Zimbabwe: Achieving Household and National Food Security (2832 words)

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Zimbabwe was once a food basket for the region. This note derives from an analysis conducted in 2009, looking back largely at the period 2000-08 which witnessed a dramatic transformation from a food surplus to a food deficit country at the household and national levels. It synthesizes the analysis of some of the major contributory factors and suggests options for the way forward.

The critical link between food security and nutrition needs to be highlighted early in this note. In Zimbabwe, nutrition is more associated with children under the age of 5 rather than adults. Though most families in the country can access sufficient quantities of starch- and carbohydrate-based foods, the level of malnutrition among children continues to increase. Mason (1990) indicated that “malnutrition remained the biggest killer of children between the ages of 2-5”. Given that nutrition responsibility fell under the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, the link between nutrition and food production has always been weaker than the link between nutrition and health. There is no direct link between nutrition practitioners and food production (availability) and access to food. Attempts to integrate nutrition with agricultural extension activities failed as nutrition personnel wanted to remain in the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare where the remuneration was higher. While the need for a national nutrition policy was identified at independence (1980), and expert committees have prepared meticulous reports, the problem festers.

Since it is axiomatic that nutrition is a function of food availability and access to food, food security will be critical in determining nutritional levels. Under a food import and food aid scenario, household and national food security will be difficult to achieve. Some suggestions in this regard relate to the need an increase in the local production of appropriate foods, targeted food aid and distribution programs in cases of severe and chronic malnutrition by development partners, NGOs and civil society groups, and more focus on livestock as a nutritional source.

Food Security initiatives
At independence, the government embarked upon the land reform and distribution program. Increasing population and the threats of drought resulted in the establishment of the Strategic Grain Reserve (SGR), basically in the form of maize. The initial quantity of 200,000 mt was increased to 600,000 mt. A decision in 1996 to keep the SGR in the form of foreign currency led to its demise, as the cash was soon applied to meet other needs such as fuel imports. Consequently, when grain needed to be imported in 2000, there was no money available to do so.

Food security declined precipitously between 2000-2008 and the following text outlines the major contributing factors.

*The Grain Marketing Board (GMB) monopoly*

The government made the GMB the sole official trader in grains. It was also the sole distributor of inputs in the country. All farmers became dependent on the GMB for input acquisition and crop sales. This resulted in the following:

- Areas without GMB infrastructure were disadvantaged;
- Farmers who had failed to deliver produce to GMB could not access inputs;
- All inputs or most of them were directed to GMB leaving nothing or very little in other retail outlets;
- Other potential distribution agencies that could have complemented GMB in those areas where they did not have infrastructure were not given the opportunity to participate in the distribution of inputs and grain; and
- A significant quantity of inputs deteriorated in GMB premises due to poor handling or inappropriate storage facilities.

*The Government Input Scheme (GIS)*

In 2000, the government announced that it would provide inputs for farmers for the next 6 years. Requirements for inputs were appropriated through the Ministry of Agriculture. However, the Ministry never received the budget needed. Over the years, the funding gap increased allied with the absence of commercial bank lending that cited lack of collateral security resulting largely from the land reform program. Having lost the initiative, farmers now made no preparations for the next season and just waited for government inputs. The government also ring-fenced all the available inputs thereby barring any commercial activity in the area. The
inappropriate targeting of beneficiaries further weakened the scheme, and the lack of evaluation and review as well as the decision of the Ministry of Finance to treat it as an off-budget item rendered it moribund. The GIS was succeeded by the Productive Sector Facility.

**The Productive Sector Facility (PSF)**

This Facility was introduced by the government through the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) in 2004 to remedy the government’s increasing inability to fund the input scheme through vote appropriations due to financial and fiscal constraints. The PSF also applied to other sectors where vote appropriations from government were inadequate. Under the PSF for Agriculture, the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe made financing available at 25% interest for food crop production, given that the interest rates at the time were 300% to 400% for such loans. The facility had a 6-month tenure for seasonal loans and an 18-month tenure for medium term loans. This period proved inadequate for effective acquittal of loans as some of the crops financed would not have been marketed at the expiry of the facility.

The PSF failed in its very first year – some of the reasons included the following:

- Loans not paid up by the maturity date or any part remaining thereof immediately assumed the going commercial interest rates - at that time, the rates ranged between 300% and 400%;
- Although lending was to individual farmers, the loans were accessed through commercial banks that were then held liable for repayment by RBZ. This increased the risk profile of commercial banks for most loans especially those to the development sector;
- Most seasonal loans matured and were called up before the items they financed were ready for the market;
- Failure by the farmers to meet their loan obligation due to the short repayment periods resulted in the commercial banks paying the RBZ and in turn charging the farmers the commercial interest rates. This obviously negatively affected the farmers who found themselves in a debt trap and were not able to farm the following season; and

- Some farmers resorted to side-marketing which negated the objective of food security.

**The Agricultural Sector Productive Enhancement Facility (ASPEF)**
This facility, established in 2004, supported a number of key areas such as irrigation rehabilitation, horticulture, crop and livestock production and the development of new irrigation schemes. Though intended to rectify the shortcomings of its predecessor, it fell victim to the following:

- ASPEF programs were poorly designed with an apparent emphasis on financial aspects instead of farmer empowerment;
- Centralized Implementation with the Central Bank making all the decisions. The Central Bank recruited a few key people from the Ministry of Agriculture who were now the sole advisers to the bank;
- Ministry plans and projections were often ignored as the Central Bank sought to implement its own policies and strategies often at variance with the Ministry of Agriculture; and

*Operation Maguta/Inala/Food Security Command Agriculture*)

This was the government’s response to the continuing deterioration in national food security status. It was based on the conviction that an improvement in logistics would result in farmers getting their inputs in time, plant early and get decent yields. The Central Bank made Maguta a separate entity from the Ministry of Agriculture and accorded it special payment and clearance arrangements. Maguta began marginalizing the Ministry, and completed the takeover in the second year of its implementation. In the process, it ring-fenced all the inputs and established its own priorities. In the winter season of 2007, farmers could not obtain inputs if they had not “joined” Maguta.

There was gross abuse of this scheme resulting in the squeezing-out of genuine farmers, secularized input distribution, and the diversion of inputs to the black market by unscrupulous profiteers. The potential for food security had suffered another damaging blow.

*The Champion Farmers Program*

Under this initiative introduced in 2008, the government undertook to provide inputs to targeted farmers capable of producing high yields. It failed to target potentially productive farmers as evidenced by the following:

- Everyone who filled an application form was considered regardless of capability or track record;
- The program was launched very late and input distribution suffered from lack of fuel and transport facilities;
• Original crop packs had been revised and reduced to 50% of the initial quantities, a factor almost guaranteed to make the targeted yield of 5 tons per hectare unattainable;
• The use of the same Maguta machinery for logistics and distribution rendered the initiative unviable; and
• The lack of proper targeting meant that the objective of achieving food security was severely compromised.

Subsidized fuel for farmers

Some of the loopholes that emerged here were as follows:

• The Ministry could not distinguish farmers from non-farmers and a lot of fuel went to non-farmers who ended up selling it on the black market;
• There was no monitoring and follow-up in the field to ascertain that fuel had been used for the intended purpose; and
• Fuel companies contracted to distribute the fuel to farmers deliberately delayed distribution or significantly reduced quantities destined for farmers by diverting the fuel to the commercial market where the returns were higher.

The Government announced that the fuel scheme for farmers was being abandoned and that every farmer was to source fuel from the market.

Some general comments

The Government should engage with development partners to mobilize resources for production and improvement to improve food security.

The Central Bank needs to support the private sector to mobilize resources for agriculture and the government should explore opportunities for the private sector to take over certain activities. These could include research and extension as appropriate and verifying compliance with standards and norms. The government could put in place facilitatory mechanisms including the following:

• Provision of incentives for private investment, particularly to banks and financial institutions, to provide financial services to the private sector for investment to boost agricultural productivity.
• Establishment of an investment code to protect private investors that will attract foreign private investment, and regulations to facilitate the establishment of joint ventures and partnerships with foreign companies.
• Simplify business regulations and procedures required to establish new businesses in agriculture.
• Capitalize on the strength of the private sector to mobilize additional resources for financing public goods through Public-Private Partnerships (PPP). This could be done through the development of an appropriate legal framework.

The government must encourage inputs to flow directly to commercial retail outlets where farmers can source appropriate requirements. Free inputs supply must be stopped as it has proved skewed and disastrous.

Zimbabwe has several underutilized large, medium and small farm dams that can be used for full or supplementary irrigation. Current efforts to rehabilitate irrigation systems should be strengthened. Programs such as water harvesting, conservation farming and the utilization of wetlands for smallholders could make significant contributions to food security.

While maize has assumed the dominant position, encouraging the growth of crops such as cowpeas, edible beans, rapoko, Bambara nuts, finger millet and sorghum in Regions II and III can make significant contributions to food security at the household level.

With good organizational planning, livestock can play an enhanced role in both food security and nutrition at the household and national levels. Small stock and poultry need to be encouraged in this regard.

The improved targeting of beneficiaries would be critical to enhanced food security and lessons need to be learned from past failed initiatives.

**Concrete steps**

*Food aid:* Food relief will continue to be needed in the short-term and development partners and NGOs are critical players here. The reduction of food aid in the rural areas (communal and resettlement areas) can be achieved through a program of support for the communal and resettlement farmer to produce his/her own food. Urban agriculture can contribute significantly to food security at the household level.
Household level food security: Smallholder farmers are key to this issue and the following is required to motivate the small farmer:

- Improved and assured access to inputs;
- Removal of past distribution bottlenecks;
- Avoiding excessive political patronage of target beneficiaries; and
- Early delivery of inputs.

Development partners, NGOs, and Civil society should consider supporting minimum packages as follows:

- 25 kg. maize seed;
- 50 kg. bag of Compound D fertilizer;
- 100 kg. (2 bags) Ammonium Nitrate for top dressing; and
- 2 kg. budworm granules.

This package should be adequate for 1 ha of maize and should be distributed to beneficiaries in the major maize producing areas. The value of this package based on current prices is estimated at US$195.00. The total estimated investment for the maize package will be US$292.5 million.

A different package is recommended for the drier areas of the country and should comprise:

- 25 kg. sorghum seed;
- 50 kg. bag Compound D fertilizer; and
- 50 kg. bag Ammonium Nitrate.

This package should be adequate for 1 ha of sorghum. The value of this package based on current prices is estimated at US$115.00. The total estimated cost for the sorghum package will be US$92 million.

The above minimum packages should yield 1 500 000 mt of maize (1 million packages @ 1.5 tons per hectare) and 400 000 tons of sorghum (800 000 packages @ 0.5 tons per hectare). Given the previous yield levels these are achievable targets.

Distribution modalities: The food aid distribution clusters set up by the World Food Program and NGOs have proved effective as they cut across the political
divide. Where such clusters exist, they should be used for input distribution and similar ones set up where they do not exist.

*Increasing food security for non-producing urban areas and farm workers:* Vulnerability in the urban areas has increased and this trend is likely to continue. Food security in the urban areas can be improved through a production of surpluses in the smallholder sectors or in the commercial sector (A2 and large-scale commercial farms). The following actions are suggested to achieve higher production levels in the commercial farming areas:

- Establishment of a formal inputs market for the acquisition of essential inputs;
- Provision of agricultural credit for farmers to procure inputs. An initial injection of US$ 200 million is required as seed money for lending to farmers. Interest rates should be practical and credible in order to encourage banks and financial institutions to take up the facility;
- Promotion of contract farming and joint ventures for the targeted production of specific crops. It is expected that the private sector will arrange to fund the contracts.

Development partners and NGOs should fund the initial establishment of an inputs market - the required inputs will be sold on the market. Commercial farmers including A2 farmers should not benefit from a program of support similar to smallholder farmers since they have the potential to acquire their own inputs through appropriate credit arrangements. Banks should be encouraged to provide finance to commercial farmers using the crop as security. At the same time government should make the A2 lease tradable so that banks can have the lease as security.

*Further global support:* This will require the following actions.

- **Support to the local fertilizer industry for raw material procurement** - This measure will ensure that in the short to medium term, the local fertilizer industry is revived and strengthened to provide a sustainable service. Banks and financial institutions should provide lines of credit to the fertilizer industry. An initial support of US$25 million for raw material imports should be set aside for the fertilizer industry.
- **Support to agricultural machinery service and repair facility** - Current indications are that the mechanization program needs to be complemented
by repair and maintenance facilities to sustain the tillage requirements. This applies to both the old mechanization inherited from the land reform program and the new thrust. Financial facilities should be provided for individual farmers to purchase tractors and other equipment. The Ministry of Agriculture, Mechanization and Irrigation Development has secured a facility from RBZ to help set up service and repair facilities under the mechanization program.

- **Support to the seed industry** - The seed industry is not in a position to provide all the planting requirements for the agriculture sector. There is adequate infrastructure for the seed industry to thrive again now that some of the impediments such as pricing have been removed. With the return to market dispensation, the seed industry should be able to operate more efficiently. An estimated funding requirement of US$ 20 million for the seed industry for acquisition of planting material and processing equipment would provide the required support. This money can be channelled through banks and financial institutions as a commercial loan.

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