

INCREASING FOOD SECURITY IN AFRICA

1. Introduction

Food insecurity in Africa requires a multidimensional response that includes improved and appropriate technology, national and international political action, and the regulation of multinational companies. This paper will present a number of programming solutions to food insecurity in Africa that has interdependent roles for governments, NGOs and international donors. It utilises a rights based approach to policy/programming that gives governments specific responsibilities to enable people to claim their human rights. The paper focuses on broad policy based solutions that can be effectively transformed into specific programming responses.

2. Background

Africa is the only continent where overall food security and livelihoods are deteriorating. Over the last 15 years, the numbers of Africans living below the poverty line (\$1/day) has increased by 50% and it is estimated that one-third of the continent's population suffers from hunger. In the past five years alone, the number of underweight children in Africa has risen by about 12%.¹

A root cause of this entrenched poverty is the fact that millions of small-scale farmers- the majority of them women working farms smaller than one hectare- cannot grow enough food to sustain their families, their communities or their countries. The 2007 World Development Report estimates that 50% of rural households are in this position while one study puts the figure as being as high as 70%.²

The challenges confronting Africa's small-scale farmers - most of whom are women - start in the field and extend across the entire agricultural value chain. Most African farmers can neither access nor afford basic farm inputs. High quality seeds and organic fertilisers need to replenish depleted soils and simple water management systems that allow farmers to deal with erratic rains are largely beyond reach. Good roads are scarce and strong market, extension and finance systems are lacking. Small-scale farmers also need the support of government policies that promote sustainable agriculture and ensure access to markets.

Since the early 1960's Africa has gone from being a net food exporter to a net importer. Per capita food production has declined as the population growth rate of 3% per year has outstripped the 2% annual increase in food production. But, until recently, government and international support for agricultural development has declined.³

3. Future Solutions

Food security, according to the definition agreed at the 1996 Food summit, "exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food

¹ Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) website

² A.. Dorward, J Kydd, and C Poulton, "Beyond liberalisation: development coordination policies for African smallholder agriculture", IDS Bulletin 36(2), 2005.

³ Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) website

preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle". Achieving this situation as a right for all people requires attention to effective production of food and to the ability of all people to gain access to the food that is produced, at a cost they can afford. In Africa, both aspects – production and consumption – present major challenges for rural communities and women in particular. Our research has identified a number of policy and programming initiatives that will contribute to increased food security in Africa which include:

- Enshrining the right to food in law
- Empowering women farmers
- Providing universal social protection
- Building Agro-Ecological Food and Agriculture Systems
- Supporting women farmers and producers
- Climate change
- Ending targets and subsidies for biofuels
- Regulating agribusiness
- Regulating speculation in international commodities markets

This integrated package of policy and programming initiatives are being campaigned for at an international and national level by the ActionAid International network of which Austcare is a member. They can be broken down into three major priorities; the first relates to consumption: Only when there is social protection for all people, especially the poorest that will allow them to produce or purchase the food they need will universal food security be achieved. The other two areas concern the production of food. Small farmers need a range of measures to allow them to maximise their potential. This includes a range of policy measures at the level of government and within the international community that will facilitate rather than undermine the efforts of small farmers. Such measures form part of the third broad area, which addresses aspects of food production such as the use of sustainable methods. These three areas can be easily translated into three major programming initiatives that should be incorporated within any future AusAID strategy in Africa.

3.1. Provision of Universal Social Protection

The most immediate action towards enshrining the right to food in law is for all governments to establish universal social protection. Social protection can operate in several ways - by addressing the income and consumption needs of the poor and by enhancing their social and political status to give them the means of voicing their demands. These efforts can be undertaken either through government or through effective community level activities.

Creating effective food security requires a reversal of any policies that inhibit government or community efforts. These include policies that may be intended to assure food at affordable prices to urban communities but do so by discriminating against farmers, requiring them to sell their output at low prices. Such measures ultimately destroy incentives and reduce overall production. They also represent a form of subsidy for people with higher income levels.

Addressing the income and consumption needs of people who are poor requires a leadership role from this group. All too often there has been an assumption that food insecurity should be addressed by providing food handouts. Such programs, however, deny poor people the opportunity to make their own choices according to their priorities. Cash transfers are a more appropriate rights based tool and are less likely to undermine the markets for local food producers. The

assumption that the problem lies in food shortages, leads to imports, which can do more harm than good when the real problem is lack of the means to buy locally available food.

Food transfers may have a role in situations of humanitarian emergency. However, most situations of food insecurity reflect problems of chronic hunger rather than humanitarian emergencies. Cash transfers targeted at vulnerable groups of people such as children, older people and the disabled can generally be the most effective way of providing food security without distorting markets. Such transfers have been widely shown to improve food consumption and health outcomes, not just among the recipients but also for everyone in the household. Transfers reduce vulnerability by diversifying income, and can lead to long-term transformation of people's lives by providing households with a cushion against adversity (loss of a job, loss of income due to health problems, forestalling the sale of productive assets, etc.). In many situations, cash transfers are much better, and cheaper than food aid, particularly where the challenge is chronic hunger rather than a humanitarian emergency.

Lesotho offers an example of an effective transfer programme: a pension scheme. The scheme was selected since there is a large population of older people, many of whom are caring for AIDS orphans. An evaluation of a pension programme showed that among the recipients surveyed, an average of one third of their pension was spent on food. Sixty percent of this extra food went to other members of the household and that food improved in nutritious quality as well as in quantity. The scheme was affordable, at 1.4 percent GDP.⁴ In Africa, providing small but regular cash transfers to 40 million chronically poor households would cost as little as US \$3 billion per year, but would make enormous inroads to reduce hunger and poverty. It could also reduce the frequency and severity of food crises demanding emergency food aid and stimulate local economies.

Wherever possible, governments should provide free school meals which are a proven and relatively inexpensive way to protect the nutritional and educational status of a very vulnerable group: children, and particularly girls.⁵ When government is unable or unwilling to provide free school meals there is often a need for short term interventions from NGOs. According to the World Food Program, during a school-feeding program's first year, the average enrolment increased by 28 percent for girls and 22 percent for boys.

Accessible, efficient and effective health care is a vital element of transformative social protection programmes. Hunger makes people vulnerable to illness. Hunger also leads people to more risky behaviour and increases the likelihood of injury through dangerous work, or exposure to disease, for instance through prostitution. HIV infection is a particular concern. People with poor health are threatened more by chronic hunger because their earning ability is compromised. Cash transfers can enable people living in poverty to purchase food, medicine and to invest in their future so as to reduce dependency. If these transfers are linked to quality health care and universal access to HIV treatment, care and prevention, then a significant reduction in poverty levels will ensue. Any health care policy must focus on the needs and priorities of women, who carry a double burden as the main producers of food and the main caretakers of the sick.

⁴ D. Croome, Lesotho pensions Impact Project presentation, Lisbon, October 2006.

⁵ J. Bennett, 'Review of School Feeding Projects', London: Department for International Development, 2003.

Cash transfers can be abused by elites if poor people are unable to hold their leaders to account. The enhancement of the social and political status of poor people through people claiming their human rights provides an essential element of effective food security. Governments must strengthen their legislative frameworks to include a broader commitment to civil and political rights so that their citizens are able to negotiate for change in the systems and structures that cause hunger and to speak out against human rights abuses. A transformative social protection agenda will include ways to engage the public and to support community organizing supported by NGOs to develop local and national political voices.

3.2. Support Women Farmers

A commitment to human rights, food security and agro-ecological practice underlines the importance of redressing the discrimination faced by women. Women are the main producers of food in Africa yet they have less access to extension services, labour, credit and fertilizer than men. Women's access to and control over land, seeds, water, credit and extension services should be increased through redistribution and tenure reforms at the national level.

Women's access to and control over land and livelihoods must be increased through redistribution and reform programmes that end gender based discrimination and allow women to own and inherit land. Governments must ensure that women's rights to property and land, in particular inheritance rights, are protected in law. Proper redress must be available to women when these rights are violated. Laws that guarantee equal access to and control of land and other productive assets for women must be introduced and upheld in national legislation.

Governments must ensure that women benefit from employment schemes, minimum wage laws and agricultural credit and extension services. Women must also be given full rights to join and form cooperatives, water user groups, farmers' associations, and other organizations that seek empowerment for their members.

Governments must increase and improve women's access to and control over agricultural technologies and inputs. Governments must increase their own investment in agriculture, small-scale farming and rural development. A large part of this investment must specifically target women producers to enhance women's access to and control over productive assets, including land, seeds, water, credit and extension, which are key to enhancing productivity

Women must be consulted and approve any land sales involving family or communal lands. Women's sources of livelihood should not be destroyed, and women must be consulted on alternative use of natural resources in their communities, as they are the people who bear the brunt of destruction of these natural resources.

As a short term solution to the current food crisis donors and governments must jointly finance distribution of free or subsidised inputs to small farmers, especially women to enable them to plant for the next season – fertiliser prices have also skyrocketed in the past year due to oil, and farmers are caught in a cost-price squeeze.

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) enshrines women's right to access land. Discriminatory cultural, religious and traditional laws on succession and inheritance must be removed from national legal frameworks and women's access to and control over land and livelihoods must be increased and improved. NGO's have a key role to play in assisting women to organise at the community level to focus on their struggle for their human rights.

3.3. Build Agro-Ecological Food and Agriculture Systems

Conventional agriculture as the rich world has known and practiced for the past 100 years needs radical reform. The earth's climate and resource base can no longer support the status quo, while realization of the universal human right to food demands change. Priorities include much better irrigation and water management, improved rural roads and storage facilities, support for community-owned and public seed banks, and public research and extension focused on sustainable, low-input farming methods.

To overcome the current food crisis and to reduce hunger governments must increase investment in small-scale sustainable agriculture and rural development to boost production and incomes and to ensure national self-sufficiency in staple foods. Priorities include appropriate irrigation and water management, improving rural roads, seed banks, and public research and extension to scale up sustainable, low-input farming methods.

Political and civil rights must underpin investment in smallholder agriculture. Local farming communities should gain greater power and control in decision-making that affects the production, processing and marketing of their crops and livestock. Farmers and farm workers, men and women, must also be invited to participate with other actors in local and national public policy making and implementation.

The role of the state in supporting agriculture and food security needs to be supported and recognised by donor countries. Governments have a vital role to play in supporting agriculture and food security. The responsibility of the state in upholding the right to food, in promoting sustainable development and in meeting international obligations towards women's rights, environmental protection and careful use of finite natural resources must be the core of any programme. Governments and donors should reject any approach that relies on genetically modified high-yield herbicide-resistant seeds; inorganic fertilizers and pesticides; and, monoculture growing systems. Instead, a significant investment to support low-input, organic farming methods is needed, including practical research and learning from existing practitioners of agro-ecology.

Governments should give highest priority to supporting the poorest and most vulnerable farmers to grow more food by providing credit, investing in infrastructure (for production, harvest, storage and distribution) and supporting consumers to be able to afford decent prices for agricultural products. Medium to long term programmes to strengthen smallholder farmers using the Right to Food framework and promoting sustainable agricultural markets must be developed.

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