

The Political Economy of Emerging Trade-offs between Famine Relief and Sustainable Food Security Recovery: The Potential Role of Stakeholder Policy Dialogues



Stakeholders of a small village in Zimbabwe engaging in dialogue

Over the past three years, food security recovery and famine mitigation have been a major preoccupation of government, the civil society and private agribusiness sector in the SADC region and particularly in countries where famine has become a recurrent problem. Countries affected by famine have provided important models on how to react to famine and manage the relationship between famine relief and protection of domestic food security interests. In the midst of the humanitarian process, conflicts have emerged between government, the food relief organizations and the private agribusiness sector.

The conflicts reflect the complex trade-off and complementary relationships between the spectrum of

social, economic and political goals that shape domestic food and agricultural policy environment as well as the international political economy of subsidized food production for sustaining global relief operations in developing countries. While some SADC countries allowed famine relief operators to distribute food Zimbabwe maintained control.

The Global Political Economic Context of Food Aid

In its purest and simplest form, food aid ensures free of charge, national food security without the concerned nation engaging

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in the costly and risky business of domestic food production. While famine creates the need for humanitarian assistance the arrival of food aid in a country has the potential to transform the domestic political economy and upsets the balance of local political power. Food aid heralds the birth of a domestic relief industry that is linked to the global food economy and its powerful spectrum of international stakeholders. The global relief food supply system is characterized by subsidized corporate production of surplus food supported by the Western World particularly the EU and North American governments.

The provision of food aid to developing economies is of strategic financial and political importance to Western Governments. They see food aid as a way of supporting their domestic agricultural sector as it guarantees them a ready market. The African continent has proved to be a reliable and growing market for food aid and provides economic relief to the agribusiness and downstream industries of the developed world.

The presence of EU/North America subsidized production of agricultural commodities in time of famine that African farmers would otherwise have a comparative advantage in supplying the world with, has negatively affected African agrarian economies. Any gains in productivity are lost during periods of food aid. Thus, resulting in lifetime poverty and vulnerability to famine.

Managing Famine for Successful return to Sustainable Food Security

Food aid, destroys the fabric of the domestic agribusiness and agricultural sector replacing it with a famine relief industry. A collective reflection and self examination of policy response to famine management and food security recovery is therefore required both at country and at regional levels in order to craft future policy choices in the event of famine in the SADC region.

Major mistakes made and lessons learnt have to do with defining the appropriate arena for debating contentious policy issues before public pronouncements of positions. Relying on the media is to the benefit of international relief operators in pronouncing their self-serving policy positions.

Governments are usually caught without any pronounced famine management strategies and food security and

recovery policy frameworks. Most SADAC countries were caught unaware allowing relief operators to manage famine relief operations. Thus marginalizing domestic interests in the management of famine relief.

In addition, the domestic agribusiness sector hard hit by famine may be severely crippled and even destroyed by the expansion of well intended distribution of the externally acquired free food and seed. Thus, further crippling the forward and backward industries. A logical approach would be for governments, to ensure that there is fair, balanced and adequate representation of domestic stakeholders (agribusiness sector, urban working class, farmers, vulnerable rural people and farm workers, and rural business community) beyond government social welfare departments in managing relief operations. This can guarantee the positive social objectives of getting the policies right for society as a whole.

Managing famine for successful and expeditious return to domestic normalcy in agricultural production and provisions for national food security during periods of stress in output requires attention to the following three key issues:

(a) Understanding the Nature of Emerging Famine and Food Insecurity Crisis Situations

In a sub continent in which poverty and food insecurity is a common occurrence, there must be domestic and/or regional agreement on the salient features that qualify an observed shock to food insecurity and poverty to trigger international emergency response. Sometimes the appropriate response to famine and food insecurity situation is not the delivery of externally procured food supplies, but mere provision of means to acquire otherwise domestically available food and agricultural inputs. The distribution of locally available food from one region of the country to another or from one country in the region to another may be the issue. Externally driven relief efforts may fail to recognize this. Thus, common understanding of the cause of famine is often important in arriving at a consensus to end famine as well as return to normalcy.

Experience in Sub Saharan Africa has shown that the famine relief period is a desirable period for both the targeted vulnerable populations, who are able to obtain food for survival, and the famine relief service providers, who are into the business of food distribution. Although food aid is accepted as the normal form of global response to emergency famine situations, it cannot address the African challenge of

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underdevelopment and cannot be a permanent solution to food shortage problems. The progressive approach should be one that delivers food relief as a short-term measure and helps design policies and programmes to avert the causes of the food crises.

(b) Effective Plan for Responding to National Emergencies.

A comprehensive disaster preparedness and response plan must include a complete system of signals for communicating to domestic, regional and international relief providers the type and severity of a forecast national food emergency situation. The preparedness plan must also outline appropriate forms, magnitude and timing of response expected from the international relief industry. Given the inevitable social, economic and political conflicts inherent in famine relief operation, the national strategy must provide clear, practical and purposive operational policy guidelines for facilitating relief operations while protecting domestic business and socioeconomic system. The new generation of famine management plans must include clear coded specifications of acceptable and permissible best practices.

(c) Strategic planning and management of the transition period

The challenge is in balancing the normally short-term humanitarian concerns of premature termination of famine relief with domestic long term social, economic and political concerns about the adverse economic, social and political impacts of prolonged famine relief operations. Experience has shown that prolonged supplies of abundant food aid relief has the potential of transforming otherwise productive members of society into permanent food aid recipients with little incentive to work for their food security. The common practice of the famine relief industry of establishing their own parallel supply chain for delivery of food aid from international markets to the target beneficiaries often paralyses local industry and pose a threat to rural businesses over the duration of famine relief operations. Thus, reducing future prospects for post-famine economic growth and sustainable food security recovery.

On the other hand premature exit of food aid and relief operations worsens the poverty of vulnerable populations as it results in more chronic forms of systemic poverty and permanent states of food insecurity with limited prospects of speedy post famine economic recovery. The solution to the viability problems posed by provision of famine relief

on local industry and rural businesses rests with extension of principle of famine recovery to integrate local businesses into the business of distributing famine relief. This would provide business to local traders at time when business volume is drastically reduced by famine. However, this is not always feasible as most countries providing famine relief funding often dictates the type and source of supplies of food aid in line with its own domestic political economy and food market situations.

Ideally famine recovery programs should shift procurement from foreign to local sources and to using local or regional commercial business supply chains and outlets in rural areas for delivery of all major forms of famine relief supplies. The private agro dealers voucher system of distributing famine relief piloted by a number of development NGOs in Zimbabwe and Malawi demonstrated the feasibility and potential cost savings associated with replacing NGOs/CBOs with rural shops in the frontline distribution of famine relief. Its attraction rests with the division of responsibility and accountability between the local trader and the NGO famine relief provider to capitalize on strengths of the two players.

The Appropriate Context and Potential for Stakeholder Policy Dialogue

In most famine hit SADC countries, stakeholder consultations are limited primarily to the area of implementation of famine relief and not into the area of formulation of famine relief and recovery policies and programs. This often remains the monopoly of government, thus compromising the quality of famine relief and food security recovery policies. Major costs associated with poor policy framework for managing famine relief and recovery policies is poor quality of the relief operations and poor prospects of sustained recovery both of which come at a higher social cost.

It should be the goal of every elected government to get policies right in order to address the crucial challenges facing its key stakeholders. The Food Security Policy Framework of most SADC countries were developed without consulting the vulnerable groups and therefore are inadequate in crucial areas. This reflects the absence of any serious policy focus on effective food security "safety nets" and "policy ladders out of poverty" for the vulnerable populations.

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Conclusion

The fundamental challenge in improving food security policies is in creating a level playing field for all stakeholders to engage effectively and equitably in formulating food policy at national and regional levels. The major component of the challenge rests with empowering all stakeholders including the marginalized to effectively participate in policy formulation. Developing a food security and famine

management policy at both regional and national levels requires a comprehensive stakeholder dialogue and consultative process that is inclusive. At regional level, nationally constructed policies can then be harmonized, giving as they would be representative by nature of the approach giving birth to regional policies. The government, as the elected representatives of nationals of each country should take the lead but not the monopoly of the process to develop such policies.

This Article is an extract of a paper written by Reneth Mano, Node Coordinator of FANRPAN Zimbabwe. To obtain the full paper e-mail: policy@fanrpan.org

NOTICE BOARD

1. One of the major stakeholders of the FANRPAN Network, Farming Organizations (which include commodity associations, smallholder farming organizations, agri-business) are seriously limited in their capacity to participate in the policy formulation and dialogue and hence are failing to take advantage of their collective strength to influence policies in their favour as well as failing to learn from each other's experiences for the same reasons.

With this background and as a result of consultations, FANRPAN will initiate the strengthening of farmer based organizations at the regional level through working with the already existing Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions (SACAU). A 2 day workshop will be convened on 19-20 July 2004 at Hotel Safari in Windhoek Namibia to discuss the establishment of an appropriate technical assistance programme for farmers and farmer-based organizations in the area of policy advocacy and representation capacity of farmer organizations leading to the development of an Information and Communication strategy for SACAU. This project is being undertaken in collaboration with the CTA.

2. FANRPAN and ITA have been undertaking a study aimed at Improving Rural Livelihoods in Southern Africa. The first phase of the study is ending in August 2004. A regional stakeholder dialogue will


be held on 19-20 August 2004 to review the findings from each of the participating countries in order to identify those that will be of relevance to the SADC countries as a whole. The workshop will provide a forum for dialogue and consultation among the representatives of stakeholders from the pilot countries and also from other SADC countries that did not take part in this Year 1 project, experts from ITA and FANRPAN, and other participants from the host country.

The anticipated outputs of the workshop are as follows:-

- Information dissemination of findings from each country;
- Major policy issues identified and to be best addressed at SADC level;
- Proposed solutions to the identified policies at SADC level;
- Priority commodities at SADC level; and
- Advocacy strategies for the implementation of recommendations as a follow up to this work.

Further details of these workshops can be obtained by emailing a request to policy@fanrpan.org

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