Understanding the food crisis in Zimbabwe

By Fiona Watson

Fiona has recently been in southern Africa with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), looking at the role of needs assessments during the current crisis.

The situation in Zimbabwe has spiralled into crisis as a result of complex underlying factors. First, the political environment is unstable and the government has been accused of poor governance. The Presidential election that took place in March 2002, and which returned President Mugabe to power, was described by almost all international observers as "unfree and unfair". Gross human rights violations were documented throughout the election process and since then, politically motivated, government-endorsed violence continues against those perceived to be supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)\(^1\). President Mugabe has stated publicly that the government intends to repress its political opponents and new laws have been passed which seriously restrict freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Secondly, the economic situation is deteriorating swiftly, with high inflation (144 per cent in October 2002 and predicted to rise to 400-500 per cent during 2003)\(^2\), high unemployment (50-60 percent) and closure of factories and businesses due to dwindling confidence in the investment environment. The donor community has withdrawn aid to the country. This, together with a severe reduction in foreign exchange earnings from sales of tobacco, gold and cotton, has led to a decline in foreign currency reserves to extremely low levels.

Thirdly, the impact of HIV/AIDS has been devastating. Over 30 per cent of the population are affected, which has had a detrimental effect on the economy and caused increased pressure on health services. There is a lack of drugs and, in some cases, health staff in the country.

These underlying factors have had a major impact on food security. Domestic agricultural production has been reduced both by the land reform programme and adverse weather conditions. In July 2000, the "Fast Track" resettlement phase of the land reform programme was initiated. A law was passed that allowed for the compulsory acquisition and resettlement of land. To date, over 5,000 of Zimbabwe's 6,000 commercial farmers have been issued with notice to leave and 150,000 farm labourers and their families have already been made homeless and jobless due to farm seizures. This has reduced crop production significantly. Erratic rainfall (floods followed by drought in the 2001/02 crop season) has reduced crop production further. In May 2002, it was estimated that cereal production was down by 57 per cent from the previous year's poor harvest\(^3\).

Imports, however, have been insufficient to meet the deficit. The Grain Marketing Board, the government body with a monopoly on importing grain, is unable to import enough grain to make up the deficit. This leaves an estimated cereal shortfall of 1.5 million metric tonnes (MT) for the marketing year (April 2002 to March 2003), of which the maize shortfall (the staple food in Zimbabwe) accounts for 1.3 million MT. Private sector commercial imports are believed to be negligible. Although maize is sold at controlled prices, there is an absolute shortage of maize and prices on the black market have soared.

Thus while the crisis in Zimbabwe has been caused by a number of interacting underlying factors, the symptomatic effect has been a growing food crisis - both in terms of absolute lack of food and lack of access to food. The latest emergency food security assessment\(^4\) concluded that some 6.7 million people (49 per cent of the population) would require emergency food aid up to March 2003.

Impact on nutritional status
Despite the dire food security situation in Zimbabwe, the prevalence of malnutrition has not yet risen significantly. The data shown in table 1 show a slight increase in acute malnutrition. Confidence intervals overlap, however, and it should be noted that the VAC assessment used purposive sampling and so is not comparable with the other two surveys. Furthermore, the methods used to assess anthropometric status in the VAC survey have been questioned and inaccuracies in measurement may have occurred. Thus, the data available so far do not indicate a significant increase in malnutrition.

The concern in Zimbabwe must be to address the food security crisis before a famine develops, causing untold misery and deaths. For this reason the importance of nutritional surveillance, as emphasised in the article by George Kararach, is of paramount importance.

**Nutritional assessments**

While national level surveys are useful in providing a 'snap-shot' view of malnutrition and in comparing provincial rates, their major constraint is that they are not carried out frequently enough to measure trends. Furthermore, in Zimbabwe, the government has not allowed a nationally representative nutritional survey to be conducted since May 2002, arguing that people need food and not more surveys.\(^5\)

Sentinel site surveillance, on the other hand, has the advantage of allowing trends to be monitored. As pointed out in the article, however, the data are not representative of the total population. In Zimbabwe, sentinel surveillance of supplementary feeding programmes for children under five at community level, is due to start. This will involve the monthly weighing of children and possibly include the collection of other indicators. Currently, the lack of measuring equipment and experience in measuring height will preclude measuring acute malnutrition, but weight-for-age will be assessed.

When used in conjunction, data from surveys and sentinel site surveillance are complementary. Surveys providing an indication of the overall prevalence of malnutrition in the population and surveillance providing data on trends, should allow adverse changes to be noticed early. Clearly it is essential that nutritional data are linked with information on underlying causes, including data on coping strategies and livelihoods. The VAC assessment was unique in that it was a multiagency attempt to link food security and nutrition data. Until now, the use of the VAC data has largely been confined to determining food aid needs, but with further analysis, the information collected could be used to inform other types of intervention.

**Politics of assessments**

Currently, the political climate in Zimbabwe is uncertain. Besides the 'politicisation of data', food is being used as a political weapon. There are many reports of families being denied the right to buy food from the government's Grain Marketing Board warehouses because of their support of the opposition. In October 2002, both Save the Children and Oxfam were banned by the government from distributing WFP food aid as they were viewed as loyal to the opposition party.

**The response**

The crisis in Zimbabwe has received a certain amount of media attention and has been included in various aid agency appeals. Food aid has been viewed as a priority response. For example, over 80 per cent of the UN consolidated inter-agency appeal for July 2002 to June 2003 was for food alone, while health represented less than 10 per cent of the appeal total. Whilst food aid may serve a vital role in protecting against food insecurity and so preventing malnutrition, it cannot address the underlying causes of the food crisis. These underlying factors are likely to continue to impact negatively in the long-term. The problem of HIV/ AIDS, in particular, needs to be
addressed as part of the emergency response.

As the article notes, there is a need to prepare for a potential rise in severe malnutrition by building the capacity of local hospitals in therapeutic care. In Malawi, a strong case is being made to set up community therapeutic feeding systems. In view of the state of the crumbling health facilities in Zimbabwe, this may be a way forward and perhaps needs to be considered.

**Conclusions**

The food crisis in Zimbabwe has complex causes, which are unlikely to be solved in the short-term. Predictions are that food security may continue to deteriorate, coping strategies will be eroded and livelihoods threatened. As yet, there has been no significant detectable decline in nutritional status. Nutritional surveillance is vital in such a scenario in order to pick up as quickly as possible any signs of deterioration.

The political environment in complex emergencies is frequently fraught. In Zimbabwe, there are particular problems concerning the collection and interpretation of data, and impartial distribution of food. Agencies working in Zimbabwe need to be alert to these problems and to work together to ensure that humanitarian principles are upheld.

Since this postscript was written, the government have allowed another national nutrition survey, conducted in February 2003 and covering all 61 districts. Using multistage 30x20 cluster survey methodology, these findings should be comparable to the 1000 DHS and May 2003 surveys. This time, NGOs and donors participated in the planning and supervisory filed visits. At time of print the survey was being analysed.

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2Economist Intelligence Unit cited in "Zimbabwe in grip of new hunger crisis" by Andrew Meldrum, The Observer newspaper (UK), Sunday 15th December, 2002.


5Personal communication, SCF-UK Zimbabwe Office.