



Southern Africa on the Brink of Famine?

Recovery from food crisis through resilient, accountable and gender-responsive agricultural development

Policy brief / August 2020



1. INTRODUCTION

The spread of COVID-19 throughout Southern Africa¹ will worsen the region's already dire conditions of food insecurity and malnutrition. The effects of climate change - persistent drought, flooding and pests - compounded by economic challenges, poverty, conflict and gaps in social accountability, have all contributed to an impending food crisis in the region. Close to 44.8 million people in Southern Africa are estimated to be food insecure as of July 2020; representing a 67% increase from 2017 (26.9 million people) and a jump of 10% from just a year ago (41.2 million people) (SADC 2020).

The disruptions resulting from COVID-19 will significantly increase food and nutrition insecurity, worsen the already stressed and ill-equipped health services in the region, undermine the capacity of people to work and earn a living, and further threaten political and social stability (FAO-WFP 2020). COVID-19 restrictions have reduced food access through limiting the movement of persons and commodities, as well as cross-border and national business transactions, which the majority of people depend on for their livelihoods. Hunger will become more apparent among urban dwellers, reliant on the market for their food needs, as well as rural households that depend on remittances, tourism and school feeding programmes. While signs of urban hunger are obvious now, rural food insecurity is predicted to reach a peak between November 2020 to January 2021, when most smallholder farming families are expected to have exhausted their own food stocks (SADC 2020).

Early warning systems are already showing that all or parts of the seven most affected countries in the region - Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe - are at 'stressed' or 'crisis' levels of acute food insecurity, as recorded within the past six months. The next level 'emergency' - just one away from 'famine' - has been predicted in parts of DRC, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe (FAO 2020e; FEWS.NET 2020; IPC 2020). In Zimbabwe, the most severely affected country, the number of food insecure people is likely to increase almost 50% by the end of 2020. About 8.6

million people, including 5.3 million people in rural areas and 3.3 million people in urban areas, or 60% of the population is expected to be food insecure (OCHA 2020).

This policy brief, presented by ActionAid International (AAI) and Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers' Forum (ESAFF) - through the Partnership for Social Accountability (PSA) Alliance - argues that COVID-19 has exposed the existing systemic weaknesses of regional policies meant to develop resilient food security in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The design and implementation of such policies has been insufficiently grounded in social accountability and gender-responsiveness, therefore falling short of adequately addressing five main factors affecting food insecurity:

- a. reliance on imports for agricultural production and food supply chains;
- b. vulnerabilities in household purchasing power;
- c. sustainability and gender-responsiveness of social protection systems;
- d. social accountability in agricultural policy; and
- e. resilience to climate shocks, disasters and conflict.

Through urgently implementing short-term measures and, in the long-term, transforming the approach to rural and agricultural development towards improved resilience, accountability and gender-responsiveness, policy makers at the regional and national levels can prevent an impending, but not inevitable, food crisis - or worse - in Southern Africa.

1.1 Reliance on imports for agricultural production and food supply chains

Food availability is about the physical existence of food. In Southern Africa, availability of food is influenced by food production, food imports (including food aid), food exports and domestic food stocks. Food imports and exports, and therefore their cost, are influenced by the efficiency (or lack) of food supply chain systems, including transportation.

1. For the purposes of this policy brief, Southern Africa consists of the 16 member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), namely, Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The heavy reliance on food imports by Southern African countries has placed much of the region at significant risk of exposure to global economic shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The travel and transportation restrictions imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 have slowed imports (both commercially sourced inputs and food aid) into the region, thereby reducing food availability as well as increasing prices of the limited food in the market.

Similarly, COVID-19 has restricted export earnings. While the immediate impact of export restrictions is the loss of export revenue, the long-term impact of COVID-19 will only be felt by the agricultural sector in the next season, in the form of increased cost and a shortage in the availability of inputs.

Several positive interventions are being implemented by governments in the short-term at regional and national levels. These include assisting food and nutrition insecure populations with food and/or cash-based transfers, while ensuring harmonisation with national shock-responsive social protection and safety net programmes. Programmes targeted at improving food security in rural and urban areas have also been scaled up, including those assisting households with in-kind food assistance, unconditional cash transfers, assets rehabilitation, resilience building and risk management solutions.

At regional level, SADC should continue – and ensure further support for – the facilitation of engagements between countries with food surpluses and those affected by drought for prioritisation of import or export and inter or intra trade among SADC member states (SADC 2020). Additionally, national and SADC grain reserves should be expanded and strengthened to ensure regional food security, particularly in times of crisis.

1.2 Vulnerabilities in household purchasing power

Household purchasing power is directly linked to access to food. Access is ensured when households, whether urban or rural, have enough resources to obtain food in sufficient quantity, quality and diversity for a nutritious diet. An increase in food prices, usually in response to shortages due to reduced availability, has a negative impact on household purchasing power. The loss of income as a result of unemployment or restricted market access, particularly for informal

traders and smallholder farmers – as often seen during disasters such as COVID-19 – reduces a household's purchasing power and therefore its ability to access adequate food.

Regular remittances from urban to rural areas, as well as uninterrupted food transfers from rural to urban areas, are essential to ensuring the region's food availability, access and security. The closure of travel and borders in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19 has undermined the earning capacities of families that rely on formal employment; those that rely on migrant work and the informal sector; as well as those that rely on remittances. In some instances, higher food prices due to reduced imports and a fall in prices of exported commodities (which, in Africa, are primarily exports of primary products), have had an impact on the purchasing power of households.

In Malawi, for example, many poor households in the country's four main cities are expected to be earning little or no income, contributing to 'crisis' level acute food insecurity (FEWS.NETa 2020). In Zimbabwe, currency depreciation and consecutive years of drought have caused food inflation to rise to 953.5% in May 2020, making affordability of food and essential goods a daily challenge (FAO-WFP 2020).

The ability of farmers to sufficiently invest in high-cost inputs – in particular, hybrid seeds and synthetic fertilisers – for the main agricultural season, due to begin in October 2020, has been compromised by loss of their secondary incomes, as well as increased costs due to restrictions on trade. Farmers have also been affected by currency depreciation which has increased the price of agricultural inputs, particularly imported commodities such as fertilisers and agro-chemicals (FAO-WFP 2020).

In response, governments and international agencies have urgently intervened to provide cash-based transfers. Development of innovative arrangements can also ensure continuity of smallholder production while access to markets is disrupted, by harnessing locally-available resources and goods. Supply chain adjustments in the urban-rural continuum in food processing, distribution and marketing can assist in bringing a consistent and organised supply of local products to local and domestic markets (FAO 2020a).

While such short-term measures are essential to prevent immediate starvation, COVID-19 has exposed vulnerabilities in the current food system in the region,

in particular, reliance by smallholder farmers on high-cost inputs, which demands long-term transformation towards more resilient and sustainable approaches to rural and agricultural development.

1.3 Sustainability and gender-responsiveness of social protection systems

The dire reality is that Southern Africa's health and other public infrastructure to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic is less resourced than those of the Northern hemisphere. Public health systems and facilities in the region are often underfunded by central governments, resulting in a shortage of personnel and medicines that undermines their ability to meet the demand for basic health services. Italy, which struggled to contain COVID-19, has an annual health expenditure of 3,620 USD per capita, versus Tanzania at 104 USD per capita (WHO 2017). While the effects of COVID-19 on public health are yet to be fully quantified, it is already clear that most of the world's public health systems – underfunded for a generation – are likely to be overwhelmed, with low and middle-income countries disproportionately affected (ActionAid 2020; FAO-WFP 2020).

Health systems and food security in the region has already been affected by previous and ongoing health emergencies, including Ebola outbreaks in DRC in 2019; measles and polio in Angola, Comoros, Madagascar and Mozambique; cholera outbreaks in Angola, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe; and malaria in Angola, Mozambique and Zambia. While the Southern Africa region has halved HIV/AIDS incidence since 2000, 700,000 new infections are still registered every year, corresponding to 40% of all new infections worldwide. Among adolescents (10-19 years), infection rates have increased. Within agriculture, the workforce – mostly between 15 and 49 years of age (approximately 70% of which are women) – is hardest hit, contributing to food insecurity. Additionally, malnutrition due to food insecurity further diminishes the capacity of people's immune systems to fight off and survive diseases, including COVID-19 (SADC 2018).

Women carry the greatest burden and face the most risk in this crisis, as they do in others. Much of the responsibility of caring for the sick and for children home from school has fallen on women. Women also predominate in low-paid frontline jobs as nurses and care workers, facing the highest risks of exposure

(ActionAid 2020). Additionally, women smallholder farmers in Southern Africa contribute more than 60% of total food production, but with fewer economic resources than men. Women's increased unpaid care responsibilities and exposure risk to COVID-19 will have knock-on implications for household income, food production, child nutrition, and undoubtedly, food security.

Since the announcement of COVID-19 restrictions in Southern Africa, there has been a corresponding rise in reported cases of gender-based violence (GBV). According to the Zimbabwe Gender Commission, reports of GBV have increased by 50% since the same time last year (GenderLinks 2020). Additionally, women have less frequently sought out sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and GBV services during the pandemic. When safe delivery, neonatal, and family planning services become inaccessible, women's lives are put at even greater risk.

Government capacity to protect vulnerable populations has been stretched due to reduced export earnings from primary products, restrictions on tourism, currency depreciation, and high public debt (FAO-WFP 2020). These constrained government resources could curtail expenditure on public services and diminish government response capacities. Critical sectors, such as social protection and social safety nets are predicted to receive diminished support as governments divert resources to the unbudgeted COVID-19 health emergency response (FAO-WFP, 2020).

Current levels of debt servicing – even before the massive borrowing necessitated by COVID-19 – has also had an impact on the ability of countries to invest in public services. Countries that spend more than 12% of their national budgets on debt servicing are invariably forced to cut spending on public services. In 2019, a number of Southern African countries were already far beyond this mark, including: Malawi (20.28%); Mozambique (26.54%); Tanzania (19.54%); Zambia (50.99%) (ActionAid 2020). The COVID-19 crisis is expected to worsen the debt situation of these and other countries in the region; with DRC and Mozambique in debt crises since 2016, South Africa and Zambia warning of looming debt crises, and financial rating agencies predicting downgrades of Namibia, Seychelles and South Africa (Ventures Africa 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of consistent and sufficient public investment and accountable governance of health services, domestic

food security, and social protection systems. Long-term investment in social safety mechanisms – beyond short-term humanitarian assistance – is required, including the expansion of universal social protection, and universal cash and food transfers that reduce women and girls' vulnerability.

Rather than cutting investment in social services, governments should seek to expand domestic sources of revenue through progressive tax reforms and expansionary macro-economic policies. SADC member states should join the pan-African call for sustained debt cancellation and suspension of loan repayments in the wake of COVID-19; and the renegotiation of longer-term debt obligations to free up funds to invest in health, climate-transition and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Health systems should be strengthened to ensure they are resilient, even within crises, and can sustainably provide relevant, affordable and quality services (ActionAid 2020).

1.4 Social accountability in agricultural policy

According to the African Union Commission 2020 Biennial Report on the Implementation of the 2014 Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods, the Southern African region was not on track to meeting any of the seven Malabo Declaration commitments² (AU 2020). On the back of such dismal performance, the report emphasised the importance of increasing public investments in agriculture and enhancing access to and use of financial services by smallholder farmers and rural households who would in turn increase investments in the agricultural sector as they are the largest and important segment of players in agricultural value chains (AU 2020).

However, current investment levels and approaches to improving agricultural production in response to the Malabo Declaration and other regional agricultural instruments, such as farm input subsidy programmes (FISPs),³ have not had the desired effect of improving food security (ACB 2016; PSA 2019).

While SADC promotes support for smallholder farmers as a key strategy for achieving household food security, agricultural policy making in the region has failed to adequately respond to their needs. Large portions of national budgets are directed into FISPs by providing subsidies that reduce the price of fertiliser and seed (usually hybrid maize). It is estimated up to 1 billion USD is spent on FISPs a year in 10 sub-Saharan African countries, including Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia – accounting for 14-26% of their combined annual public expenditure on agriculture (Jayne 2018). Despite such large outlays on FISPs over the last decade, food insecurity in the SADC region is on an increasing trend (SADC 2020).

Overall, FISPs have become largely top-down ineffective, social transfer schemes that create dependency, and enable significant loss of public funds through elite capture, leakage and diversion (vouchers and/or fertilisers have been reported stolen before reaching the intended beneficiary group). Aside from providing a partial economic safety net, the subsidies have been found to not directly benefit the poor and most vulnerable, who are mostly women. Instead the FISPs have led smallholder farmers to direct their scarce resources towards hybrid maize production, effectively reducing the diversity of food available as well as undermining resilience of rural communities to disasters (ACB 2016).

As documented in a 2019 PSA Alliance policy brief, across four Southern African countries (Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia), the FISPs have faced multiple accountability issues. Smallholder farmers – particularly women – are excluded in the design, implementation and monitoring of agricultural programmes, resulting in a lack of agricultural budget and extension services directed towards farmer support in local (open-pollinated varieties - OPV) seed production, organic farming and agroecology. Irregularities, allegations of corruption and misuse of public funds in relation to FISPs have been widely reported. In all four countries, there were varying levels of concern with performance management of FISPs. All found that FISPs were not delivered as planned and budgeted. Smallholder communities reported that they did not have access to key services

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2. The seven Malabo Declaration commitments are: (i) Recommitment to the Principles and Values of the CAADP Process; (ii) Commitment to Enhancing Investment Finance in Agriculture; (iii) Commitment to Ending Hunger in Africa by 2025; (iv) Commitment to Halving Poverty by the year 2025, through Inclusive Agricultural Growth and Transformation; (v) Commitment to Boosting Intra- African Trade in Agricultural commodities and services; (vi) Commitment to Enhancing Resilience of Livelihoods and Production Systems to Climate Variability and other related risks; (vii) Commitment to Mutual Accountability to Actions and Results.
 3. FISPs are large-scale input subsidy programmes that involve the distribution of coupons, vouchers or e-vouchers to farmers for a package of subsidized improved seeds (mainly maize, rice or legumes) and chemical fertilisers and pesticides – with the aim of boosting staple crop production and tackling entrenched poverty and food insecurity. These inputs must be purchased at subsidised rates, from a government agency, authorised agro-dealer or commercial supplier.

such as rural extension officers, and that the costs of accessing subsidised hybrid seeds and chemical fertilisers through FISP were too expensive, their quality unreliable, and the seeds provided often failed under harsh weather conditions (PSA 2019).

Rather than continuing to invest in policies that undermine the resilience of rural communities to withstand climate-induced shocks and disasters (including pandemics), COVID-19 has highlighted the need for a drastic shift in agricultural support in the region. Public investment should instead be channelled towards services that assist the producers of the region's food – smallholder farmers (particularly women) – to adapt in the face of climate change, such as extension services which promote agroecology and use of local (OPV) seeds, and are gender-responsive and farmer-led (ACB 2018).

1.5 Resilience to climate shocks, disasters and conflict

The climate-induced shocks and hazards experienced in Southern Africa in recent years – most dramatically seen with the 2019 Cyclones Idai and Kenneth – have reduced agricultural production, led to the displacement of people, caused damage to homes and critical infrastructure, and accelerated the outbreaks of diseases such as malaria and cholera (SADC 2020). Consequently, even prior to COVID-19, prices of basic food stuffs were expected to rise sharply, thereby further limiting access to food for poor, particularly urban, households (SADC 2020).

Political instability and protracted conflicts in the region have also negatively impacted on food security. In DRC, continued multiple and large-scale complex crises, including insecurity and mass displacements, have taken a toll on its people. In Mozambique, the conflict in Cabo Delgado, a province that is reported to be most COVID-19 affected, has led to worsened food security.

Recent protests in Zimbabwe are also an indication of rising political tensions there. The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 will further heighten political instability and conflict in these and other Southern African countries due to rising levels of unemployment, loss of income and livelihoods, increased levels of poverty, inequalities and resulting food insecurity.

Effective short- and long- term responses to building resilience in the region's food systems must address the factors which cause vulnerability to shocks and stresses. Vulnerability is caused by (i) **social exclusion**, involving the denial of people's rights on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, race, and limitations on their participation in economic, social and political life; (ii) **limited access to appropriate basic services**, such as education, healthcare, information, finance, early warning services, evacuation, fair and stable markets and entitlements such as social protection; and (iii) **lack of assets**, such as livestock or land, and limited economic opportunities to adopt sustainable and diversified livelihoods (ActionAid 2016).

In the short-term, women must have equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making; and efforts to address the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 must target women and girls. To build long-term resilience to recover from this and future crises, SADC and its member states must ensure all policies, including the SADC Disaster Preparedness and Response Mechanism, promote and build locally-owned and women-led institutions, and ensure participation in policy formulation and implementation by all actors. Ultimately, upholding of social accountability through sound public resource management, inclusive and gender-responsive decision-making, and effective government oversight creates better economic conditions from which individuals and communities can draw livelihoods.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS BUILDING RESILIENT, ACCOUNTABLE AND GENDER-RESPONSIVE FOOD SYSTEMS IN SADC

Effective and long-lasting responses to the impacts of climate change and other disasters - as made obvious by the COVID-19 crisis – call for a transformation in the current approach to rural and agricultural development in Southern Africa. As presented in this policy brief, there is need to ensure robust and purposeful regional and national investment towards building resilience – through supporting agroecological approaches, ensuring social accountability, and strengthening gender-responsive public services. Such initiatives will, in the long-term, build urban and rural systems that can support the health, wellbeing and social protection of their people, preventing food crises, even in the face of disaster.

The major recommendations of this policy brief are to **accelerate:**

1 Climate proofing of agriculture and ensure the resilience of food systems in the SADC region by investing in sustainable agriculture and rural development, with an emphasis on agroecological initiatives, as anchors for improved food availability and household purchasing power. This investment should include, but not be limited to:

1.1 Fulfil the Malabo Declaration commitments, and progressively allocate budgets to agriculture that efficiently and effectively reach the Malabo Declaration target of at least 10% of national budgets in order to sustain the desired annual agricultural GDP growth of at least 6%. It is further urged that there be greater efficiency and effectiveness in programming and budget utilisation as a means of ensuring return on investment.

1.2 Align national investments in agriculture with farmers' own priorities and focus on financing

diversified smallholder support programmes such as: extension services, research, climate change adaptation and financing, input support (including development of local – OPV – seed) and improve farmers' access to finance and market.

1.3 Support innovative agricultural research and development as well as the implementation of alternatives to hybrid seeds and chemically intensive agriculture such as: (i) integrated pest management (ii) use of community-based seed systems (iii) improvement of soil fertility through increasing soil organic matter, and (iv) diversification of farmer support programmes and the redirection of funds towards the adoption of agroecological practices.

1.4 Strengthen or establish smallholder farmer and CSO-inclusive food and nutrition councils at district and sub-district levels to guide, monitor and oversee food and nutrition strategies, plans, programmes and budgets.

1.5 Establish strong, operational and effective Joint Agriculture Sector Review (JASR) mechanisms from villages to wards, districts to national, and national to regional to inform plans and activities in the sector towards reclaiming women-led resilient and sustainable agriculture, as outlined in the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Mutual Accountability Framework.

1.6 Set up independent multi-stakeholder reviews of FISPs to help diversify agricultural support away from hybrid seed and chemically-intensive agriculture towards providing support for adopting agroecology at scale.

1.7 Strengthen and reorient rural extension services towards the needs of rural women, girls, youth, the most vulnerable and those living with disabilities or HIV/AIDS.

1.8 Conduct performance audits of agricultural extension services to assess their efficiency and effectiveness in capacitating smallholder farmers, particularly women, to sustainably contribute to the realisation of food security goals in the region.

1.9 Conduct forensic audits of all farmer support programmes, with a focus on FISPs, with the aim of identifying and addressing the systemic internal control weaknesses that allow for misuse of funds.

1.10 Build human and physical capacities by ensuring effective land reform, with a focus on benefiting women smallholder farmers;

1.11 Develop a dynamic rural agriculture sector through supporting the development of robust rural non-farm enterprise systems, as well as providing adequate rural infrastructure including roads, energy, water, and information and communication technology (ICT). This should emphasise support for the development of agro-processing in rural areas, closest to where products are produced (as indicated in the SADC Industrialisation Strategy and Roadmap, 2015 – 2063).

2 Decentralisation of power to local communities, with a focus on women-led accountability mechanisms, for their full participation in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes that affect them, as well as improving collaborative competences through capacity strengthening of rural institutions.

3 Expansion of sustained investment into local social services and support, including social safety nets, universal cash and food transfers, effective stakeholder

participation (inclusiveness) and public social infrastructure such as health and education facilities, and extension services. Further domestic sources of revenue should be opened up through progressive tax reforms and expansionary macro-economic policies. SADC member states should join the pan-African call for sustained debt cancellation and suspension of loan repayments in the wake of COVID-19; and the renegotiation of longer-term debt obligations to free up funds to invest in health, climate-transition and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

4 Further efforts by SADC towards the facilitation of engagements between countries with food surpluses and those affected by drought, for prioritisation of import or export and inter or intra trade among member states. Additionally, national and SADC grain reserves should be expanded and strengthened to ensure regional food security, particularly in times of crisis.

5 Operationalisation of national and regional strategies, in a manner which ensures resilient, gender-responsive, and accountable agricultural and rural development, in particular:

5.1 SADC Regional Agricultural Policy and its implementation instruments, the Regional Agricultural Investment Plan and the Agricultural Development Fund.

5.2 SADC Food and Nutrition Security Strategy; and,

5.3 SADC Disaster Preparedness and Response Mechanism,

6 Development and implementation of a SADC Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy, ensuring expansion of investment into agroecological initiatives, as proposed in the SADC Revised Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (2015-2020).

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The Partnership for Social Accountability (PSA) Alliance is a consortium of organisations working to strengthen social accountability in health and agriculture across Southern Africa. The consortium consists of ActionAid; PSAM – Public Service Accountability Monitor of Rhodes University; SAfAIDS; and ESAFF – Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers’ Forum. The PSA Alliance is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). For more information visit <http://copsam.com/psa/>, or email psaalliance@actionaid.org. To follow the PSA Alliance on Twitter or Facebook – see @PSAAlliance.

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Cover image: A social accountability monitoring team in Marraceune, Mozambique. CREDIT: ACTIONAID INTERNATIONAL