



Famine in Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

The current production shortfalls in agriculture in Southern Africa are primarily due to persistent low levels of rainfall over the last two years. In some countries of the region the lack of disaster preparedness in terms of food security has led to a situation where they have to rely heavily on the importation of food and food aid in order to feed the population. Yet the sheer catastrophic proportions the famine has taken in Zimbabwe where half of the 14 Mio population is depending on food aid for survival in the coming months is due to policy factors directly linked to the opportunistic and economically irresponsible land reform programme of the government.

The way this forcefully imposed agrarian reform has affected agriculture's economic performance can best be illustrated by the drop in output in tobacco production. Whereas in 2000 Zimbabwe produced well above 200 million kilograms of tobacco, the estimate for 2002 is around 80 million kilograms. Tobacco being a drought resistant plant these figures dispel all possible inference about the relative importance of natural and man-made factors in this disaster.

The fact that this year's rains are still far below average and that during this planting season only 60% of the surface that was under exploitation last year is being farmed should make all alarm bells ring. On a recent visit to Zimbabwe James Morris, UN special envoy for Humanitarian Needs in Southern Africa, commented to members of the diplomatic corps on the need of even more food aid once the meagre crop of this year will have been consumed. In light of the persistent accusations about political manipulation of the food aid distribution by the ruling ZANU-PF party future provision of assistance will become even more of a political issue in Europe.

The food situation in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has moved from a traditional net food exporter only in the past 5 years to the present situation where the bulk of the nation's food needs are being imported to avoid widespread hunger and starvation. Traditionally the bulk of Zimbabwe's basic foods – maize, millets and sorghum, have been produced by communal farmers¹ and the small-scale commercial farmers². However these two categories of farmers are also very vulnerable to variations in rainfall and can be adversely affected by too little as well as too much rain.

As at March 2002 the large scale commercial farmers (LSCF) numbering some 6 000 and 17 000 small scale commercial farmers, provided about 40 per cent of total basic food needs.³ The former's contribution in adverse weather conditions has been critical as they had the capacity to irrigate large areas and were better equipped to deal with different conditions. Yields are roughly 5 to 10 times the yields achieved in the communal farmers. Commercial farmers, especially the LSCF still dominate certain sectors – soybean and wheat being the most notable – mainly because these crops require a certain level of sophisticated management and resources not generally available in the other sectors.

Since 1999 the commercial farming sector has been increasingly disrupted by illegal farm occupations and other forms of violence directed at the farmers and their workers. As a consequence output declined sharply during 2002 and is expected

¹ Communal farmers are traditional peasant farmers who reside in and till lands owned by the community under the guardianship of the state. These areas were previously called tribal trust lands under the colonial period.

² In 1999 the small-scale commercial farmers and communal farmers contributed 60 percent of overall agricultural output (See Africa South of the Sahara, 2002, 31st Edition, England, Europa Publications, 2002.

³ The estimates of food production and requirements are based on a March 2002 report by the Department of Agriculture at the University of Zimbabwe.

to fall even more during 2003. At the same time drought has resulted in a serious crop failure – virtually 100 per cent in the southern and western parts of the country and reducing the yield potential of northern area crops by 50 per cent or more. Only the very reduced soybean crop – 85 per cent under irrigation, was estimated to yield something close to original estimates.

Of the estimated 14,4 million people in need of food aid in the SADC region Zimbabwe has the highest population of about 6,7 million people⁴. The majority of the Zimbabwean people are facing starvation with absolutely no staple food in Grain Marketing Board's (GMB) grain silos, and no food available in the markets unlike in other countries in the region, e.g. Malawi and Zambia, thus plunging the country and its people into a deep crisis of hunger. The response of the authorities was to reintroduce the GMB monopoly over purchase and distribution of maize and wheat and more price controls over virtual all food products. The price controls are themselves increasingly meaningless since the authorities are using the official prices for non-existent commodities like maize meal and cooking oil to merely cushion inflation rate.

Zimbabwe stands out, as having the greatest number of people in need of food assistance in the region, representing 49% of the country's population (Table 1). Because of the severity of the hunger situation Zimbabwe requires almost half of the overall metric tonnage of the Southern African region, followed by Malawi and Zambia with 30% and 24% of their populations requiring food assistance respectively. Though the figures presented in Table 1 describe the situation up to March 2003, predictions are that the situation will actually be worse for the rest of 2003 to around March 2004.

⁴SADC Regional Emergency Food Security Assessment Report (cited in Southern African Humanitarian Crisis Response, July 2002- March 2003, Implementation Strategy update as of 5 December 2002, WFP, Southern Africa Regional Bureau.

Table 1: Populations in Need of Emergency Food Aid and Cereal Requirements:
September 2002 through to March 31 2003

Country	Max No. of People in Need	Max % of Total Population	Cumulative Re-quirements (MT)
Zimbabwe	6,700,000	49%	486,000
Malawi	3,300,000	29%	237,000
Zambia	2,900,000	26%	224,000
Lesotho	650,000	30%	36,000
Swaziland	270,000	24%	20,000
Mozambique	590,000	3%	48,000
Region	14,400,000	25%	1,051,000

Source: SADC Regional Emergency Food Security Assessment Report (cited in *Southern African Humanitarian Crisis Response, July 2002- March 2003, Implementation Strategy update as of 5 December 2002, WFP, Southern Africa Regional Bureau*).

The food shortages have caused a lot of distress among many Zimbabweans not only through the unavailability of basic food stuffs but also through the exorbitant prices consumers are facing on the black market where the food is at least available. Some of the hunger effects are being felt through increased poverty, malnutrition, increased criminal activities (theft), prostitution, and increased external migration.

In November 2002 it was reported that Zimbabwe's food security situation had worsened across the country. Some district hospitals had noted a marked increase in the number of malnutrition and pellagra cases because of shortages of maize, bread, milk and sugar. The World Food Programme (WFP) noted that a 20kg pack of maize sells for Z\$3000 on the black market with the same going for half that rate in Masvingo Province⁵. A 20kg pack sells for Z\$3500 at Bulawayo's Renkini and Entumbane (bus terminuses) where supplies are normally available in the black market in spite total shortages in shops going on for some weeks.

The government is adamant against the importation of cereals by the private

⁵ Zimbabwe Humanitarian Situation Report, 13 November 2002, United Nations.

sector, a factor that could have a positive impact on commercial food supplies and reduce the amount currently spent by the poor on the parallel market. Anecdotal evidence, though scanty shows that the elite and well connected individuals and families benefit more from subsidised food than the poor and the needy.

With further declines in export revenues, crucial imports such as fuel will become even scarcer. Inflation and other macro-economic indicators are expected to deteriorate further and this will have devastating implications for the welfare of ordinary citizens through reduced employment, lower incomes and further declines in the provision of social services. Poverty⁶, which according to official figures already afflicts 75% of the population, will continue to worsen both in extent and depth.

Many Causes of Hunger

Unlike in the other hunger-stricken countries of Southern Africa, the debate on food-aid in Zimbabwe is quite com-

⁶ **In this case poverty is defined in local terms** as people living below the poverty datum line (PDL). About 80% of the Zimbabwean population is now living below the PDL of per capita income of US\$15.

plex as it is not just a result of drought alone. The material causes of hunger can be traced to the haphazard ownership changes in land patterns which has led to wanton disruptions to commercial farming in the country, the absence of effective food security, poor economic performance, severe shortages of foreign exchange and political governance issues. The immediate impact of the "fast track" land distribution process has been a reduction in production of key commodities by the agricultural sector with adverse multiplier effects throughout the economy and, given the abrogation of the rule of law and a sharp reduction in confidence in Zimbabwe.

Consequently Zimbabwe's food crisis should be understood in the context of the country's economic activity disruptions as a result of state-sponsored farm invasions and lawlessness; and brushing aside decisions of the law courts by the sitting government. This clearly undermined business confidence, affected output and decimated investment, almost in a single blow undermined the country's export sector, resulting in accumulation of arrears in international payments, increases in the budget deficit from about 5.5% in 1998 to 24% of GDP by 2000⁷ and acute fuel shortages.

Specifically, causes of Zimbabwe's hunger can be enumerated as follows:

1. **Drought:** insufficient rains received for the 2001/2002 season resulted in poor food crop yields with some areas registering no yields at all hence the food crisis. There have not been any significant showers in the current season 2002/2003 raising fears of yet another drought.

2. **Land policies:** the controversial government land reform programme has also contributed to the current hunger

⁷ Government of Zimbabwe, *Budget Statement 2002*.

crisis as it can be attributed to:

- reduced food production by at least 60% in 2002;
- land invasions which led to the appropriation of more than 90% of the country's white-owned commercial farms for the resettlement of landless blacks, many of whom do not have the resources to farm on a large-scale;
- reduction in the beef herd by 60%, leading to meat shortages;⁸ and
- shrunken dairy herds have seen Zimbabwe producing only a third of its milk requirements.

3. **Shortage of foreign currency:** yet another factor causing the hunger crisis as this is hampering government efforts of importing food. Agricultural exports in good years with adequate rainfall contribute around 45% of the country's foreign exchange earnings, but due to the 2001-2002 drought not much was realised. Other crucial imports such as fuel, essential drugs, spare parts and raw materials have not been spared from the foreign currency problem.

4. **GMB monopoly:** The government created monopoly on the importation and handling of grain is also contributing to the starvation problem in Zimbabwe. Given the prevailing economic conditions it is practically impossible for the GMB, the sole importer grain to acquire sufficient food stocks to feed the 6 million starving population

5. **Price controls:** by the government have exacerbated the hunger plight, namely:

- The artificially low prices of grains have in part led to food shortages because it has become uneconomic to produce given inflationary costs of inputs in the face of price controls⁹.

⁸ It is estimated that it will take 8-10 years for the Zimbabwe beef-herd to reach its 2000 level when farm invasions started.

⁹ This has fuelled black market food sales as well as un-controlled packaging tactics by manufacturers in order to evade the price controls. For instance sugar is now being sold as 15kg and

- The manufacturers and food retail operators have increasingly ignored price controls, despite random visits by inspectors of the Ministry of Industry and International Trade. Manufacturers have also resorted to the production of substitutes of controlled products, which many consumers cannot afford hence further thwarting efforts to make basic food-stuffs affordable.

6. **HIV/AIDS:** is recognised as a major factor that increases vulnerability to the current hunger crisis, and an underlying factor, which reduces household and national resilience to the hunger shocks. At the same level with Mozambique and Swaziland, Zimbabwe's HIV/AIDS infection rate is over 34% of the adult population. This leads to loss of productivity, lost income and increased time pressures on caregivers, in addition to changing the family structures (with increased numbers of the elderly and child-headed households as well as exceeding community care capacities in the country.

- There is very likely to be varying levels of overlap between households experiencing serious food shortages and households affected by HIV/AIDS. In a high food insecurity situation such as in Zimbabwe delays in the provision of food could result in sharply increasing levels of malnutrition.

- Zimbabwe's Vulnerability Assessment Committee (VAC) has established that the level of acute food insecurity has several causes and consequences, including HIV/AIDS, lack of agricultural inputs and nutrition¹⁰.

7. **Macroeconomic fundamentals:** Increased level of unemployment has further worsened the hunger situation in

25kg packs whose prices are not controlled while the 10kg and 2kg controlled packs have been scarcely available on the market.

¹⁰ Zimbabwe Humanitarian Situation Report, 29 October 2002, United Nations, The UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator's Bi-Monthly Report.

the country. Owing to severe macro-economic distress some companies have closed down operations whilst others are downsizing their workforce. Price controls, hyperinflation as well the overvalued exchange rate pegged at Z\$55 to the US\$ since 2000 with the parallel market rate quoted at Z\$1500¹¹ are stifling both foreign and domestic investment. Annual inflation rate rapidly rose from 57% at the beginning of 2001, doubling up to 116.7% by January 2002 and reaching an all time high of 198.9 by December 2002¹² (compared to an average of 14% of her SADC trading partners).¹³ Since these inflation figures are based on official control prices, which are largely non-existent in the market, the actual inflation is estimated at double the official figures, i.e. around 400% and this being led by the food basket.

8. Lack of **disaster preparedness** for eventualities such as drought by the government is also a contributing factor to the hunger problem.

9. **Food distribution.** The politicisation of food distribution has further worsened the hunger problem since not all the intended recipients of the food aid are benefiting from it. There have been numerous complaints from the general public of being forced to produce a ZANU-PF membership card in order to obtain maize. Some ZANU-PF cadres have been actually lobbying for war veterans involvement in the distribution of

¹¹ October 2002- January 2003

¹² **Table 1 Zimbabwe's Year-on-year inflation (%) June 2002-December 2002**

	Jun '02	Oct '02	Nov '02	Dec. '02
Food	102.0	180.0	234.6	220.1
Core	121.8	125.9	145.9	188.3
All	114.5	144.2	175.5	198.9

Source: CSO

¹³ Botswana (11.1%), Malawi (16.7%), South Africa (12.7%), Tanzania (4.4%) and Zambia (25.3%).

food which will see more deserving hungry people linked to the opposition suffering. Only recently the ZANU-PF militias (the so called Youth Brigade or notoriously known as “Green Bombers”) beat up the Zimbabwe Republic Police who were overseeing the orderly distribution of food. The militias are used by ZANU-PF to deny food to ordinary people who do not belong to the ruling party.

Production Capacity and Food Needs

As shown in Table 2 total production of the LSCF showed an increase in nominal terms, but growth in real terms declined from 20.9% in 1998 to -3.30% and -12,23% in 2001 and 2002 respectively. Though this is only reflective of the LSCF sector, it has traditionally been the most important sector in the deliveries of maize, wheat, soybeans, dairy and beef products to the market.

In normal years and good rain seasons, Zimbabwe produces 2 million tonnes of maize and about 300,000 tonnes of wheat. Of the 2 million tonnes of maize production, communal farmers contribute about 1 million tonnes, but this is mainly for their own consumption, while the LSCF keep about 30% for own livestock needs and sell the rest to the national food markets. In the 2001/2002 season only 500,000 tonnes of maize and 140,000 tonnes of wheat were delivered to the market. The current requirement is an abnormal 2,5 million tonnes of maize (against the normal requirement of 1,5 million tonnes in normal seasons when there are carry-over stocks).

Table 3 gives a detailed analysis of quantities produced by the LSCF for the period 1992 to 2002¹⁴. It shows that

¹⁴ NB 2002 figures are CFU official estimates

maize production by this sector reached its peak in 1994 a post drought period but was at the lowest level in 1992. Wheat production reached its peak in 2001 despite the El Niño effect of 2000 from its lowest level in 1992. Sugar production was quite high in 1998 and 1999 compared to other years and the declines have not been that significant in subsequent years.¹⁵ It is also important to note that though the 1992 drought had drastic effects on crop production unlike the 2002 one, the consequences of the former were less severe than the latter. This is because the 2002 drought was accompanied by massive disruptions of farming activities as the government wanted to complete its chaotic fast track resettlement exercise. Also in 1992 the importation of grains and distribution system was excellent with no food politics involved.

Data from the Central Statistical Office (CSO) indicates that maize and soybean deliveries to GMB and other traders declined drastically by 70.4% and 94.1% respectively for the first nine months of 2001 compared to the same period in 2000. The same pattern was also recorded in cotton and flue cured tobacco registering declines of 14.8% and 1.4% respectively over the same period¹⁶. This shows a general reduction in agricultural production from both commercial farmers and communal farmers. These reductions partially show the extent of the food gap as well as the de-

¹⁵ Shortages of sugar in the domestic market despite good harvest are caused by smuggling of sugar to neighbouring countries due to Zimbabwe’s grossly misaligned exchange rate. Sugar fetches large premiums in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia and traders even quote their prices in foreign currency terms and because of the combined effects controlled prices and exchange rate misalignment, it is profitable to sell sugar in these markets and subsequently starve the domestic market of the commodity.

¹⁶ Central Statistical Office (CSO) Stats-Flash, May 2002.

gree of the hunger crisis in the country.

But the reality of Zimbabwean farming landscape has changed in a dramatic fashion in the last two years. The initial objective of the “fast track” was to acquire 5 million hectares of land and re-settle up to 100,000 families before the start of the 2001/2002 agricultural season. However, out of an estimated 1,100,000 peasant households, this would still leave 1,000,000 families in the communal areas, the majority of whom live in poverty because they produce low value agricultural commodities through inefficient technologies, which result in low yields. The production situation does not appear to be addressed by the new farmers, as most of them have little or no capacity to produce marketable surplus.

The country now relies on food aid since it has no food in its reserves and no foreign currency to import sufficient food because poor exports performance since year 2000. The suspended balance of payments support by the IMF in 1999 also contributed to the foreign currency crisis the country is currently facing.

GMO Donations and Exports to the EU

Though the Zimbabwean government has accepted genetically modified (GM) food aid to help its starving population there are growing concerns on the long run effects this might have on the country's exports to the European Union (EU). The fear is that genetically modified organisms (GMO) will be introduced into the production of crop or used as fodder for livestock and thereby disqualify Zimbabwean beef and game products from the EU market¹⁷. The EU de-

¹⁷ As a precautionary measure the Zimbabwean government accepted GM food on the condition

bate on GMOs, is dominated by demand factors, such as food safety concerns. Europe's recent string of health scares due to food contaminants (e.g. mad cow disease and dioxin contamination) has only helped further heighten concerns over food safety.

In June 1999, the EU Council of Ministers decided to impose tougher, highly burdensome risk assessment requirements on all products that contain GMOs which include compulsory comprehensive labelling, thorough monitoring of products once they have been put on the market, and renewed approvals for all products after they have been on the market for 10 years. The practical effect of the regulations is that of a moratorium on the import of GMOs¹⁸. Since non-authorized GM crops cannot be placed on the EU market, in the absence of tolerance thresholds, any traces of such crops to be found in consignments, will mean no clearance of such imports into the EU. Given that the EU is one of the leading export market for Zimbabwe's agricultural produce this creates uncertainties on the future of agro-exports to the EU. Main producers and exporters of GM corn and soybeans like the US, are already feeling the consequences of the EU ban as it claims that it is costing U.S. corn farmers some US\$200 million annually in lost sales.

Under current EU legislation, genetically modified food can only be placed on the market after it has been scientifically evaluated in accordance with the latest scientific knowledge and found to be safe for human health and the environment. In cases where the scientific evi-

that all GM food received is processed before reaching the intended recipients to avoid any reproduction of such food in the country.

¹⁸ Lisa Oladotter Sandblom, “Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), a Transatlantic Trade Dispute” May 2000. Source (www.commercialdiplomacy.org.)

dence is insufficient, inconclusive, or uncertain, protective measures are adopted on the basis of the “precautionary principle,” which is found in Article 5.7 of the WTO Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures¹⁹.

Conclusions

The question of food security is probably the most urgent matter facing Zimbabwe today but yet the authorities in Zimbabwe appear to have taken a laissez-faire and business-as-usual attitude towards the prevailing and still looming crisis. The Government of Zimbabwe is yet to seriously redress fundamental macroeconomic factors at stake as well as review some of its policies hindering effective participations of other stakeholders in acquiring food for the nation.

Some of the suggestions to deal with the crisis and the way forwards are as follows:

1. Detailed acknowledgement of the extent of the food crisis, the reasons for it and the need for transparent food imports and foreign currency financing.
2. The GMB monopoly over the import and marketing of wheat and maize should be withdrawn completely and local price controls abandoned/modified.
3. Immediate stop of the use of the Zanu-PF’s private militia in controlling the distribution of food.
4. The private sector should be requested to take over the import of all basic food needs and to be responsible for processing, packaging, and retail distribution.
5. Donor assistance should be made available to the importers of basic foods for identified contracts and should be paid for at an agreed exchange rate, which reflects its current real market value.

6. In the event that the certain donors are prepared to supply food under some programmes, this should be managed with the private sector and the resulting products purchased in Zimbabwe dollars by the companies concerned at market prices.

7. The counterpart funds created by this exercise to be returned to the local accounts of the donor countries and possibly co-ordinated by the UNDP which could set up relief efforts in all affected communities using local NGO’s for this purpose.

Contact Person:

Hubert René Schillinger
Southern African Desk
Africa Department
Division for International
Cooperation
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Godesberger Allee 149
53170 Bonn
Phone: (0228) 883-582
E-Mail: hubert.schillinger@fes.de

¹⁹ Ibid