation and the impact of HIV. As a result over 60 per cent of households survive on two meals or less a day. Children in these households are not getting adequate nutrition.

There are many organisations in Zambia monitoring food security. It is used as an indicator to measure the success of poverty eradication programmes. They include the government, multilateral agencies, the private sector and civil society organisations including PAM, Care and World Vision. Civil society organisations use a number of methodologies to monitor food security including household surveys, questionnaires and price surveys.

The presentation looks at two methodologies used by civil society organisations, one in an urban setting and one in a rural setting, used by PAM. In the past, organisations focused exclusively on rural areas but they have recognised that there are also problems in urban areas when staple foods are in short supply and prices increase.

JCTR, a Catholic civil society organisation that promotes economic and social justice, has a social condition research project that monitors a basket of food and non-food items (the minimum for healthy living) in six urban areas based on a survey of what households buy. Comparing the cost of this basket with income levels shows that people like teachers and civil servants are not able to afford it.

PAM provides a pack of inputs to 150 000 poor rural households. The pack includes seeds and fertiliser. Along with the distribution PAM also tries to promote conservation agriculture to prevent famine. Using participatory methodologies and including government distribution of inputs PAM compares production levels in areas receiving inputs to those not receiving inputs. It analyses this information and shares it with government, donors and other stakeholders. The results show that providing inputs to small-scale farmers can improve food security and that it is more sustainable than food handouts. This has had a positive impact and many civil society organisations are now opting to use input packs rather than food relief, except in cases where there is dire need.

The various monitoring methodologies being used complement each other as long as they highlight problems and help the search for solutions. Monitoring has shown its effectiveness in strengthening programme evaluation and advocating for policy change. In Zambia government and civil society are trying to come together through the office of the vice president to look for solutions.

Discussion and questions

Q: C-Safe is also monitoring food distribution in Zimbabwe where price increases pose a major challenge to food security. However, food is not only sold through the formal market and it is difficult to monitor. With both government and NGOs monitoring food security how do you ensure standardisation?

In Zambia price stability is also a challenge. There are three or four increases in food prices a year. Although it is not possible for government and employers to adjust salaries every time food prices increase they need to pay a living wage. Civil servants salaries are not adequate and trade unions are using the surveys to monitor food prices. There are a number of bodies doing monitoring and through the office of the vice president they are trying to agree on indicators. However, because of their funding some NGOs are trying to do their own thing.

Q: Is the 70 per cent poverty figure given in the presentation based on the UN or a local definition? What do the input packs consist of?

Q: Purchasing power affects the availability of food but having purchasing power does not automatically lead to food security.

Q: To produce you do not only need draft power. How integrated are interventions in addressing food security?

Input packs consist of seed and fertiliser. They contain a variety of seeds such as legumes and cereals, and fertiliser. The contents vary according to the needs of different regions. For example, packs for high rainfall areas, where the soil is acidic, include lime. The distribution includes technical transfer to teach improved soil use, conservation farming and proper rotation. The technical input also differs depending on the needs in different areas. The aim is to avoid a situation where people go every year to get food handouts. Government aims to get people to produce enough for themselves rather than depending on handouts. This is cheaper.

Many NGOs are incorporating HIV issues in their training programmes for small-scale farmers and are distributing condoms. We cannot afford not to do anything about HIV/AIDS. The labour constraint resulting from HIV/AIDS is an ongoing concern. There are various methods to try and overcome this constraint. Conservation farming is one; others are animal draft and systems of rotating labour amongst households. Other organisations are promoting labour saving devices in households - for example cassava chippers because processing cassava is a labour intensive process.

The definition of poverty is a challenge in Zambia. The WFP, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN (FAO), and World Bank all have definitions. PAM uses the figures from the central statistics office, which show that 70-75 per cent of people in Zambia are living below the poverty datum line.

Presentation 3: Community based monitoring of food security and social welfare in Zimbabwe

Thomas Chikumbirike (Community Monitoring Programme)

The Community Monitoring Programme (CMP) is managed by the Training and Research Support Centre (TARSC) www.tarsc.org. TARSC operates mainly in Southern African networks with other organisations in the region including government departments and academic institutions. The process that led to the formation of the CMP started with a monitoring working group of non-government organisations connected to Fosenet. The group was collecting information on food security at the height of the food crisis in 2002. It used indicators agreed on by the receiving organisations and based its monitoring on principles from the international humanitarian charter on food aid.

Fosenet trained monitors from civil society organisations across the country to report on food security in their areas. Based on feedback from organisations it was able to identify issues that the monitoring system was not addressing. To facilitate the collection of additional information Fosenet invited other organisations to form a wider network. This is how CMP was formed. A coordinating committee drawn from civil society manages it. CMP uses the food sovereignty conceptual framework, which prioritises food production for domestic and local markets. It requires fair prices for farmers, price stability, access to land, water, forests and other productive areas,

CMP wants to create greater awareness of how policies and conditions are experienced at household level in order to increase the attention given to these issues in policy and planning. It focuses not only on outcomes but also on the voice and capacity of communities. Its information focus is wider than food security and its monitoring encompasses employment, health, education and community needs. CMP uses structured forms to collect information. These forms are updated regularly based on observations from the ground and the experiences of others working in similar fields.

On average it receives 200 reports from sentinel sites at community level in urban and rural areas. This information is used to compile and publish monthly reports. Most of the information is qualitative. CMP does not collect information on production levels but rather looks at food security issues such as harvest

expectations and food security conditions in households. The information is collected confidentially to avoid compromising those doing the collecting but the reports are published and CMP makes sure that they get to academic institutions and government.

There are three monitors per site who are trained separately and do not know each other. Their results are compared and if there are any disparities CMP sends a verification team to establish the reason. Other quality control safeguards include comparing findings with information from other surveys and with information from the government statistical office, and ongoing training of monitors. CMP encourages local and international users to review its reports and comment on them. The reports are widely circulated.

Apart from the monthly reports CMP now produces quarterly surveys on different issues such as health, incomes and employment, production and assets. When it identifies issues that need further follow up it commissions research to gather the necessary information. For example it has looked at health related costs incurred by an average household in Zimbabwe using a community based research approach. This involved training community members in research methods such as sampling, questionnaire design and interview techniques and then sending them out. Once they have gathered the information they are taken through a process of data analysis and report writing. The aim is for communities to have a sense of ownership of the information and to be able to use it. Information gathered by CMP has shown, for example that households experience income stress at particular times of the year leading to the disposal of assets. This stress is mostly related to food shortage.

Information provided by CMP has contributed to policy formulation. It has shown that community based monitoring can provide timely and reliable information on community experience and that it is the fastest way of gathering information for decision making.

Discussion and questions

Q. How can you ensure that the information is accurate and that you do not get a hostile response? What strategies does CMP employ to ensure that it influences policy? Even good information does not necessarily lead to a policy response.

The monitors live in the situation, experience the conditions and interact with the people. The fact that no one knows who they are avoids the problem of hostile responses.

CMP is not directly involved in lobbying work but it feeds the information to other organisations that do engage in this type of work. It also makes sure that parliament gets its reports and has held meetings with the agriculture and health portfolio committees to discuss the information in its reports.

PAM in Zambia uses the same strategies to disseminate information. It calls meetings of government and NGOs to release information and also asks government policy makers to visit areas and interact with communities. In addition it makes use of radio and TV programmes to disseminate information.

Q. How does CMP address the issue of sustainability of the monitoring process? Are CMP and community based monitoring the same thing? And, given that information is being gathered secretly how can it be verified?

CMP is a network that does community monitoring work. The methodology is called community based monitoring. The situation in Zimbabwe is different from that in other countries. If asked openly most people would not be prepared to say that there are food shortages. Zimbabwe is divided into provinces, districts and wards. The sentinel sites correspond with the wards. They are chosen at random and monitors are then identified in each site.

CMP does not offer a direct service to empower communities but it feeds information to organisations that work in communities. The government is interested in getting the information. When there was a delay in producing the first report in July 2003 parliament asked when the report would be available. While CMP can't claim any special relationship with government it provides its findings to government, parliament,

Zimvac and to SADC Fewsnet and has found consistency with surveys from these agencies. Where reports contain unfavourable findings such as allegations of the abuse of food stocks. CMP does not make direct accusations but rather requests that allegations be investigated. Reports need to go to parliament and local agencies first and CMP does not speak to media directly.

How sustainable is the process? It is a simple tool to monitor food security. The problem with the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (VAC) is that information takes a long time to be released.

Presentation 4: Monitoring food security in South Africa - the FIVIMS-ZA experience

Scott Drimie (Human Sciences Research Council)

The Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information Management System (FIVIMS) is not directly involved with community monitoring but provides a space for civil society to engage in community monitoring. It represents an opportunity rather than existing practise.

FIVIMS is based on terms of reference set by the national Department of Agriculture, which wanted a map-based information management system to enable on the ground food security interventions. The presentation will show the capabilities and limitations of the system and raise a challenge for civil society to engage with government, which has set the terms of the discourse.

In 2002 South Africa saw dramatic food price increases. Research projects in the former bantustan rural districts of Mount Fletcher and Mount Frere revealed chronic food insecurity and vulnerability. With the regional food security crisis coming to a head, links began to be drawn with food insecurity in South Africa. Achieving food self sufficiency was a major aim under the apartheid government but there was little concern to ensure access to food. In South Africa, where few small scale farmers are self sufficient in food production, access to food largely equates with access to cash. Around 1.5 million children in the country suffer from malnutrition and 14 million people face food insecurity. In response the government has created the Integrated Food Security and Nutrition Programme (IFSNP). Driven by the Department of Agriculture, the programme tries to provide a framework for government departments in the social cluster to work together. Initiatives include food parcels, nutrition programmes, community development programmes and the public works programme, which provides short term employment opportunities.

Government recognises that there is little information available on where and how to target interventions. Food parcel distribution was shown to be very unsuccessful requiring drastic improvements in targeting. This led to the decision by the department of agriculture to pilot the FIVIMS. It is essentially a tool to assist government response on the ground and a light monitoring system that complements existing early warning systems. (The system is separate from the UN food insecurity and vulnerability monitoring system.)

A pilot programme was run in Sekhukhuniland to advise government on the possible roll out to the development nodes established under the Integrated and Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS). Sekhukhuniland, located on the border between Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces, reflects the reality of much of the former bantustan areas. After establishing an advisory panel the programme began by looking at existing information and undertaking a series of studies to understand the reality of food security on ground and to measure anthropometrics.

The Department of Agriculture's existing geographical information system AGIS was to provide the basis for the FIVIMS mapping system. The concept of an information system that would tell officials how to respond on the ground was problematic from the beginning. There were a number of other challenges including how to work with civil society on the ground. A mock up of the system shows how it identifies the areas with the highest levels of poverty in the northern areas of Sekhukhuniland and helps to understand issues of access to food. The GIS system can also give a picture of population numbers, gender, employment, GDP by district, education and lifestyle segmentation. Linked to existing systems like that of the weather service it shows rainfall patterns and other weather related information.

Information from the survey conducted in Sekhukhuniland was complemented by data from STATS SA and other sources such as the VACs and C-Safe to profile poverty and vulnerability in the area. It showed that the major sources of income were state grants such as old age pensions and child support grants along with

remittances from migrant labour and income mainly from farm work in surrounding areas. Over the past year almost a quarter of households had suffered the death of an adult and 15 per cent the death of a child. The survey did not ask whether these deaths were HIV/AIDS related. Anthropometric data showed a high level of stunting amongst children ranging from 33-37 per cent in children aged 2-13 years.

FIVIMS can provide information on, for example, where to provide school feeding schemes. However using maps as the only source of information for interventions can lead to dangers such as neglecting areas with high levels of need. In the context of the urgent need expressed by government officials for quality information there is a danger of unrealistic expectations of what a system like FIVIMS can deliver. For this reason the pilot concluded that:

- What is required is the ability to synthesise information from a wide variety of sources and to put it together in a way that is accessible to enable action in a particular context.
- This need cannot be met by an information management system.
- It can be met by developing the capacity for understanding, synthesising and working with information at local, provincial and national level – including capacity to use a system like FIVIMS...
- ...and partnerships especially with CSOs

IN summary, the pilot programme concluded that FIVIMS needs to be one component of a shared information management system that makes information available for interpretation and integration by users, rather than one that tries to develop an expert system that interprets and integrates the data for users.

Questions and discussion

Q: What is South Africa's capacity to respond to problems?

Q: What was the cause of the food price increase, was it due to high demand and limited supply?

Q: The statement that food security in South Africa is not due to shortage but to access to food seems to raise issues of administration and delivery?

The Department of Social Development has shown capacity to reach a considerable number of people other departments struggle to implement programmes at local level. Often local municipalities have to deliver and this is where there is the most stress in the system. Some areas have capacity while others do not and local government, as the key delivery agency, has the biggest problems.

One of the reasons for the food price increase in 2002 is given as speculation. However, a commission on the food price argued that manipulation was not necessarily the cause and that the increase could be linked to increased demand in the region. Sekhukhuniland is far off the beaten track and food prices did not increase dramatically. The increase was more dramatic in urban areas.

Delivery is an issue in terms of getting food to people in mountainous areas. The survey picked up areas where people have no cash income. Households operate by sharing resources. Most areas have a shop where basic foods are available.

Q: Is there a link between provincial and national monitoring systems in South Africa? FIVIMS operates at the national level but some issues may be better approached at a provincial level.

Q: How can FIVIMS relate to the monitoring systems discussed in the other presentations?

Q: Was the food price rise linked to a shortage of the staple food? In Zambia, people tend to think there is a food shortage when maize, the staple food, is in short supply although other foods are available.

FIVIMS is a nationally driven process and this is the reason for many of the institutional challenges. The Department of Agriculture wanted to pilot something and then bring everyone else on board. The intention is to roll out from Pretoria using provincial FIVIMS but at present nothing exists at provincial level apart from KwaZulu-Natal, where the province has its own monitoring system but this is at odds with the FIVIMS system.

How could the system relate to the others that we have heard about? There is strong desire for information at local level where there is some mistrust of things that come from the centre. In this sense local systems are a realistic option but they require all kinds of capacity development. South Africa could learn from experience elsewhere in Africa in building capacity at local level.

The food price increase was focused on maize although there was a general rise. One strategy was to buy cheaper, less refined, maize.

Q: Can you elaborate on civil society consultation. What is the HSRC recommending to the Department of Agriculture? Does it need to consult on the existing model or does it need to look at other ways of gathering information.

The HSRC was one of a consortium of 12 organisations involved in the programme. The recommendation on engagement with civil society is to go back to the drawing board. The system as it stands is problematic. The Department needs to check the system, as piloted in Sekhukhuniland, and see what needs to be changed. The fear is that this responsibility will fall on a directorate that it already overworked. The Department needs to create the space to enable this to happen. However, it is difficult to sell this because the money is already there for the roll out.

Comment: The Department of Agriculture has taken initiatives such as distributing seed packs and chickens. There have been problems with these with people saying that they can't afford to buy chicken feed. Some initiatives have not been appropriate such as attempts to introduce fish farming in areas where there is not enough water for drinking.

Comment: There is an interesting disjuncture in the way the state sector engages. Provincial departments are relatively independent and often do not act in tandem with the national department. Part of the recommendation is to get them to work more closely together.

Q: There was no reference in the presentation to issues around access to land? Does this mean that land is available to people in Sekhukhuniland?

In the three northern areas in Sekhukhuniland there is land available and the problem people have is with inputs, particularly water. If the input were available then the question of access to land would arise. The land question has surfaced in the neighbourhood of large farmers because people can see that land can be put to good use when inputs are available.

Presentation 5: Vulnerability analysis in Southern Africa: an overview of the SADC VAC system

Phumzile Mdladla (RVAC)

The RVAC was established as a SADC FANR committee in 1999 to provide leadership on regional and national vulnerability assessment (VA) activities. It is a multi-agency group chaired by the SADC and includes other regional programmes and international NGOs in its membership. National VACs are multi-agency groups chaired by national governments and including government departments, UN agencies and national and international NGOs.

The main consultation in Kariba in 2002 identified three focus areas for the RVAC:

- harmonising vulnerability assessment (VA) concepts and methods amongst key partner agencies.
- training and institutional strengthening at regional and national level and
- advocacy for more widespread use of VAs and information dissemination.

During the food crisis in 2002-3 longer-term development activities were shelved to focus on providing critical information to guide emergency interventions. A consultation process began in 2003 to define support needs and the relationship between regional and national VACs. The process led to each VAC articulating its vision and mission and the drafting of a renewed mandate for the RVAC in 2004:

“To strengthen national and regional vulnerability analysis systems in order to inform policy formulation, development programmes and emergency interventions that lead to a reduction in vulnerability within the SADC region.”

The process also drafted a five-year programme for the RVAC, which is under consideration by SADC structures. It has three objectives:

In relation to the SADC secretariat: “To strengthen the design, implementation and M&E function of SADC’s RISDP and business plans through building up national and regional VA systems.”

In relation to SADC member states: “To enhance *national* policy formulation, development programmes and emergency interventions through strengthening of national and regional vulnerability assessment and analysis systems.”

In relation to international cooperating partners: “To support ICPs to make informed decisions in their allocation of resources for short term and long term interventions in the region.”

Once the programme is approved and funding has been found a major input will be setting up a secretariat at SADC with full time project staff including a RVAC coordinator.

Discussion and questions

Q: Local NGOs don’t seem to be mentioned in connection with the VACs - it is not only international NGOs that can assist the VACs with delivery.

At the country level, the national VACs include local NGOs. National VACs are open to participation by any interested parties. The RVAC provides technical support to the national VACs to enable countries to do credible assessments. Regional agencies like the FAO and SC-UK are included in the RVAC because of their ability to provide technical support. International cooperating partners sit on the RVAC because they have information needs and this relieves them of the need to set up parallel systems to provide sound objective information.

At national level local organisations are not encouraged to participate as much as they could. More local participation would broaden information. International partners seem to be dominating rather than building capacity and transferring technical information. The situation varies from country to country. The government typically chairs national VACs and local participation varies depending on the agencies involved. VACs target local government participation rather than NGO participation and there is a question of how local NGOs can be more involved and how more capacity building can take place. This depends on the level of engagements with a broad range of stakeholders and how a VAC portrays itself and connects with local NGOs. The ideal is for all NGOs that have anything to do with food security monitoring to be part of the VAC.

Q: What role does the regional VAC play in ensuring that national vacs are inclusive? What have been the challenges and successes in carrying out assessments in the region?

The RVAC does not really have a role to play in ensuring inclusiveness apart from saying that the national VACs should be inclusive. National VACs have terms of reference that say where the RVAC should intervene and it will only get involved in the issue in response to a request. At present many of the VACs are ad hoc groups, many do not have their own bank accounts and rely on partner NGOs for support.

The challenges are mostly around institutionalisation and methodological issues. Many NGOs in Zambia would prefer to work as implementing agents for international NGOs. Standing on their own as local NGOs is a strong challenge for them. Decentralisation is another challenge. We need to build the capacity at district level to conduct assessments.

Presentation 6: Critical reflections on the workshop

Greg Ramm (SC-UK)

At the outset we need greater clarity on terminology. We use the term food security in many different ways: to refer to crop production, household income, subsistence production, urban food prices while we confuse food security and food availability. We are also using the concept of monitoring in relation to many different things such as nutrition, crop production and livelihoods.

We also need to ask if the information generated from the monitoring processes is getting to the right people. We talk about generating data but not so much about using the data that is there. Putting policy into practise involves politics and civil society groups can't just leave food security to technicians. They need to talk about the politics of food and food security. A VAC analysis can tell us how many hungry people there are in a community but the question of why they are hungry still remains. Is there too much commercial production – or not enough? As food security groups we need to talk about these issues and put the politics back into food security. Good information is useful but we need to talk about what it means. Budget monitoring raises interesting possibilities. What kinds of monitoring do we need?

We need to look at the challenges of governance and information in different countries, not just in Zimbabwe. We need to talk about civil society's role in holding government accountable for putting good information to good use. We only got to talk about the politics of land at the end. The Zimbabwe presentation talked about community control of resources. Do we need more of this or do we need more private ownership of land?

Finally we have not talked about what civil society means. The term has been used to the point of misuse. What is the role of civil society? Whom does it represent? What is basis of our legitimacy? Do we lose our ability to critique when we become implementers?

We should talk about how we use the research, not just about how it is produced. Why aren't we using the data more to debate policy and implementation? How are we engaging with civil society to use the data? Civil society always talks about power, policy and politics and food security is about power. Power is about organised money, or organised people, but power can also come from good ideas and evidence. We need to talk more about the policy and the power involved in it. Alliances will differ in different situations but we need to debate and argue these issues more.

Take the issue of food security: the Malawi presentation emphasised the link between food security and nutrition. We need to look at whether we can just look at food security without considering nutrition. At the household level we need to look at how food is being used to see who is benefiting. We also need to bring in vulnerability and not just look at food security. Socio-economic conditions affect food security and we need to look at the question of social and economic rights. We need to draw links to issues like access to health care and education, and their impact on food security.

There is a targeting challenge in countries where you have so many poor people. There are pressures from communities that want to ensure that everyone is included. We face a problem with targeting to ensure maximum impact when there is no proper definition of vulnerable groups. SC-UK produced a publication last year on targeting food aid which raised many issues. If we can't distinguish the most vulnerable, or if targeting raises people above the mean level, then you need to ensure that others also get food. Using HIV to target is not the right way to go. HIV affected households have their issues but it is not the only thing that creates vulnerability.

If you want to target children that can't get to school because they have lost parents you should use economic criteria. It may be due to HIV but poverty also has other causes.

The food crisis was initially identified as the cause of vulnerability but then people saw that there were other issues leading to food vulnerability. We need information that gives a holistic picture before saying something is the cause of the problem. There has been a shift from food production to production for export. We need to look at ways to attract investment back into food production.

Targeting should try to use an approach that provides a range of interventions so that everyone gets something. We have to find innovative ways to do this but it is necessary to avoid the danger of raising the poorest above the level of those who are not as poor. We also need to consider the issue of dependency where people become too used to being given things.

Getting funding for an integrated approach is difficult. Donors tell us that we can't be all things to all people.

Who will monitor civil society? In Zambia civil society is monitoring government but there is no mechanism for tracking civil society. Transparency needs to work both ways. What is the mandate for monitoring? Do we do it on behalf of the community, the funders, international NGOs?

Who are we working for as individual organisations? Civil society is difficult to define. We need to see something like a critical mass of civil society consortiums supported by funding consortiums working on the perceived needs of communities themselves. We need to know what exists in the region and how we can come together.

We need to do something drastic in the region about those caring for people with HIV. The caregivers are increasingly younger and older.

Civil society came from organisations based where people live. Now this has changed and funders are increasingly driving programmes. To know who you are do you listen to the people or do you get your information from the newspapers. My concern is when funders start telling organisations what they should do. Funders will support a conference on HIV and AIDs but not one on food security.

We will not be doing justice to the question of food security if we do not deal with the poverty debate. We also need to touch on issues of international politics. For example in Zambia people are planting flowers for export while others cannot plant because they can't compete with subsidies in the developed countries. Do international interventions talk to our problems? If they launch a poverty reduction programme how does it address our situation?

Civil society organisations do their work on behalf of civil society. To be sustainable we need to empower civil society itself so that people can represent themselves. Wouldn't that put us out of business? Is it our aim to be in business or to be effective? If we are out of business then we have done good work.

We choose one intervention and think it can solve all the problems at community level – we need to look at how communities get their food. Only a few take up the inputs we offer, not everyone in the rural areas is a farmer. There are fishermen and traders, we need to really look at the community and come up with a range of solutions – one solution does not fit all.

Civil society organisations each have their own goals and objectives. Sometimes we are responding to what is written in proposals rather than what is on the ground. Indicators do not address the issues at ground level. There is a sense of emptiness in the process. It is about collecting data and expecting someone else to respond. We don't seem to go back to the community with the results and look at what can be done. If we can take the information back to the community they will organise themselves to demand what they need. When they are organised they will go to government and develop capacity in the community to address their own needs.

People talk about the community. We were distributing seed but people said. "Give us food because we don't have rain." If we lack a feedback mechanism to the community we are likely to have the wrong response.

When we say "what does civil society think about this or that" we have to understand that civil society is diverse and we need a dialogue.

We can agree that there is benefit in talking about these issues from a regional perspective. Speaking together about them can harness the power to create change and build on the evidence of what has been done. If we can harness this energy we can contribute to change.