Southern Africa's Silent Food Crisis

July 6, 2016

A team from the CSIS Africa Program and the CSIS Global Food Security Project recently returned from Mozambique and Malawi, which are in the grip of the worst drought to hit southern Africa for more than three decades. An estimated 6.5 million Malawians—39 percent of the population—will need emergency food assistance by the end of the year, and at least 1.5 million Mozambicans face similar risks. The immediate cause of the catastrophe is the El Niño *weather system, but policy and governance shortcomings in both countries have aggravated the situation, as Richard Downie explains.*

Dorothy Mnemula, the head of a household of four in Balaka district, Malawi, shows us her groundnut (peanut) harvest, the product of many months of hard labor. It fits comfortably into a small basket. Her other crops have fared little better. She tells us that in an average season her sorghum harvest would yield four or five 50-kilogram bags, but this year she has less than one bag to show for her efforts. The rains started late and ended early in this part of south-central Malawi. In this country of farmers who rely almost entirely on rain-fed agriculture, there is no second chance. The climate allows for only one harvest a year, and this season's paltry returns were gathered only a few weeks ago. The coming lean season looks like the toughest yet for communities knocked back by successive years of drought and flooding. When I ask Dorothy how she will cope, there is a long pause before she answers: "It will be hard this year to take care of everyone."

In neighboring Mozambique, the "great grey-green, greasy" Limpopo River immortalized by Rudyard Kipling looks far less imposing this year. We cross the river on our way to Mabalane District in Gaza, one of the hardest hit of Mozambique's 10 provinces. The water level is too low to feed the irrigation channels that nourish the nearby sugar cane plantations. For the ordinary farmer, the situation is even worse. Many have experienced total crop failure, have drawn down their food reserves, and are already relying on emergency assistance. We accompany a team from COSACA, a consortium of four international nongovernmental organizations that is distributing food vouchers to 10,000 families across four districts. The vouchers, worth $40, are given to the heads of each eligible family once a month. The coupons can be exchanged for essential food items—corn flour, rice, and cooking oil—sold by visiting traders. But rapidly rising inflation means that they don't come close to meeting the dietary needs of even the smallest family. The COSACA representative in charge of the distribution process urges recipients to "Eat enough to live, not to fill your tummies." This is the last month that the program will operate in its current form, and the funding outlook is uncertain. Villagers tell us it is becoming increasingly difficult to find drinking water for themselves and their cattle and say they are foraging for leaves and roots to supplement their meager diets.

A Slow Response

International donors have been sounding the alarm over the situation in southern Africa since the end of 2015, but the host governments that must lead any emergency response effort have been slower to amplify those messages. Malawi only declared a national disaster in April, while Mozambique has yet to formally issue one at all; so far the only official signal of the crisis has come from its disaster relief agency, which issued a "red alert," also in April. In Mozambique, the scale of the emergency was unclear for several months because of doubts about the accuracy of data collected by the agency responsible for making on-the-ground assessments, the **Technical Secretariat for Food Security** and Nutrition (SETSAN). A survey conducted in December found that 167,000 people were in need of food assistance, mainly in the three southernmost provinces. However, when SETSAN made a further assessment in March, it revised the number dramatically upwards, to 1.5 million, spread across seven provinces.

The food crisis could not have come at a worse time for Mozambique, which has seen a resurgence of the civil war that formally ended in 1992. Fighting in the center of the country has displaced civilians and hampered the distribution of aid supplies to affected districts, not only in Mozambique but in neighboring Malawi as well. In addition, a scandal involving almost $2 billion of dubious loans, much of them state backed and hidden from the International Monetary Fund, has devastated the economy and poisoned relations with international donors at the very time their assistance is most needed. Foreign currency reserves have been drawn down, and inflation has risen sharply, driving up food prices. Public-sector wages have failed to keep up, placing ordinary citizens in a precarious position. Mozambique's government is distracted, and despite the efforts of its disaster relief agency, the National Disaster Management Institute, it is incapable of mounting an effective response to the drought.

Partly as a result of this unfavorable backdrop, Mozambique's drought response faces an enormous funding gap. The estimated cost of the relief effort is $190 million, based on the current assessment of 1.5 million people in need, which is likely to rise. Only one-quarter of those requiring assistance are receiving any support at all. One donor representative said Mozambique would be lucky to get much more than 10 percent of what it needs.

Over the border in Malawi, the emergency response has yet to get off the ground. The results of a needs survey conducted by the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee, a group of government agencies and donors, was released in June, but a coordinated response plan has yet to be released. The government is scouring the region for surplus supplies of white maize, which is used to make nsima, the staple food for the vast majority of Malawians. With the domestic harvest down more than 12 percent on last year (when production was 30 percent lower than in 2014), the search is increasingly urgent. However, few countries have a surplus to sell because the drought has affected the whole of southern Africa. So far, only Zambia has stepped forward. Furthermore, some observers question whether Malawi has the foreign reserves to make such large purchases. Orders have been given to Malawi's state-run Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation, ADMARC, to buy all available domestic stocks in preparation for subsidized sales to the public, but its intervention has failed to keep the cost of maize down. In June, a 50-kilogram bag of maize was selling for $19, an increase of 60 percent in just two months.

Meanwhile, the elite in Malawi's capital, Lilongwe, appears detached from the situation despite the insistent prompting of the donors. The city's golf course remains green and lush while the rest of the city faces water rationing, and the south of the country is a carpet of washed out brown. One donor representative recounts a senior official talking airily about the need for people to adjust to the situation, as they've always done in times of hardship, by cutting down to one meal a day. President Peter Mutharika has urged citizens to rely on traditional coping mechanisms such as eating mice and grasshoppers. (Following criticism of the remarks, a spokeswoman for the president said he had been joking).

Policy Inertia

Neither the governments of Mozambique nor Malawi appear to have the political appetite to adjust to the new realities of climate variability or make policy reforms that would help alleviate the current crisis and put themselves in a better position to face the next one. In Malawi, most farmers continue to grow maize exclusively, even though it is ill-suited to changing climatic conditions in the south of the country. A costly fertilizer subsidy scheme continues to drain the agriculture budget, even though there is inconclusive evidence that it has helped improve productivity or increased food security. An unofficial ban on maize exports and government interference in commodities markets through ADMARC deter investment in the agriculture sector. A profusion of ill-directed and disconnected social safety net programs neither meet the needs of recipients nor provide a pathway out of dependency.

The donor community in Malawi has largely united around a set of proposals for government reform that includes less prohibitive trade regulations, the passage of a new agricultural policy, land reform, and further pruning of the fertilizer subsidy scheme. They have framed their message around the concept of "breaking the cycle" of food insecurity, but the results of their engagement are modest, at best. The more optimistic among them talk of using this year's crisis as an opportunity to push for reform; the gloomier observers note that Malawi "never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Meanwhile, the government of Malawi complains that donors are too pushy and do not take sufficient account of political sensitivities and the challenges of getting things done.

Linking Relief and Development: U.S. Policy Responses

The United States is a major donor to both Malawi and Mozambique. In 2014, more than $230 million was disbursed to Malawi, while Mozambique received $441 million. The lion's share of this assistance was spent on health initiatives, particularly the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, but an increasing share was directed to improving agricultural productivity and addressing food insecurity. Both countries, for example, are beneficiaries of President Obama's Feed the Future initiative, which has the goals of alleviating poverty and hunger while at the same time developing agricultural value chains and boosting productivity. The regional drought undercuts these efforts and threatens to divert attention from longer-term development goals to short-term humanitarian responses like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Food for Peace Emergency programs. The price tag for dealing with these almost annual crises is becoming unsustainable, yet the United States is not going to walk away when lives are at stake. USAID has spent more than $129 million on humanitarian assistance to Malawi alone since 2012. Each crisis chips away at development gains, damages livelihoods, and drags people back into extreme poverty.

At the same time, strict budget earmarks, procurement rules, and inflexible targets mean that Feed the Future has been less responsive to the current food crisis than it could have been. The model for Feed the Future is to concentrate resources on targets of opportunity within partner countries rather than spread resources nationwide. In Mozambique, this has resulted in a situation whereby Feed the Future's efforts to build agricultural markets and alleviate poverty are located in the north and center of the country, far from the epicenter of the drought and the current food crisis. In Malawi, there is greater overlap between what Feed the Future calls its zones of influence and the drought-struck areas. Here, a different problem comes into play: it is hard to distinguish between its activities and those of the shorter-term emergency programs. There are few viable agricultural value chains to develop and the high level of poverty means that most farmers only produce to consume. Building resilience among households is an increasingly tough proposition in an environment where increased climate variability is delivering food shocks year after year. Looking forward, it may be necessary for Feed the Future to better integrate climate awareness into its approach to agricultural development.

Conclusion

The immediate outlook is bleak in southern Africa. The authorities are scrambling to respond to an historic drought with few resources and limited options for securing the food commodities they need to feed their citizens in the coming months. International donors and UN agencies are accelerating their response, but the funding shortfall is enormous. Also on the horizon is the looming threat that a *La Niña* weather system, the inverse to *El Niño*, will bring flooding to hard-hit areas toward the end of this year. Both governments blame the crisis on climatic factors beyond their control. While this is partly true, they do have the power to make policy changes that would enable them to respond more effectively to extreme weather events and equip their citizens with a wider selection of tools to help them cope during times of hardship.

As an important donor to both countries, the United States will continue to push its partners to take a more proactive stance in the face of a quickening cycle of weather-related food shocks. A business-as-usual approach will not do. The United States can also adapt its engagement on agriculture through Feed the Future, the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, and other initiatives and agencies, to ensure that climate adaptation drives its activities in the most vulnerable countries. It can also do more to strengthen the links between its longer-term activities to boost agricultural productivity and its short-term emergency relief efforts. While some USAID program awards contain crisis modifiers that allow funding to be redirected to emergency response, Feed the Future does not. In addition, more clarity is needed about the overall objectives of Feed the Future, which is trying to do two distinct sets of activities—alleviate hunger and develop agricultural value chains—with what in theory are two distinct groups—the poorest of the poor and the productive farmer. These are both important objectives, but it does not necessarily make sense to do them at the same time in the same locations.

Finally, the unfolding food crisis in southern Africa may require USAID and other development actors to evaluate strategies to build household, community, and national resilience. Many donors have embraced resilience as a development concept, viewing it as a way of protecting livelihoods and preventing vulnerable citizens from succumbing to the types of crises that require costly emergency interventions. But is it possible to build resilience in a meaningful way in the face of the large, repeated shocks that climate variability is delivering to some of the most fragile parts of the world? Furthermore, is success even possible in countries with governments that are unwilling or unable to make policy changes that improve food security? Based on observations in the hardest-hit communities in Malawi and Mozambique, who face the prospect of many months of uncertainty and hunger, achieving resilience is a distant dream. Interim strategies will be required that help communities get through yet another crisis and bridge the gap between emergency assistance and the long-term objective of resilience.

Richard Downie is a fellow and deputy director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.