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INTERNATIONAL FOOD
POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

sustainable options for ending hunger and poverty

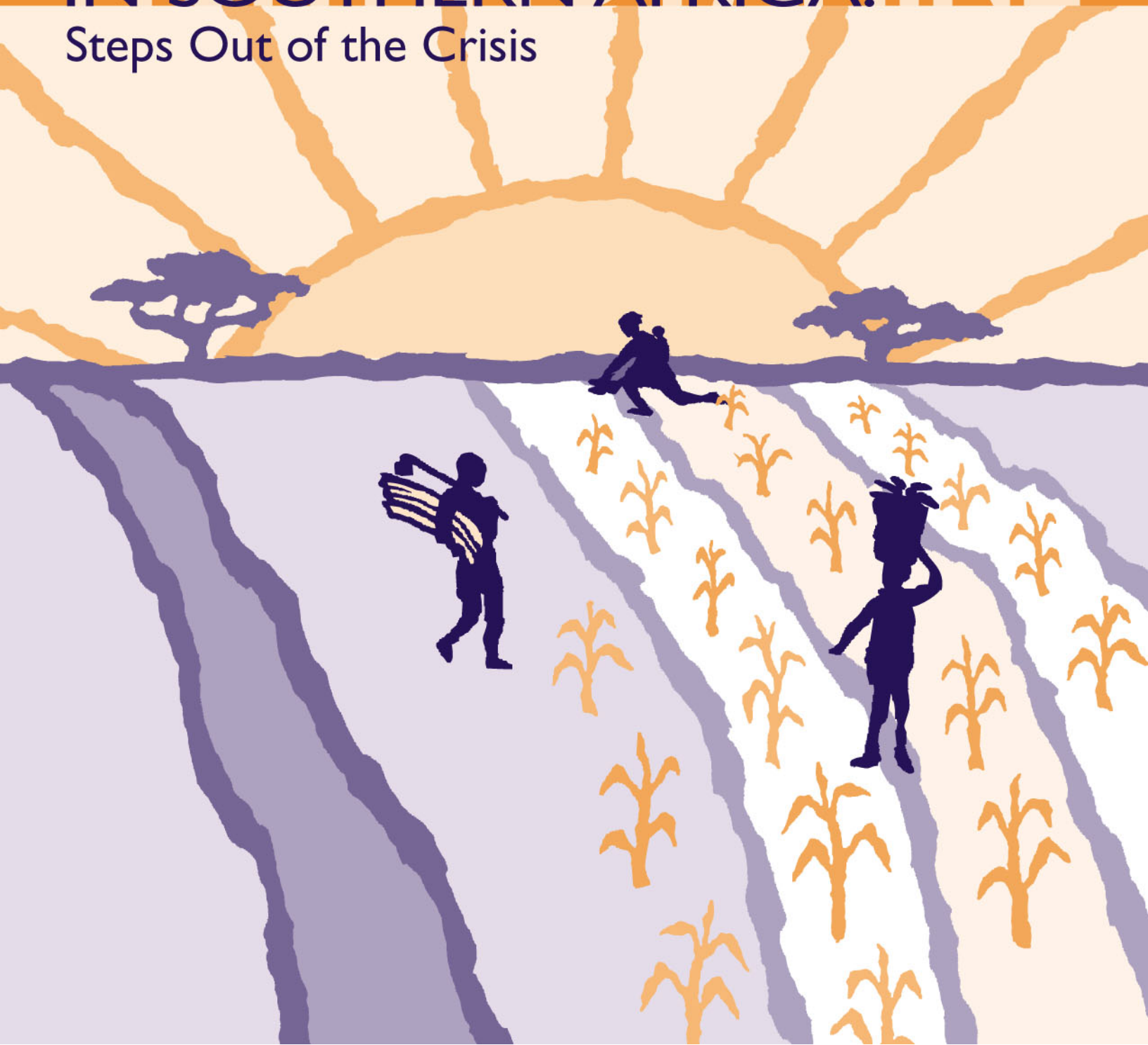


Lesotho
Malawi
Mozambique
Swaziland
Zambia
Zimbabwe

FIGHTING FAMINE

IN SOUTHERN AFRICA:

Steps Out of the Crisis



FIGHTING FAMINE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: STEPS OUT OF THE CRISIS

About 10 million people in southern Africa—Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—are experiencing famine or the threat of famine. In Malawi, an estimated 70 percent of the population has been affected by food shortages, with the situation only a little better in Zambia and Zimbabwe. In past years, grain shortfalls in the region could be filled with imports from South Africa, but this year that country too has produced lower than normal yields.

The immediate causes of the current crisis are drought, flooding, and low levels of crop planting. What has made these countries so vulnerable to famine, however, is chronic poverty and inadequate policies. Now these conditions have combined to result in severe shortfalls in food production and in turn high prices for maize, the staple food of the region.

The key to overcoming this famine is appropriate and effective policies. Environmental shocks like drought bring collapse only to systems that are already weak owing to poor policies and governance. To mitigate the present famine in southern Africa and to prevent others in the future, governments in the region will have to adopt the well-being of their people as their central goal. If governments allow wars, corruption, and poor policies to continue, actions to mitigate and prevent famines will fail.

Policies for mitigating famine lie on a spectrum ranging from immediate relief to recovery to initiating development. Preventing future famines requires long-term development policies. When deciding which mitigation policies to adopt, policymakers must consider two questions: What interventions should be implemented? And when will their implementation be most effective? Policymakers must answer these questions within the context of their own country.

Described here are the policy approaches that IFPRI® research in Africa has shown to be effective in fighting famine.



IMMEDIATE RELIEF

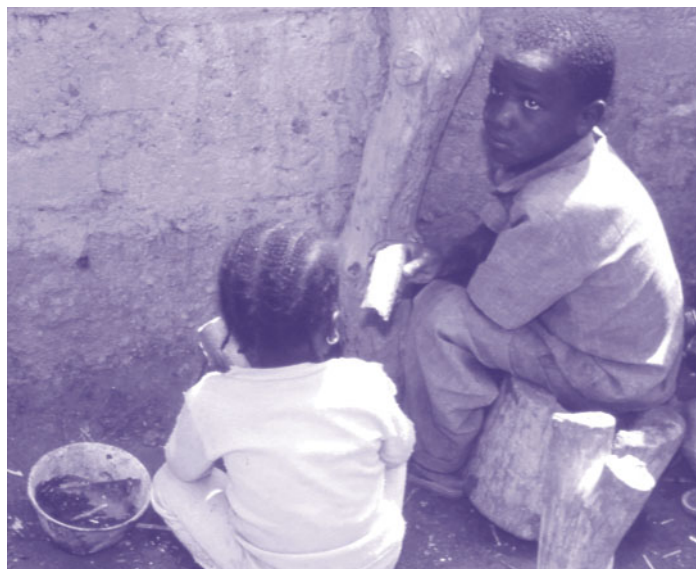
GETTING FOOD TO THE HUNGRY

Make food available to those suffering most as fast as possible. When a famine is already underway, governments and aid agencies must work to minimize the mortality, dislocation, and destitution it produces. For fastest relief, a government can release reserves of grain, which can also help to stabilize prices. But if such reserves do not exist, there are few options for providing immediate relief other than the distribution of free food aid. Relief must go to the most severely affected regions and people, even if they are difficult to reach, as rapidly as possible. In areas prone to food shortages, populations may require free food aid for several years.

Distribute food to people where they live. Food camps should be avoided as much as possible. The weakness caused by extreme hunger may prevent entire households from traveling to central food aid outlets. In addition, the formation of food camps undermines household stability by uprooting people, thus also removing the basis for future development. Camps also threaten the population's health by helping to spread disease, especially cholera, because of poor sanitation and overcrowding. Camps may also expose the most vulnerable to exploitation by more powerful inhabitants. Weak management and ineffective operation in camps can leave the neediest people unassisted. When roads do not exist, however, and people have already come to central locations, project administrators will have little choice but to use these central distribution points.

Target the most affected areas first. In many cases, famine is most severe in certain regions of a country owing to, for instance, local environmental calamity, remoteness, poor infrastructure, or higher pre-famine levels of hunger and malnutrition. This is now the case in some southern African countries. In Lesotho, poverty and malnutrition are particularly pronounced in mountainous and difficult-to-reach areas. In Mozambique, food shortages are occurring in the south and central regions. In Zimbabwe, the south, west, and extreme north are most affected. A national famine mitigation strategy can be more effective and more cost-effective if it targets food aid to the areas with the most severe food shortages and uses other programs to address the threat of hunger elsewhere. Criteria for ranking the severity of the situation by district might include crop production records, emigration numbers, anthropometric measures of nutritional status, and reported mortality rates.

Within areas, aim assistance at the neediest households. Within targeted and nontargeted areas, households differ in size, wealth, composition, and coping capacity. If all house-



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holds in an area require assistance for a time, aid administrators may respond by distributing food aid evenly, but in such cases large families and those that have no additional coping mechanisms will suffer. It is crucial that aid administrators work to ensure that the poorest households receive what they need to survive.

Use standardized and formal guidelines for distribution. Discrimination by gender, age, status, ethnicity, and political affiliation often arises in food aid distribution. Households headed by women or the elderly and households of low status or minority ethnicity are frequently poorer to begin with. Relying on informal and varying criteria for food distribution, such as the judgments of village leaders or project administrators, may make the situation worse for these poor households. Aid organizations must establish transparent rules—and be seen to be enforcing them—for distribution to ensure that the most disadvantaged households receive the aid they need and that resources are used efficiently.

Invest in health services during famine relief and recovery. Many of the deaths that occur during famine are due not to starvation, but to disease. Undernutrition makes people more susceptible to disease, and existing health services are often unable to take on the added burden. It is therefore imperative that governments maintain or increase public investments in health services during famine, including investments in childcare, nutrition, sanitation, and clean water. Health services during famines are also needed to cope with HIV/AIDS.

RECOVERING FROM FAMINE

VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT, LABOR-INTENSIVE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS, AND PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Assess famine vulnerability in all areas. Vulnerability mapping can help determine what kinds of relief and recovery interventions are needed to move out of famine. Some useful indicators to collect for households in each district are levels of food intake, average income level and income range, food sources, coping capacities, links to markets, level of asset holdings, and water scarcity. It is also important to know which households are headed by females or the elderly and which households have members with AIDS.

Implement labor-intensive public works programs. Public works programs that employ poor people provide three main benefits: they offer short-term income, they serve as risk insurance, and they create assets by developing or improving public goods important for future food security, such as infrastructure and the natural resource base. Which benefit an intervention should focus on will depend on the health of the households participating as they recover from severe hunger, their coping capacity, and the level of food shortage. During the initial crisis stage of a famine, a public works program may disregard the asset-generation component. Once some security has been achieved, however, thought should be given to how the scheme can create outputs that promote food security and prevent famine.

Where a public works program exists, it should be expanded. In Zimbabwe, for instance, such a program helped prevent a famine in 1991, and this program should be scaled up. Labor-intensive employment schemes, however, require extensive administrative capacity if they are to contribute effectively to a nation's recovery efforts. If such capacity is not present, food aid and other assistance schemes may be more suitable.

Provide payment in the form of food when food prices are too high. During the early recovery stages, when food shortages still exist, food may still be too expensive for the poor to afford and the cash wages offered by public works programs may be insufficient. In certain regions of southern Africa, where prices are very high but extreme shortages at the household level do not yet exist, food-for-work schemes would be an appropriate intervention. Such schemes would also work well in areas with poor infrastructure or far from markets. Cash wages, on the other hand, are most appropriate in, for example, urban areas where food is available but incomes have declined and in rural areas where food markets function well.

Target public works schemes to poor households. During famine it can be difficult to limit participants in public works programs to the "needy." As with food aid distribution, public works should employ standardized and formal criteria to target those suffering most. Public works programs can also reach more poor than nonpoor people if wages are set relatively low or food quantities supplied are limited. To distribute the benefits across poor households, administrators could set minimum quotas for female participants who are heads of households or limit the number of participants per household.

Implement supplementary programs to assist destitute households that cannot participate in public works schemes. Many destitute households, especially those headed by females or the elderly or those in which working-age adults have AIDS, do not have an adult who can go out to work in public works schemes. For these households, other programs such as free food aid are required. A lack of such programs will lead to a significant decline in human and social capital for development in the future.

Encourage the private sector to implement employment schemes for the poor. When drought or floods cause food prices to rise and farm incomes to decline, the government could give agents in the commercial agriculture sector, such as tobacco estates in Malawi or commercial farms in Zambia or Zimbabwe, incentives to temporarily employ poor rural people. If food prices are high, these private agents could purchase staple grains from the public sector and provide them as wages for work.

Develop public and private partnerships to make food more available. Although initial recovery from famine requires government involvement, greater private-sector participation in supplying and distributing food could help alleviate local food shortages and lower local prices. Poor infrastructure may prevent the transport of food between regions, but the private sector could help make food more easily available within regions. Public-private partnerships in food distribution could also help prevent future famines and ensure food security in the long run. Increasing private-sector involvement will require developing better information systems on prices and markets. Government food marketing systems, such as Malawi's ADMARC, could arrange for private sellers to supply government-purchased grain in areas not served by the public system.

INITIATING DEVELOPMENT

TECHNOLOGY, POLICY, AND INSTITUTIONS

Deliver agricultural inputs to farmers for the next growing season. Southern Africa’s vulnerability to famine and food shortage stems largely from low agricultural productivity, mainly owing to soil degradation and low application of fertilizer. Providing basic agricultural inputs, such as fertilizer, seeds, or equipment, to small farmers can help increase agricultural production in the near and long-term future. The governments of the region could distribute free “starter packs” of seeds, legumes, and fertilizer to all farmers, as Malawi did in 1998–99. Such a program should be expanded in Malawi and introduced in the other countries, especially Zambia and Zimbabwe, where small farmers lack seed and fertilizer.

Introduce agricultural technologies appropriate to the situation. To be successful, technology transfers, especially during famine recovery periods, must be appropriate to the agricultural season, agroecological conditions, existing farming practices, and household knowledge, skills, and labor available. New technologies or assets should be easy to use or require little training and need little maintenance, especially if they are provided during the more difficult periods of a famine. Transfer schemes should also be flexible so they can succeed even with temporary obstacles, such as unfavorable weather.

Encourage farmers to produce staple food crops. If small farmers believe that growing staple food crops for the coming year will be risky and that commercial crops will bring higher

incomes, they may not plant staple crops. If this scenario occurs, food shortages will continue in the following year. The government should implement macroeconomic policies that provide an incentive for small farmers to grow staple crops but that do not place an undue financial burden on the public sector.

Develop institutions to improve farmers’ access to and use of new technologies and assets. Strengthening private markets for agricultural inputs and technologies would help to meet the demand of small farmers, reduce the administrative responsibility of the public sector, and create the basis for long-term agricultural development. Governments should also establish formal, affordable credit programs for the rural poor where informal and inexpensive borrowing does not exist. Such credit allows poor households to purchase agricultural inputs, to buy food to survive during food shortages, or to replenish assets such as livestock, which farmers are often forced to sell during famine. Livestock sales have been frequent in Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia. Finally, governments must improve their agricultural extension systems oriented to small farmers so that the technological and credit inputs available are used as productively as possible.

The table below presents the policy options suggested here for each of the mitigation phases: relief, recovery, and initiating development.

POLICY CHOICES FOR FAMINE MITIGATION

POLICY AREA	PHASE		
	Relief	Recovery	Initiating Development
Production & Supply	Food aid Food imports	Public and private food-for-work employment programs	Agricultural input delivery Macroeconomic policies favoring staple crops Private sector input marketing Agricultural extension
Markets & Accessibility	Macroeconomic policies (price stabilization)	Public and private cash-for-work employment programs Credit for purchases Public/Private marketing partnerships	Credit systems for inputs & assets Public/private marketing partnerships
Human Capital	Investments in health services	Investments in health services	Agricultural extension

POLICY ISSUES IN FAMINE MITIGATION AND LONG-TERM FOOD SECURITY

Get the right combination and sequence of interventions. Although the primary goal in a famine situation must be to get food to people as soon as possible, attention should also be given to how relief and short-term measures can reduce future vulnerability to famines. Relief, recovery, and development projects must be combined and sequenced with each other in mutually reinforcing ways to generate the greatest possible benefits. No single type of intervention will be sufficient to achieve relief, recovery, or the initiation of development. The combination and sequence of interventions required for a country will depend on its context. The figure shows where various interventions fall as governments move carefully from relief to development initiation. It also shows that the more immediate the effect of an intervention is, the smaller the magnitude of its effect and the less sustainable the intervention is over time.



Monitor and evaluate famine mitigation measures. To guarantee that the needs of the most severely affected households are being met, countries must monitor and evaluate famine mitigation schemes. Measures should be evaluated for their private and social cost-effectiveness and for the efficiency with which they make food available. Assessing the performance of interventions during famine can be difficult, especially during the initial crisis stages, but even estimates can be helpful.

Coordinate the actions of governments, NGOs, the private sector, and donors. For effective famine relief and prevention, governments, NGOs, the private sector, and donors must strengthen their cooperation. Each of these actors has different capacities, and it is important to draw upon and integrate all of them in plans for mitigation and long-term development. Countries should also improve coordination among their own different public agencies.

Work toward long-term prevention and food security. Famines signal the failure of institutions, organizations, and policies. While various programs can minimize the impact of famines and lay the groundwork for future development, policies that assure both famine prevention and long-term food security are imperative. Such policies must promote and encourage agricultural growth, particularly among small farmers, infrastructure development, environmental rehabilitation, and more effective markets. Well-developed famine early warning systems and the proper management of buffer grain stocks are needed. Countries must develop the capacity to design and implement appropriate food policies and programs at all levels.

Long-term food security also depends on sound governance. Without responsible governance, transparency, and accountability, investments in growth, development, and food security are likely to have little impact. The governments in southern Africa must have the will to ensure food security and protection from famine regardless of the political and social changes that a country undergoes. Governments must ensure that the poor and vulnerable can take an active part in determining their own lives and their nations' political future. If governments allow wars, civil unrest, corruption, and poor policies to continue, countries will remain vulnerable to famines. Indeed, to prevent future famines, the governments of southern Africa will have to adopt the well-being of their respective people as their overriding goal.

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