

Foreword

Southern Africa is a region that is particularly susceptible to climate variability and drought. It is being threatened increasingly by desertification processes, the degradation of land and water resources and the loss of biological diversity. In this environment, rainfed farming is a high-risk enterprise but also a way of life. People are committed to making the best of the scarce resources at their disposal.

Agricultural productivity is low and the production environments are normally characterized by soil moisture stress and poor soil fertility. There are large yield gaps between the average farmer and the best farmer, and returns to land, labour and capital are low. Droughts tend to reduce production below the already marginal levels, so that subsistence farming itself is threatened. These conditions occur where the local economy is least diversified and where virtually everyone depends either directly or indirectly on agriculture.

In southern Africa, more frequent exposure to drought events causes agricultural production to be out of equilibrium with the seasonal conditions, representing an inability on the part of most smallholders to adjust land use to climate variability. Thus, managing for drought is about managing for the risks associated with agriculture, and managing for climate variability must become the norm rather than the exception. Farmers must either increase agricultural productivity or develop alternative sources of income if their livelihoods are to be sustained.

Acceptance of this principle implies the need to better understand the underlying environmental, economic and social causes of drought impacts, and to identify mitigating actions that will address these underlying causes of vulnerability to future droughts.

The situation analysis presented in this report aims to provide readers with an understanding of the people and their environment in the Limpopo River Basin in southern Africa, covering parts of the four countries of Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. It examines the biophysical, socio-economic and institutional characteristics of the basin and captures details of past programmes and practices. It concludes with a section on lessons learned and proposes options and strategies for sustainable development, with a focus on drought impact mitigation.

Acknowledgements

The idea of incorporating drought mitigation into the regular work of FAO was first put forward in 1997 by a small group of FAO technical officers at the Subregional Office for Southern and East Africa (SAFR), in Zimbabwe. The group was later expanded to include all technical officers belonging to the multidisciplinary team, led by Owen Hughes.

This team hypothesized and believed that longer-term interventions were needed in order to overcome the underlying environmental, economic and social causes of drought impacts on peoples' livelihoods and that this principle should guide the work of FAO in this area.

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