

Lessons from the 1992 Drought in Zimbabwe: The Quest for Alternative Food Policies*

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INTRODUCTION

The 1992 drought in Zimbabwe was recorded as the worst drought in living memory. It was experienced throughout Southern Africa. Zimbabwe had come to be known as the 'bread basket of Southern Africa' as a result of surplus harvests in most years since 1980. The drought transformed Zimbabwe from a food surplus position to a net food importer. The challenge to us and to future generations of this country, is to avoid a similar crisis by adopting alternative strategies to ensure food security within the limitations of natural hazards such as droughts, floods, pests, etc.

1. THE 1992 DROUGHT

National food security was threatened by the 1992 drought that resulted in virtually no harvests throughout the country. The Grain Marketing Board (GMB) domestic maize intake during the year was about 13 000 tonnes - just enough for two days consumption. Local maize intake by the GMB over the past ten years is summarised in Table 1 below. Over one million head of cattle died of starvation during the year. Food security at household level was threatened to the extent that households engaged in various activities in order to survive. Rural poverty was obviously exacerbated. The country's water reserves were so depleted that there was inadequate water for drinking, let alone irrigation.

For most of the year February-December 1992 the country lived from hand to mouth, i.e. food was consumed as fast as it arrived into the country by rail or road. This was the time we nearly witnessed riotous scenes as hungry city people scrambled/stampeded for trucks carrying and delivering the scarce mealie-meal. At rural grain depots the old and the young waited in long queues for the arrival of the road trucks carrying maize grain from the sea ports.

Apart from the immediate food shortages, the drought had a significant impact on the overall performance of the agriculturally based economy. The lowveld sugar and ancillary factories closed down with consequent loss of jobs. Indeed, all industries dependent on agricultural raw materials e.g. meat

processing, clothing manufacture, oil expressors, stockfeed manufacture, etc. suffered the same fate.

Table 1. Domestic maize intake by the grain marketing board (in tonnes)

Year	Large-scale commercial producers	Smallholder sector	Total
1983/84	464,486	152,414	616,900
1984/85	464,486	390,001	854,487
1985/86	1008,971	819,140	1828,111
1986/87	911,945	682,429	1594,374
1987/88	946,735	155,802	1102,537
1988/89	440,733	755,802	1196,535
1989/90	510,686	654,841	1165,527
1990/91	357,414	423,594	781,008
1991/92	233,731	371,760	605,491
1992/93	11,952	718	12,670

Source: Grain Marketing Board, Annual Reports, 1983 - 1993.

A number of factors which include the following contributed towards food shortages in 1992:

(i) Pricing policies in previous years

Changes in producer prices for food crops did not keep pace with changes in input and other marketing costs. For example, the producer price for maize was at a standstill at \$ 180.00/t from 1985/86 to 1987/88. As a result the maize production base was gradually eroded as commercial farmers moved out of maize production into other more lucrative crops, especially tobacco and horticulture.

(ii) Inequalities within farming communities

It is a pre-independence reality, and even to this day, that commercial farms (formerly reserved for Whites) are generally endowed with richer soils, and higher rainfall as well as infrastructural development, e.g. road, rail, telephone, grain depots, credit facilities, etc., than the communal areas (formerly reserved for Blacks). Thus the best farming areas were the most responsive (negatively) to the low producer prices.

(iii) Droughts and the Lack of Adequate Irrigation Infrastructure

A major cause of the food shortage was the 1991/92 low rainfall. The impact was exacerbated by the progressive but less severe droughts of the previous two years which saw the country deplete its grain stock piles from three years back.

Although the Agricultural Finance Corporation (AFC) administers the National Farm Irrigation Fund (NFIF) on behalf of Government for irrigation infrastructure, the Fund is usually inadequate to cater for both commercial and smallholder farmers. Large scale farmers are granted loans for medium and long

term capital development only. Smallholder farmers may use the loan for seasonal input requirements and infield works, where irrigation water reservoirs exist. However the mechanics and application of the NFIF in communal areas is hampered by lack of title to the land, as well as the fragmentation of arable land. The Fund is restricted to wheat production although smallholder farmers are not obliged to grow wheat.

(iv) Land resettlement policy

Resettlement of peasants on commercial farms was initiated in 1982. It seems that there was not enough consultation and research in order to come up with proper selection criteria for settlers. Models B (collective cooperatives) and C (central core estate surrounded by individual households with ownership or rights to land) did not achieve the desired objectives. It was necessary that Government clearly defined its objectives of resettling households. For example, if the objective for resettling households is to at least maintain high production levels in the formerly commercial sector then master farmers and agricultural college leavers should have been given first priority for settlement. However there were also socio-political considerations arising from the pre-independence racial land tenure systems.

(v) Lack of a stocks policy

Rural household food security had been eroded over the years by the belief that "we can always buy maize from the GMB" or "the Government will provide free food relief". GMB opening stocks of maize for the year 1992/93 (commencing April) were zero. If there had been a stocks policy through which the GMB would start importing if stocks fall below a specified level, the 1992 panic importation might have been avoided. The lack of a stocks policy made it more expensive for the fiscus. It took long to authorise and release funds for imports. Consequently, when authority to import was finally granted, there was panic buying of large quantities of expensive maize imports. The logistics of moving food to the people was the prerogative of the GMB. The Board was compelled to set up extra temporary selling points and to appoint Approved Sellers to ensure that food was moved, as much and as fast as possible, to the outlying areas to avoid starvation. On the whole, Government and donors played a vital role in purchasing and distributing food in communal areas as drought relief.

2. LESSONS FROM THE DROUGHT AND ALTERNATIVE FOOD POLICIES

Organisations involved in the procurement and distribution of food during the drought had their own successes and failures. A number of lessons, some of which are summarised below, have been learned from the drought experience and should serve as bases for alternative strategies and food policies to avoid famine in future.

(a) The need for stocks

The importance of a national reserve stock cannot be over-emphasized. The GMB has prepared and submitted to Government proposals for a minimum reserve stock. The proposed reserve stock would serve as a trigger for imports if stocks fall below the minimum reserve stock. Such a minimum reserve stocks policy would avoid delayed importation, since the responsibility for this exercise and provision of funds will lie in the hands of the GMB and perhaps only one Ministry. National statistics on retentions by smallholder farmers were proved wrong last year because the majority of households outside urban areas had run out of food stocks from previous years' harvests.

(b) Household food security

Most of Zimbabwe's communal areas are more suitable for the production of small grain cereals because the soils and rainfall are marginal. Despite this many, if not all, communal area farmers grow maize as the major food crop. Some of these areas are not suitable for any crop production at all but can sustain livestock ranching. In the event of a drought, maize can be totally destroyed, yet drought tolerant small grain cereals e.g. sorghum and millet can yield some food for subsistence.

Furthermore, each family must retain adequate food stocks to last for at least one year. There is also need to build stocks of fodder banks which would save livestock during drought years.

Export and cash crops, yes; but not at the expense of food crops. There has to be a balance. Peasant communities must be encouraged and facilitated to satisfy household food security in the first instance. This entails appropriate crop types and storage facilities.

(c) Land resettlement

Resettlement programmes must be refined to empower the able and productive producers irrespective of their scale of production. When devising land resettlement policy, Government should incorporate strategies that would maintain or increase productivity, such as careful selection of settlers and adequate provision of services and physical infrastructure. Constraints should be evaluated and addressed in order to enhance productive land use. Market forces should determine the value of land. Giving land a commercial value will promote investment and conservation. Since not all persons can be farmers, there is need to allow and support only capable farmers on the land, whilst providing alternative sources of income for non-farmers.

(d) Pricing policy

We should aim at a steady increase in producer prices to maintain viability and retain producer confidence and interests in the food crops. Producer pricing policies prior to 1990 appeared to have resulted in reduced returns to investment

in controlled (notably maize) and regulated commodities, leading to shortages of essential commodities e.g. cooking oil. The GMB can improve farmer viability through seasonal and regional pricing systems as well as by a supplementary payments system as is currently in place for groundnuts.

(e) Investment policy

Investment in the productive sectors of the economy in order to stimulate growth is an important aspect of structural adjustment. Government could provide credit windows and preferential interest rates for targeted sectors. Such measures could promote the adoption of modern farming methods and technologies by smallholder farmers. Preferential interest rates would also induce smallholders and other private traders to invest in agricultural marketing.

To cushion the effects of recurrent droughts in our regions, we should intensify our water conservation efforts through dam construction and other sustainable uses of our river systems for supplementary irrigation purposes. Our agronomic practices should also be soil and water conservation oriented. Government should speed up the development of water and energy resources particularly in the smallholder sector.

(f) Conservation policy

Conservation is an essential aspect of development. Agroforestry has a potential for improving field crop production while providing the other benefits of tree planting. Producers should construct contour ridges for conservation. Farm level conservation should also promote minimum tillage as an alternative to existing cultural practices. Smallholders fuel and draft power requirements should be taken into account when devising conservation programs. For example, alternative energy sources such as solar power should be pursued in order to preserve the environment. Livestock that are ecologically viable and provide tillage such as donkeys and goats should be promoted.

3. CONCLUSION

While drought is by and large a natural phenomenon, humans often contribute to the negative effects through mismanagement of the environment. Pollution and deforestation have resulted in changes in climates throughout the world. In Zimbabwe many people have engaged in various activities, some of which were detrimental to the environment (e.g. gold panning which contributed towards siltation) in order to survive. Drought preparedness measures and drought recovery strategies are important aspects of alternative food policies in drought prone countries of Southern Africa. Above all, we need to be pro-active, pragmatic and committed in order to eliminate hunger and suffering in our region.

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