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UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF MALNOURISHMENT IN ZIMBABWE

I. Introduction

Planet Earth is home to about 6.39 billion people and counting each passing second. A vast majority of this population (about 5 billion) live in 125 low to middle income or developing countries, which have a generally lower standard of living. They have access to fewer goods and services than people in high-income countries. Out of the 5 billion people living in developing nations, 1.2 billion live below the international poverty line earning less than a dollar a day. More than 800 million people across the world go to bed everyday either half hungry or without any food. Approximately 14.4 million people throughout southern Africa are facing food shortages resulting in widespread starvation, malnutrition and disease. According to the Human Rights Watch Group (2003) by early February 2003, there were 7.2 million food vulnerable people in Zimbabwe which translates to almost 50% of the food insecure in southern Africa! On seeing these figures, it was obvious to me that any study on hunger and malnourishment has to focus on the situation in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country with a population of 12,746,900 and is located in southeastern Africa. It has borders with four countries - Zambia, Botswana, South Africa and Mozambique. It achieved its freedom from the U.K in 1980 and has since then seen only one ruler, President Robert Mugabe, who continues to be the Head of the government even today. In the early days after independence, Zimbabwe continued to maintain good economic indicators. Though there were some signs of deterioration during the later part of the 80s, the final turning point came with the drought of 1991/92. The crippling drought in 1991/92, which is the worst drought to hit Zimbabwe in more than a century, reduced maize production by about 80%. As a result Zimbabwe was forced to resort to imports and food aid to meet its grain requirements. Since then, it has been down hill all the way. It is not surprising that, today, Zimbabwe has nearly 7.2 million people (which is nearly 37% of its total population) suffering starvation and malnourishment.

One of the major contributors for malnourishment is either the lack of availability of food due to reduced crop production or due to the lack of purchasing power due to reduced production. So, the focus of this paper is the food production trends in Zimbabwe with specific emphasis on maize crop production, since maize is the staple food. I have also looked at the over all agriculture production and major factors contributing to the hunger and malnourishment in the country.

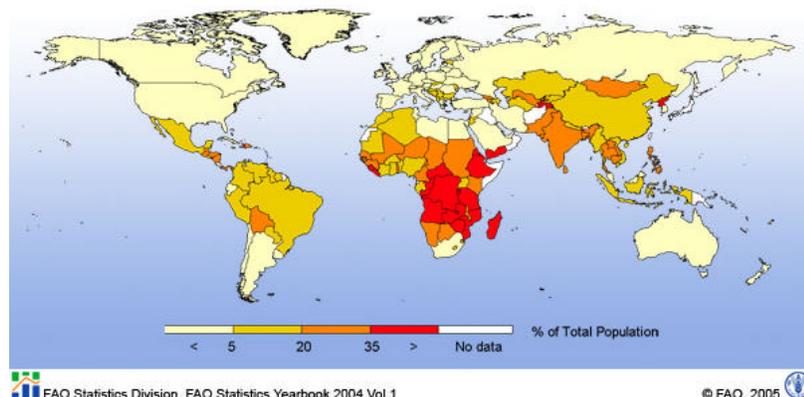


Fig 1: World Hunger Map

FAO Statistics Division, FAO Statistics Yearbook 2004 Vol.1

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Malnourishment in Zimbabwe

Malnourishment occurs when a person's diet does not meet the quality required in terms of minimum daily requirements for proteins, vitamins, minerals and other nutrients.

The poor households in the low rainfall areas (communal lands) are vulnerable and are exposed to the incidence of malnutrition and other health problems arising from malnutrition. Children under 3 years age and pregnant women are affected the worst. The International Monetary Fund Executive Board in Zimbabwe (2004) stated “We regret that a cycle of malnourishment and disease has developed and that the sharp fall in agricultural production has led to continued food insecurity.....” In general, the rate of malnutrition across all Communal Lands is reported to be around 10-15 per cent of all children between the ages of one year and five years. In the low rainfall Communal Lands, the rate rises to around 20-25 per cent. It is as high as 30-40 per cent in such Communal Areas as Nyanga, Binga, and several areas in the Matebeleland provinces. In some of these districts, malnutrition is chronic. It is evident from the FAO Nutrition Country Report on Zimbabwe (2001) that among the children under 3 years, the prevalence of underweight was 15.5%, 21.4% of the children were stunted and 5.5% wasted in 1994. Children living in rural areas seemed to have a greater risk for underweight and stunting than their urban counterparts. This trend appears to be same even now.

Table1: Sections of the populations currently vulnerable to food insecurity in Zimbabwe

	Individuals
Urban Sector	850 000
Unemployed	
Widowed, Divorced Separated Women	
Informal Workers	
RURAL SECTOR	5 402 000
Communal Lands:	
Unemployed	
Widowed, Divorced Separated Women	
Landless	
Commercial Farming Areas	
Farm Workers	489 000
Newly Resettled Farmers (A1 model)	650 000-775 000*

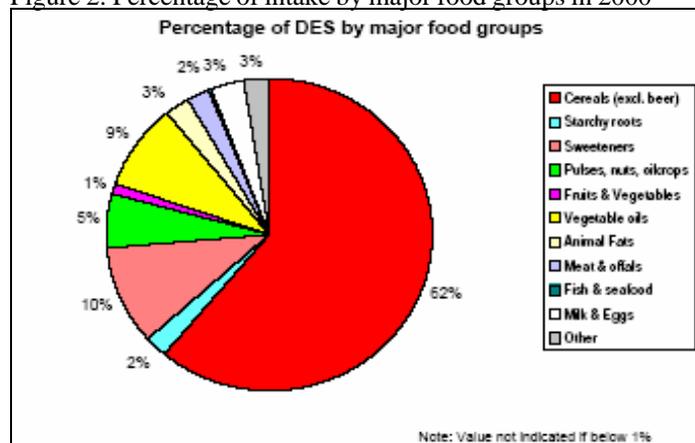
Source: Zimbabwe Emergency Food Security Assessment Report (2002); FEWS Net (2002)

* Estimated from number of household resettled under the A1 model on former commercial farms (Government of Zimbabwe, 2002).

II. Lower Food Production Leading to Lesser Availability of Food

Over the past decade, Zimbabwean agriculture has grown at a very slow pace (i.e. less than 2% per annum) with most of this growth confined to parts of the large-scale commercial sub-sector. Recently it has dropped earnings of 12.1% in 2001 and a further 22% in 2002. The amount of rainfall has traditionally been the determining factor in Zimbabwe's agricultural productivity. The most recent growing seasons in Zimbabwe were affected by a regional drought . The reduction in yield and output at farm level led to a 70% shortfall in production to meet annual food requirements. This, coupled with GOZ-sanctioned farm invasions, that grossly reduced production, has caused domestic production of the food staple maize to fall less than 25 percent of consumption. In fact, Maize output fell 33% to 50,000 tons. This has created a major malnourishment problem among the people as maize is their staple food. In fact, 67% of their daily calorie intake consists of cereals such as maize which is evident from the figure below:

Figure 2: Percentage of intake by major food groups in 2000



Source: FAO Nutrition Country Profile (2001)

Food production trends

Zimbabwe has a broad-based economy with three major productive sectors namely agriculture, mining and manufacturing (World Bank, 1999a). Although accounting for only 18% of Zimbabwe's gross domestic product (in 1996), the agricultural sector remains the backbone of the economy and society (World Bank, 1998). It provided income and employment for 75% of the population accounting for some 45% of the country's merchandise exports, and being the focus of a large share of the country's domestic trade and transport services.

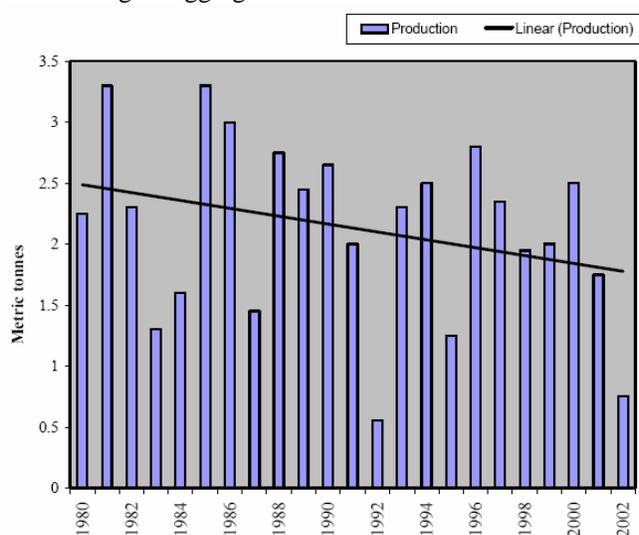
Agriculture in Zimbabwe is characterized by a high degree of diversification including the cultivation of maize, soya bean, cotton, wheat, groundnuts, sorghum, sunflower seed, cottonseed, coffee, millet and the production of high grade beef and dairy products as main products. Food exports account for 13.6% of the total exports of the country. Tobacco is one of the country's big three (with gold and ferrochrome) foreign exchange earners. Its export accounted for US\$532 million in 1998 (World Bank, 1999a). It is evident from the table below that the food production is on a gradual decreasing trend in Zimbabwe with sharp decline in 2003. The fluctuations in production reflect the vulnerability of Zimbabwe to climatic changes. The drought affected the production in 1991/1992, 1994/1995 and 2002 resulting in reduction in crop yields especially sugar, maize, seed cotton and wheat.

Table2: Food production trends

Year	1961	1970	1980	1990	2000	2003
Agricultural production per capita index (Index: 1999-2001=1000)	125.6	110.1	111.8	98.1	106.6	83.2

Figure 3 below shows the trends in aggregate grain production between 1980 and 2002. And there is a gradual decline in the production of the grains in the country with 1992 and 2002 noting the lowest productions. Table 3 shows the declines in Maize production over a decade.

Fig 3: Aggregate Trends in Grain Production



Source: USDA

Table 3: Trends in Maize production from 1990/91 – 2000/01

Growing Season	Communal Sector			Commercial Sector			National Production (kg)
	Production (mt)	Area (ha)	Yield (t/ha)	Production (mt)	Area (ha)	Yield (kg/ha)	
1990/91	1019300	926200	1.10	566500	175000	3.24	1585800
1991/92	115200	728000	0.16	245800	153000	1.61	361000
1992/93	1133600	1040000	1.09	878250	198000	4.44	2011850
1993/94	1313800	1269200	1.04	1012400	232000	4.36	2326200
1994/95	399400	1209200	0.33	440200	188700	2.33	839600
1995/96	1687000	1330000	1.27	922000	205000	4.50	2609000
1996/97	1453800	1483000	0.98	738370	157100	4.70	2192170
1997/98	727550	1057000	0.69	690480	166800	4.14	1418030
1998/99	845300	1262000	0.67	674260	184400	3.66	1519560
1999/00	1240000	1210000	1.02	908110	206700	4.39	2148110
2000/01	993940	1084100	0.92	482300	139000	3.47	1476240

Source: Ministry of Agriculture: Agricultural Statistical Bulletin 2002

Major trends in Zimbabwean agriculture are as follows:

- Maize and wheat (for bread) are the country's food security commodities. Maize production, generally, has been fluctuating over the years at both national and farming sub-sector levels.
- The total crop area of both the small-scale and large-scale commercial farmers declined the past five years.
- In the late 1980's and early 1990's, the commercial farmers turned increasingly away from maize, cotton, and oilseeds to tobacco and horticulture, the two crops whose price and marketing were not controlled by government.
- In the communal sector, in addition to the decrease in maize area, overall output has been erratic.
- Fallow area generally has been increasing. Farmers have been leaving their land to fallow, as they could no longer afford to buy the inputs to use to cover the whole cropped area.

Lower food production and failure of agriculture has led to dependency on food aid. And it is reported that the food aid is not being systematically distributed to all the poor and needy in the country. According to the Zimbabwe Emergency Food Security Assessment Report (2002), 486 000 tones of food aid was needed to meet food security requirements of 6 700 000 people (49% of the population) over the period September 2002 to March 2003. Of the 6 700 000 requiring food aid, 5 900 000 were in rural areas

and 850 000 in urban areas. Seventy percent of the rural population was at risk of famine-induced starvation (WFP, 2002). It was projected that the rural population at risk would increase to 80% and 100% by end of 2002 as households ran out of stocks. The cereal deficit in the April 2002 – March 2003 marketing year was estimated at 1.65 million tones (Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment, 2002). The food shortages, in turn, deteriorated into a famine and a humanitarian disaster. The scale of the food aid and politicization of its distribution was unprecedented in the history of Zimbabwe.

III. Factors contributing to lower food production and there by to malnourishment

Zimbabwean households are likely to face serious food shortages if the population growth and the increase in urbanization coinciding with an increase in price for major food items, like maize, continue. Smallholder farmers in the risky regions face food insecurity due to a fragile food production system as a result of multiple factors discussed else where in this paper. In Zimbabwe, several missteps by the government as outlined below have contributed to the crisis in agriculture leading to food insecurity and malnourishment.

1. Severe drought in two consecutive years followed by another drought period.
2. Limited progress due to structural reforms. The reforms should focus on increasing production and raising productivity of agriculture land.
3. The price controls for staple crops, such as corn has inhibited the production and trade of the staple food crop.
4. The corn is back under the control prices thereby creating a monopoly that prohibits open commercial trade.
5. The irresponsible expropriation of land from commercial farmers has decimated the most productive part of Zimbabwe's agricultural sector. A clarification of tenure rights will be crucial for raising agricultural production and facilitating access to credit for farmers.
6. The Government of Zimbabwe also has serious foreign exchange restrictions, prohibiting its ability to import sufficient grain and making ancillary farming inputs (fuel for tractors, fertilizer, etc.) either unavailable or exorbitantly expensive.
7. The regressive economic policies have collapsed the national economy, sharply reducing family income. And when this is coupled with the drought leads to an increasing number of people becoming vulnerable and unable to purchase food.
8. In addition to all these there is a politicization of the food aid distribution.
9. HIV/AIDS pandemic has its own effect on food production by infecting more than 20 percent of adults. Even in years of normal rainfall, crop production has suffered due to the number of HIV-positive adults who are too ill to carry out the hard labor required for subsistence farming.

IV. Recommendations on food production/ food aid distribution in Zimbabwe

To address the malnourishment in Zimbabwe the action needs to be a two pronged attack – One addressing the food production and the other in food aid distribution.

Food Production

- As the Zimbabwean agriculture is rainfall dependent, the agriculture research should focus on developing drought resistant and tolerant crop varieties, especially in the staple food crops like maize.
- About 60% of the small farmers are dependent on communal lands and hence the agriculture technologies developed should be low cost and easy to adapt.
- As the youth constitutes, more than 50% of the population, they need to be trained and provided with skills in agriculture extension to specifically work with small farmers.
- Clarity of land title and ownership is essential for accessing commercial bank loans that could be invested in agriculture production.

- Agriculture extension should integrate its messages with HIV/AIDS information for broader education of the rural men and women.
- Set up an enabling policy framework that encourages and motivates the farmers to grow staple and commercial crops.

Food Aid Distribution

- The Zimbabwe government should make serious efforts to end corruption at all levels of the food importation and distribution process.
- The food distribution should be strictly based on the need and poverty of the individual not his political affiliation.
- The United Nations, United States (U.S.) and the European Union (E.U.) should continue to check food aid distribution to ensure that the poor and needy get their fair share.
- The WFP should increase efforts to assist populations currently excluded from food aid and mobilize resources to supervise and train those responsible for distribution.

V. Conclusions

Almost half of the food insecure in Africa lives in Zimbabwe. About 4.3 million people in Zimbabwe could not meet their food requirements in the period from 1995-1997 and consequently have been considered as undernourished, representing 39% of the total population. Smallholder farmers in the risky regions face food insecurity due to a fragile food production system and several other factors. Severely affected are the farmers and their families on communal lands and then the children under 3 years. Over the past decade, Zimbabwean agriculture has grown at a very slow pace (i.e. less than 2% per annum). In 2002 Zimbabwe experienced a severe crop failure due to early termination of the rainfall and the yield has reduced to almost 70% of annual food requirements. This led to an ongoing shortage of staple foods such as maize meal, bread and sugar. Several macro economic and other factors have caused considerable damage to the sector and make agricultural production uncertain. The production trends indicate a decline in production of staple crops like Maize. Lower production leading to higher prices when coupled with inflation makes it harder for families to buy the food. Some of the major factors contributing to the malnourishment in Zimbabwe include the failure of rainfall, ill conceived macro-economic policies, and political leadership and in-appropriate timing of the land reforms. So the problem of malnourishment needs to be addressed in a concerted way by doing small farmer oriented research in agriculture, building effective agriculture extension, creating an enabling policy framework and structures in place for promoting and encouraging small farmers to produce and finally putting in place an effective food distribution system which caters to needs of all the poor including women, children and people living with HIV/AIDS.

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