

# **Food Policies and Food Security in Zambia\***

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## INTRODUCTION

Between 1964 and 1991, the policy of the Zambia Government was that to ensure food security through increased crop production and availability by providing high producer prices for various crops, especially maize, the national staple food crop. Maize production was encouraged throughout the country - even in regions which are not suitable for maize production. In order to provide attractive incentives for maize production, the government introduced uniform prices for inputs (fertilizer, seeds and agricultural chemicals) and uniform crop producer prices. This resulted in high production of maize and other crops but at a colossal cost to the economy.

While providing high crop producer prices, the government policy was also to keep the prices of processed agro-products (like mealie meal, cooking oil etc.) as low as possible. This was achieved through the introduction of "Price differential subsidy" in such a way that maize buyers could pay farmers who might be 150 kilometres from the milling plant an equivalent of eight (8) US dollars (K4,000) per 50 kg bag of maize but sell the same bag to the miller at seven (7) US dollars (K3,500). The maize buyers had to claim from the government one (1) US dollar (K500) per 50 kg bag as price differential subsidies, plus the cost of handling, storage, transportation etc. In addition, where processors fixed economic prices for their products, they were directed by government to reduce them and claim through consumer subsidy the difference between the economic price and the government controlled price. It was easy to implement such a policy when the economy of the country was strong. However, as the economy grew weaker and weaker, it became increasingly difficult and resulted in very high budget deficits because of such heavy food subsidies.

As soon as the current government came into power in November 1991, it decided to change the policy and started liberalising agricultural production and marketing. In order to implement the liberalisation process systematically, the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries appointed a "National Task Force" comprising a cross section of professionals, farmers, business people etc. The "National Task Force" (NTF) is formulating a new agricultural sector policy up to the year 2010. The writer of this paper is a member of the "NTF" which is formulating strategies to redress the negative effects of the old agricultural policy.

Since the old agricultural policy has been discarded and a new one is being formulated and implemented, this paper discusses the new food policy.

## 1. THE FOOD POLICY IN ZAMBIA

In contrast with old policy of highly controlled prices of inputs and producer prices, the current government has liberalised agricultural production and marketing. It has removed subsidies and controls on the prices of inputs and crops. Farmers are being encouraged to grow crops that are ecologically adapted to their respective regions (high rainfall, medium rainfall and low rainfall regions). This has resulted in the reduction of maize production. In low rainfall areas, farmers are being encouraged to grow drought tolerant crops like sorghum, millet, cassava, ground beans and other food crops.

## 2. RESEARCH

In order to meet the changed policy environment, agricultural research programmes are now geared towards breeding crop varieties which are stable and high yielding according to the requirements of the three ecological regions of high, medium and low rainfall areas. The Agricultural Research Programmes (ARP) are addressing soil acidity problems and are producing crop varieties which are tolerant to acidic soils. Appropriate agronomic packages and technologies for sustainable agricultural production are being developed. In addition, more adaptive research work is being done on the farms in order to come up with Agricultural Research recommendations which are more suitable to the farmers' situations.

## 3. EXTENSION

Agricultural extension has also been reoriented to meet with the changing situation of liberalisation head on. Farmers in remote areas are being encouraged to grow food crops first to ensure food security. However, such farmers are also encouraged to grow high value crops and crops which do not need high fertilizer applications as cash crop. Extension priorities are being developed in three major agro-ecological zones to support technologies which have great potential for farm incomes and household food security while maintaining the sustainability of the resource base.

#### 4. IRRIGATION

Zambia has abundant water resource which has not been fully developed and utilised for increased food production. The new government policy on irrigation is that of exploiting the potential in order to reduce heavy dependence on growing rain-fed crops and to increase employment. The full exploitation of the irrigation potential will enhance and maximise farming profits, reduce the risk of financial loss due to bad weather and improve household food security. Measures are being put in place to ensure quick and equitable allocation of surface water rights among farmers and other users. The testing of new irrigation technologies and the transfer of the promising appropriate technologies are currently being pursued.

#### 5. AGRICULTURAL CREDIT

In order to have a significant improvement in food production, there is a great need for a good agricultural credit system. The government is encouraging the development of a viable and sustainable financial system to service the agricultural sector. This includes an improvement in the accessibility of credit and other financial services (including banking) to the smallholder producers. In line with the liberalisation policy, bank interest rates have been liberalised. This has made borrowing more costly. However, it has also encouraged producers to borrow prudently and they are utilising credit judiciously. The current interest rates range between 120% to 145% per annum.

#### 6. TOTAL CROP PRODUCTION

It is too early to assess the impact of the new policy in terms of food production. The first year of the new government experienced the worst and most devastating drought in living memory. The drought brought severe food insecurity to most households. This was aggravated by declining economy with the buying power of most agricultural producers diminishing drastically. Equally affected were urban dwellers. Many agricultural industries closed down due to lack of raw materials. In spite of adequate maize imports (commercial and donations), many people faced starvation due to low buying power. The total production was reduced to about 35% of the total potential while maize surplus sales dropped to an all time low of about 20% of the potential. For production and sales figures see Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Maize production, sales and retention 1975 - 1992 (90 Kg bags)

Zambia	Production	Marketed	Retained
1992	5,400,000	2,900,000	2,500,000
1991	12,000,000	6,600,000	5,400,000
1990	13,500,000	4,630,986	8,869,014
1989	20,675,342	13,653,539	7,021,803
1988	21,591,321	14,989,980	6,601,341
1987	10,601,552	6,942,598	3,658,954
1986	12,872,850	10,607,414	2,265,436
1985	12,480,800	7,069,637	5,411,163
1984	9,686,000	6,347,637	3,338,363
1983	10,392,000	5,901,824	4,490,176
1982	8,162,000	5,705,578	2,456,422
1981	16,625,000	7,734,616	8,890,384
1980	14,986,300	5,445,900	9,540,400
1979	7,782,640	5,191,900	2,590,740
1978	13,773,500	9,236,100	4,537,400
1977	21,470,000	9,835,100	11,634,900
1976	17,990,393	8,333,000	9,657,393

*Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, 1992  
(Agricultural Marketing Information Centre)*

## 7. FOOD SECURITY

In Zambia, the achievement of national food security has been an explicit goal of the agricultural policy. However, past experience has shown that while national food security targets have been met in some years, there have also been increasing rates of malnutrition and food insecurity at the household level. As a result of the prevailing household food insecurity, it is estimated that 33% of the population is vulnerable to food insecurity (2.6 million). These problems were further exacerbated by the 1992 drought that impacted most of Southern Africa. Thus it cannot be assumed that the attainment of national food security will also guarantee household food security.

Although the 1992 drought contributed significantly to the worsening of conditions in Zambia, a number of other factors have resulted in a serious deterioration of food and nutritional security in recent years. High levels of food insecurity and malnutrition characterize marginal rural areas, some peri-urban localities and high-density locations in urban areas. In rural areas food insecurity is due to low productivity, limited access to agricultural services and resources and past government policies which over-emphasized the production of hybrid maize at the expense of traditional crops. The promotion of maize in unsuitable areas increased the effects of climatic risks, reduced on-farm retention of food stocks due to highly subsidised mealie meal and changed consumption patterns. In urban areas, food insecurity and malnutrition are related to the deterioration of

purchasing power as a result of the stagnation of the economy, the scarcity of income-generating activities and inflation. Urban earnings are linked to rural food insecurity through remittances, which are particularly important in certain areas where urban dwellers have to send funds to their relatives in rural areas to support. Thus chronic food insecurity is likely to persist for some time, despite the abatement of the drought.

Household food security issues are extremely important at this time, not only because of the previous drought, but also because of the structural adjustment and liberalization policies which are presently being implemented within the country. It is quite likely that the socially vulnerable groups in society will become worse off during the structural adjustment process.

The Government has abolished the subsidies and price control on maize and fertilizer and is encouraging farmers to shift back to crops that are more ecologically adapted to their given region. These policy changes are having significant impacts on the food security system. The lack of a guaranteed market, combined with large increases in inputs costs, are discouraging farmers from producing hybrid maize for sale. Farmers are also retaining more maize for local consumption due to the market uncertainties and fluctuating prices. This is placing greater demands upon access to varieties that require low inputs and are less susceptible to storage pests (i.e. open-pollinated and flinted varieties). This shift has also increased the need for better on-farm and local storage and processing facilities. The lack of a guaranteed market for maize and higher input costs are encouraging farmers to diversify their cropping strategies, to include a number of alternative food and cash crops. To enable farmers to pursue these alternatives, the government is providing an access to appropriate seed, market outlets, storage and processing facilities. However, it will take some time before these strategies become effective in all areas.

During this transitional phase of market liberalization, food insecurity among the poor rural and urban households has increased. Since the removal of subsidies on the production and consumption of maize, rural household's access to cash and purchased food has been negatively affected in the short-term. This has much to do with the remoteness of the areas in which many of the smallholder households reside. Such areas are not attractive to private sector traders and to investment due to poorly developed infrastructure. This vulnerability to food insecurity has been compounded by the worst drought in living memory in the 1991-1992 planting season when maize production fell by more than 65%. Although the response to the drought emergency was timely and effective, many poor households lost their productive assets. In order to improve and provide food security, the government, through the Programme for Prevention of Malnutrition and Non Governmental Organisations formulated a programme; Food for Work to assist the able bodied in urban and rural areas. The handicapped in society were identified and given free food.

Government recognized that economic growth, sustainable agricultural productivity, and abating food insecurity among the rural poor are all intimately

linked. To secure adequate food supplies on a sustainable basis, national efforts are being formulated which are based on regional comparative advantage. The adoption of household food security as a policy objective has helped ensure that economic growth also takes into account equity issues. The Government's Agricultural Policy Framework gives priority to market liberalisation, crop diversification, and better utilization of land and water resources. In order to ensure that smallholders have full opportunities to benefit from the new policy environment, better services are being formulated in research, extension, credit, land tenure, and marketing. In addition, special measures to integrate less developed areas into the market economy have been recognized; these include improvements in infrastructure and integrated programmes to improve access to seed, fertilizer and markets. A capacity for early detection of food entitlement changes due to natural disasters and for rapid response are being maintained through the Early Warning System.

## 8. CONCLUSION

It is apparent that while food security has been achieved in some years when Zambia had good rain season, there were many years when production had been below the annual national consumption (maize). The situation was made worse by the former government policy of encouraging maize production in every region and heavily subsidised prices. This resulted in a big change in the eating habits of the people with maize taking an unusual prominence in the diet while the traditional crops such as sorghum, millet, cassava etc. were abandoned.

Food insecurity has been worse at household level. However, with the government policy of diversification of crop production and an emphasis on encouraging production of food crops in areas where crops have agro-ecological advantage, the situation is improving. Since the removal of production and consumption subsidies, mealie meal prices have increased significantly. This has lead consumers to look for other maize meal substitutes. It is hoped that the pragmatic new food policies will result in an improvement in food security both at national and household levels.

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