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Mitigating the Food Crisis in Southern Africa: From Relief to Development

More than 10 million people in southern Africa—Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—are currently threatened with famine, with the crisis being particularly severe in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The immediate causes of the food shortage, namely of maize, the region's staple crop, are drought, flooding, and low levels of planting. However, what has made these countries so vulnerable to famine is chronic poverty, inadequate development policies and, in some cases, poor governance. Shocks such as drought bring collapse only to systems that are already weakened by these factors. The key to preventing food shortages and possibly famine, therefore, is effective and appropriate food security policies and responsible governance.

Policies for mitigating the effects of a critical food shortage or famine lie on a spectrum ranging from immediate relief to recovery to initiating development. Preventing future famines requires long-term development policies. In addressing the crisis, policymakers should design measures that not only provide relief, but which also lay the foundations for development. Interventions must be combined and sequenced with each other, depending on a country's context, to gen-

erate the greatest possible short- and long-term benefits. Described here are policy approaches, that IFPRI research in Africa has shown to be effective in mitigating severe food shortages and enabling development.

Immediate relief: getting food to the hungry

When a famine is already underway, governments and aid agencies must work to prevent or minimize the mortality, dislocation, and destitution it produces. If grain reserves exist, their release can provide the fastest relief by maintaining affordable food prices. But if such reserves do not exist, food aid distribution will be the only option. Relief must go to the most severely affected regions, even if they are difficult to reach.

Food should be distributed to people where they live and the formation of camps should be avoided as much as possible. Hunger-induced weakness may prevent people from traveling to food aid sites. In addition, relocation to camps undermines household stability, thus also impeding future development. Furthermore, the poor sanitation and overcrowding in camps help to spread dangerous diseases, such as cholera. Finally, weak camp management can

leave the neediest unassisted and expose the vulnerable to exploitation from more powerful residents. The most affected areas of the countries should be targeted first since food shortages are more severe in them owing to local environmental calamity, remoteness or other factors. In Lesotho, for example, poverty and malnutrition are particularly pronounced in mountainous and difficult to reach areas. In Mozambique, food shortages are occurring in the south and central regions. A mitigation strategy can be more effective in terms of cost and of achieving its aims if it targets food aid to the severely affected areas and uses other programs to address shortages elsewhere. Criteria for ranking the severity of hunger by district might include crop production records, emigration numbers, and anthropometric measures of nutritional status, and reported mortality rates.

Within areas, assistance should be aimed at the neediest households. Within targeted and non-targeted areas, households differ in size, wealth, composition, and coping capacity. Food must be distributed to households according to

these characteristics. Otherwise, large families, households headed by a female or an elderly person and those that have no additional coping mechanisms will suffer. Measures must also be taken to prevent discrimination by ethnicity, political affiliation and other characteristics. Households discriminated against in normal times are frequently poorer to begin with. Governments and aid organizations must therefore use standardized, formal and transparent rules for distribution and enforce them to ensure that the most disadvantaged households receive the aid they need.

During the relief phase and the subsequent recovery phase, governments need to increase or maintain public and clinical health services. Most of the deaths that occur during a famine are in fact due to disease not starvation. Undernutrition makes people more susceptible to disease, and existing health services are often unable to take on an added burden during a crisis. Some of the services that are particularly important are infant care and nutrition, sanitation and those for people with AIDS.

In sum, immediate relief interventions should be designed to save lives and prevent instability as rapidly as possible, so that further measures, for true recovery and development, can be implemented.

Recovery: assessment, labor-intensive employment programs, and public-private partnerships

Once the crisis phase is over, an assessment of the vulnerability of each area in the country could be done. The results of such an exercise could help determine what kinds of measures are needed. Some household-level indicators that might be useful are: food intake, available food sources, coping capacity, link to markets and asset holdings.

A program that can be highly effective for recovery and in areas where the food shortage is not acute is of labor-intensive public works projects for the poor. These programs offer short-term income to the poor and serve as risk insurance. A public works program in operation in Zimbabwe in the 1980s has in fact been regarded as a factor that prevented a famine in

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1991. Where such schemes already exist, they should be expanded. These schemes also create assets by developing or improving public goods important for future food security, such as infrastructure and the natural resource base. However, if the capacity for such programs is not present, food and other schemes may be preferable. Governments could also encourage the commercial agriculture sector through incentives to implement employment schemes for the rural poor. Tobacco estates in Malawi and commercial farms in Zambia could temporarily employ rural people.

During recovery, when food is still expensive, payment in both public works programs and private farm schemes could be in the form of food. This would also work well in areas with poor infrastructure or far from markets. Cash wages are most appropriate in urban areas where food is available but incomes have declined and in rural areas where food markets function well.

As with food aid distribution, public works programs should employ standardized and formal criteria to target those suffering most. These programs can also reach more poor than nonpoor people if wages are set relatively low or the food supplied is rationed. To ensure that the benefits of projects are distributed across poor households, administrators could set minimum quotas for female participants or limit the number of participants per household.

However, food aid distribution will need to be continued for destitute households. Many households, especially those headed by females or the elderly, or in which working-age adults have AIDS, do not have an adult who can go out to work in public works schemes. A lack of food distribution or other programs for these households, especially for their children, would lead to a significant decline in human and social capital for future

development. Furthermore, in areas prone to food shortages, populations may require food aid for several years.

Along with government measures, greater private-sector participation in distributing food could help alleviate local food shortages and lower prices. Although poor infrastructure may prevent the inter-regional transportation of food, availability within regions could be improved. For example, government food marketing systems, such as Malawi's ADMARC, could have private sellers supply government-purchased grain in areas that it does not serve. Such public-private partnerships could also create the basis for preventing famine in the future. While the recovery measures discussed above are intermediary steps in famine mitigation, they can, if planned correctly, make critical contributions for achieving food security in the long-term.

Initiating development: technology, policy and institutions

On the spectrum of interventions, what are required after some stability has been achieved are short-term agricultural development measures. Southern Africa's vulnerability to famine stems largely from low agricultural productivity, mainly owing to soil degradation and low fertilizer application. Providing small farmers with basic agricultural technologies, such as fertilizer, seeds, or equipment, for the next season could help increase agricultural production in the near and long-term future, as these farmers generally lack these inputs. Free "starter packs" of fertilizer, seeds and legumes could be distributed to small farmers as Malawi did in 1998-99.

The agricultural technology inputs must be introduced at the right time in the year and appropriate for the agroecological conditions, farming practices, and the household's knowledge, skills and

labor available. New inputs or assets should be easy to use, require little training and need little maintenance. Technology transfer schemes should also have flexibility to deal with temporary obstacles, such as unfavorable weather.

The governments also need to implement macroeconomic policies that provide small farmers with the incentive to produce staple food crops. If small farmers believe that commercial crops will bring higher incomes and involve less risk, they may not plant staple crops. If this scenario occurs, food shortages will continue into the following year. These policies, however, should not place an undue burden on the public sector.

Finally, there is a need to develop institutions to improve farmers' access to and use of new inputs and assets. Strengthening private markets for agricultural inputs would help to meet the demand of small farmers, reduce the responsibility of the public sector, and create the basis for long-term development. Affordable credit programs for the rural poor should also be established where informal and inexpensive borrowing does not exist. Credit would allow households to purchase inputs, buy emergency food, or replenish assets such as livestock, which are currently being sold at high levels in the region to buy food. Finally, agricultural extension systems oriented to small farmers must be improved to ensure that technology and credit inputs are used productively.

Broader policy needs for crisis mitigation and long-term food security

In planning a mitigation strategy, no single type of intervention can be expected to achieve relief, recovery or the initiation of development. Planners must formulate the right combination and sequence of policies and programs, within the con-

text of their countries, to provide relief in the short-term and food security in the long-term. It helps to understand that generally, the more immediate the effect of an intervention is, the smaller the magnitude of its effect and the less sustainable the intervention is over time.

To mitigate the crisis in southern Africa and prevent famine in the future, two major steps need to be taken:

- Governments, NGOs, the private sector, and donors must recognize and draw upon each other's capacities and strengthen their cooperation. Countries also need to improve coordination among their own different public agencies.

- Governments need to implement policies for long-term food security. Famines signal the failure of institutions, organizations, and policies. Without long-term policies a country will remain vulnerable to famines. Such policies must encourage agricultural growth among small farmers, infrastructure development, environmental rehabilitation, and more effective markets. Well-developed famine early warning systems and emergency mitigation measures must also be in place. Along with these policies, countries must develop the institutional capacity to design and implement the appropriate policies and programs.

Sound governance is equally essential. Without transparency, accountability and participation in governance, investments in relief and development will have little impact. At this time, the governments of the region will have to place the well-being of their respective people as their overriding goal.

*This article is based on a Policy Brief, "**Fighting Famine in Southern Africa: Steps Out of the Crisis**," prepared by the International Food Policy Research Institute for policymakers in southern Africa. The brief can be obtained at <<http://www.ifpri.org/pubs/ib/ib8.pdf>>. For additional information, please contact Suresh Babu (s.babu@cgiar.org) Ashwin Bhouraskar (a.bhouraskar@cgiar.org) of the Communications Division, IFPRI.*