



Women and Food Crises: How US Food Aid Policies Can Better Support their Struggles A Discussion Paper

Over the last few decades, food crises have become distressingly common phenomena. Women are often at the center of these emergencies, though the disproportionate impact of hunger on women is too often hidden within the dire aggregate statistics. But the role of women in providing solutions to these crises is also too often overlooked. This discussion paper lays out some of the key issues in modern food crises and explores some opportunities for engaging women more actively in the quest for more effective answers.

In 2006, major food shortages struck Niger, Eastern and Southern Africa, and there were numerous smaller but serious food emergencies in Haiti, Bangladesh and other countries around the world. The increasing frequency of these emergencies is alarming. In Kenya, to cite just one example, while the 2005-2006 drought and the resulting food shortage were among the most severe in recent history, there has actually only been one short period since 1998 (during part of 2003) when the country was not experiencing some sort of food emergency. Such chronic situations of hunger take their toll on people's stamina and resilience, making them less able to cope with other health crises. According to the United Nations, only 9 percent of the 300 million children who suffer from hunger are

experiencing acute food emergencies, but 90% of these children suffer from chronic malnutrition, leading to stunting and other health problems.

The increase in the number of people experiencing chronic hunger has been the subject of much talk but little action. In 1996, world leaders gathered at the World Food Summit and pledged to reduce "the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015." When the leaders met again in 2006, figures released by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) indicated that the number of hungry people in the developing world had actually increased – from 796 million in 1996 to 815 million in 2002. One Ghanaian farmer interviewed by ActionAid in 2006 lamented that,

"Running out of food is not new to us. Even our fathers, who could produce, eat and sell millet to buy animals, used to run out of food in some years...[But] today we run out of food too early in the season – sometimes just after Christmas. We suffer the food shortage for a longer period and more severely than our fathers, and year after year it gets worse for us."ⁱ

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Many of the causes of these food shortages are as frustratingly easy to list as they are difficult to resolve: recurring droughts; declining public support for agricultural production, particularly for subsistence agriculture; trade liberalization that forces developing country farmers to compete with low-cost imported goods, undermining consistent local production; and technological solutions that seemed to hold tremendous promise but failed to address systematic violations of poor people's rights which in turn limit their productive capacity.

Women suffer disproportionately from food crises. Some 70 percent of the hungry are women and girls. But women also contribute more than their share to the potential solutions. Numerous studies cite the importance of women's participation in agricultural production. According to the FAO, rural women in developing countries produce between 60 and 80 percent of their countries' food. They are overwhelmingly responsible for the production of vegetables and basic food grains, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.ⁱⁱ Women contribute their labor, their knowledge about traditional seed varieties and cultivation practices, and their determination to feed their families, especially their children, over most other considerations. Studies have also documented that increases in women's incomes are more strongly associated with improvements in their families' well-being, especially their children's nutritional status, than similar increases in men's incomes.

Unfortunately, all too often women must confront inequitable inheritance laws and other practices that limit their access to land and credit. In many countries, women are unable to gain title to land except through marriage. If they divorce or become widowed they often lose any right to ownership or control over the land. ActionAid research in Uganda concludes that "women are therefore unable to make decisions over what to grow, how much to grow, where to grow it and how to spend the income from the proceeds of the sale of agricultural output."ⁱⁱⁱ

Women, in their roles as producers and caregivers, confront especially difficult challenges in situations of high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. Food security can be drastically reduced, either due to women's own failing health or because the burden of caring for sick relatives

is borne almost entirely by women. In many cases, sick family members return to rural communities when they become sick, placing further strains on women. Following the death of a husband or father, women are often dispossessed by a male relative, losing their access to productive land. At the same time, malnutrition from poverty enhances the onset of progression to full blown AIDS, creating a vicious cycle. Food aid programs, particularly food for work programs, may not be effective for very vulnerable people such as sick or older people, especially women.

Clearly, men play crucial roles in food production as well, but they typically face lesser constraints than women. They are much more likely to have access to productive resources such as land, credit and extension services. And when the weather, crops or prices fail, cultural traditions often make it easier for men to leave their farms in search of employment elsewhere, leaving women behind to struggle to feed their families and make ends meet. This vulnerability means that even if they do manage to make it through the latest food crisis, women have diminished assets and resources to help them plan for and potentially avert the next crisis.

Responding to food crises: the role of food aid

The solutions to these problems are complex. They must create mechanisms to ensure that food reaches hungry women, men and children during times of crisis, while paving the way for more lasting solutions. It is hard to see how such vicious cycles can be broken in situations of scarcity of resources. All too often, a country's financial and technical resources and its food reserves are simply insufficient to respond to continuing food crises. One first step must be an increase in the quantity and effectiveness of short-term food aid for crisis situations.

The United States is the single largest provider of food aid, supplying about half of total global resources. While there is no doubt that this aid has saved countless lives, the current program is based on an outdated model which is dependent on the shipment of US commodities to developing countries. When its food aid program was created over 50 years ago, the US had

substantial excess food reserves. Food aid served as an outlet for those excess stocks while also serving vital humanitarian objectives. Food aid programs were also intended to bolster US political objectives and to create new export markets for US goods.

Times have changed, but food aid programs have not. Due to changes in commodity policy introduced by the 1996 Farm Bill, the US no longer holds significant food reserves. Food aid is purchased on the open market as needed, but it is too small a portion of total food production to affect the prices received by farmers at the farmgate. While food aid, like most US foreign assistance, continues to be affected by geopolitical considerations, there is little evidence that the provision of commodities rather than cash best serves those objectives, and, in fact, that program is a source of tension in the current World Trade Organization (WTO) talks. There is also very little evidence that the provision of food aid has created any new demand for US goods in developing countries.

Under the current system, Congress allocates funds each year for food aid. Food is purchased on the market by US agribusiness firms, and shipped on US carriers. Some food aid is “monetized”, i.e., sold on local markets, primarily by US NGOs, to generate resources for development projects. While these funds often support valuable work in developing countries, it is important to distinguish between the usefulness of those projects and the effectiveness of the funding source. Food aid shipments often take 4-6 months and cost 30-50 percent more than food aid purchased locally or regionally.

There is also evidence that food aid can disrupt local food production, particularly when the food aid shipments arrive just before the harvest, depressing local prices. CARE USA recently decided to phase out its use of monetized food aid, in large part because research concluded that, under some circumstances, food aid can harm local production and markets, undermining long-term food security.^{iv}

That problem appears to be diminishing with more careful attention by food aid providers, but the fact remains that the current system is an inefficient use of

scarce resources. If food aid were provided to the World Food Program, local governments and non-governmental food aid providers as cash rather than as commodities, it would be a much more flexible tool. Food could then be purchased on local or regional markets, bolstering local food production and regional integration. There would undoubtedly still be cases in which food could be sourced more efficiently in US markets, but those decisions would be based on careful analysis of what makes most sense in each particular situation. Food aid is such a vital resource that such a transition should be made cautiously, but the goal should be to reach a system that provides food quickly, cheaply, and in a manner that bolsters longer-term development objectives.

While this would be a significant change in US food aid policy, it is not actually a new idea. The European Community (EC) has strictly adhered strictly to recommendations by the OECD Development Assistance Committee to untie food aid for more than a decade. The Canadian government has also shifted its food aid policy in favor of the provision of cash rather than commodities. The OECD DAC emphasizes that “tied” food aid involves major transfer inefficiencies, i.e., that a large share of the food aid budgets actually remain within the donor country to cover logistical costs, rather than being made available to recipients.^v

Food insecurity does not only result from an insufficient quantity of food. It is also the result of inadequate distribution of resources. More must be done to improve the targeting of food aid so that it reaches those who need it most, within regions, communities and households. Given women’s vital roles in food production and feeding their families, more attention needs to be paid to enhancing women’s participation in decision-making on food aid and agricultural development generally.

Improved targeting of food aid is only part of the solution. It must be complemented by changes in long-term development assistance and agricultural policies. Under current law, some \$1.2 billion a year is allocated for humanitarian assistance during emergencies, with additional funds often approved as supplemental funding. Even with supplemental funding, current food aid

levels are less than \$2 billion a year, substantially lower than in the past. Given the scarcity of predictable funding and the abundance of food crises, funding for non-emergency aid has suffered. The US should set funding for food aid to at least \$2 billion a year, with a minimum of \$500 million allocated for development and social safety net food aid programs. Funding for other sustainable agricultural development programs should also be increased.

Agricultural development policies also need to become more flexible to respond to current realities. In some countries, an overemphasis on production for export has lessened attention to the production of crops for local consumption. Even when crops like maize have been promoted, they may no longer be suitable to current climatic conditions. Women are often the guardians of traditional knowledge of seed varieties and crops that can be grown in less than ideal climatic conditions. More efforts should be made to learn from their specific knowledge and to build on it with information on new ways to achieve nutritional goals.

In various fora on trade, development and agriculture, developing country civil societies and their governments are asserting their right to food and to food sovereignty – the right to make their own decisions about the best ways to feed their people and ensure their livelihoods. Those decisions must also enhance women’s roles as actors in agricultural development. Limitations on women’s access to land, credit and technical assistance must be removed and women’s ability to make and carry out decisions about the best way to feed their families must be enhanced. Old solutions and old technical fixes simply won’t do. Women’s voices simply must be heard to reach creative, equitable and lasting solutions to current food crises and hunger.

Crises and responses in Kenya

Kenyans are confronting chronic problems of hunger and poverty that have only increased in recent years. The UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) estimates that there are some 10.3 million people experiencing chronic hunger in Kenya. This represents a small decline over the ten-year period ending in 2002, but it is still about one-third of the total population. Of these, about two million people are benefiting from food

relief programs at any given time, a figure that rises to more than 5 million people during periods of severe drought and floods. The food insecurity problem is compounded by high poverty levels. Currently, more than 17 million Kenyans (60 percent of the population), of whom 75 percent are in rural areas, survive on less than a dollar per day.

This situation has worsened over the past few decades. According to UNICEF, during 1963 to 1976, only 10 percent of the population lived below the poverty line. Poverty rose throughout the next decade. Chronic hunger and poverty are evident in high levels of malnutrition, as demonstrated by the prevalence of stunting at a rate of 30 percent, about 15 times higher than what would be expected in a healthy well-nourished population.

Food production, which had grown at a rate of 4.7 percent between 1965 and 1976, started dropping steadily to 2.9 percent in the 1980s, resulting in food deficits, hunger, malnutrition, and rural poverty. The food situation is particularly dire for people living in the arid and semi-arid areas and adversely affects farmers and pastoralists because successive rain failure seasons often aggravate an already severe scarcity of water and pastures for livestock. There are persistent food crisis in pastoral areas, resulting from a combination of cumulative livestock losses, falling livestock prices and sharply rising cereal prices. The Kenyan government has responded by declaring the droughts and famines as national disasters and appealing to the international community for assistance to cope with these emergencies. In general, however, the appeals have received late and inadequate response. Furthermore, continued food aid imports have tended to weaken domestic food markets. While food aid can ease these situations in the short term, changes in economic policy and sustained resources are needed to provide lasting solutions.

Causes of the crises

Environmental degradation and global warming have undoubtedly contributed to this situation of growing hunger and poverty. Large-scale deforestation and overuse of water catchment areas have been factors in an increasingly dry climate in several parts of the country. Indigenous forest cover accounts for only about

2 percent of Kenya's land today, with 10 percent estimated to be the prerequisite for a balanced environment. The Kenyan government has taken some steps to ease population pressures in the forests – primarily by evicting “squatters” with little effort at resettlement or recognition of land title claims.

A key problem, however, is absolute poverty. People in the arid and semi-arid areas have never had significant income or asset reserves, and unfavorable weather year after year has eroded not only their resources but their adaptability. Coping mechanisms have been exhausted, and relentless desperation has meant that many people have had no breaks during which they can recoup and apply their creativity to improving their situations.

Many of the solutions imposed by so-called experts have, in fact, worsened the cycles of poverty and crisis. From the time of independence until the interventions of the IMF and World Bank, the Kenyan government had an official policy of achieving food self-sufficiency. That

changed to “food security” in the mid-1980s – in other words, not necessarily producing all the food needed within the country, but ensuring an adequate supply from whatever source. In fact, an analysis by KIPPRA, a prominent Kenyan research institute that often works with the government and the World Bank, finds that “After the [IMF/World Bank-designed] reforms, the country moved from broad self-sufficiency in production of most food staples to a net importer.”^{vi}

By 1996, the World Bank and the IMF were promoting a plan to transform the Kenyan National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB) “into a commercially viable entity free to make independent commercial decisions.” This commercialization of the NCPB meant that it effectively became a government-owned grain marketer. Its role was blurred, however. James Oduor, a Kenyan government official in several agencies dealing with drought management, explained that the agency was in effect hired by the government to procure maize for the country's strategic grain reserve, while at the same time



it was expected to play a role in stabilizing prices, both on the supply and demand side. This, Oduor points out, was an exact contradiction: it was to act as a commercial entity trying to make a profit, but was also asked to stabilize prices by paying above market-rates for maize when the price was too low, and sell at artificially low prices when the government determined that consumer prices were too high. This ill-defined role virtually guaranteed failure, and indeed Oduor predicts that, saddled again with skyrocketing debts, the NCPB will be in danger of collapse in the near future.^{vii}

While it was expected to fulfil these conflicting goals, one thing the NCPB, and the other agricultural parastatals, were not doing was providing farmers with all-encompassing marketing services. Once the World Bank and the IMF conditions were put into practice, farmers and consumers soon discovered that the new system lacked mechanisms to support robust production and provide for orderly and fair pricing and distribution. KIPPRA notes that during the adjustment period, “Most commodities, particularly food commodities and industrial crops, declined in production. The worst decline occurred for maize, rice, milk, cotton, sisal and coffee... Climatic factors such as drought are important in explaining Kenya’s agricultural performance, but the major factors are policy-related; they include poor coordination and sequencing of liberalized policies.”^{viii}

An interesting process of gender analysis took place in Kenya. Research was carried out on gender relations in agriculture in three different regions. It brought to light constraints and challenges with regard to equitable agricultural development and found that gender imbalances were rooted in values, norms, myths, taboos and traditions that were widely accepted by both men and women. The imbalances resulted in distorted decision making, unequal access to and control over resources (land, capital, agricultural inputs, and income) and a major work burden on women. Many men have migrated out of smallholder farms and this has led to the paradoxical situation where ownership and decision making are in men’s hands, while the cultivation and management are done by women.

The research also highlighted a number of practical problems. These included the fact that delayed and inappropriate decisions often negatively affect the productivity or health of animals or crops. In addition, women’s lack of resources greatly limited their ability to purchase needed inputs such as fertilizer and seeds, keeping general productivity levels low. Men’s control over the land also limits the incentives for women to invest their labor, especially since a heavy workload can

negatively affect women’s health and nutritional status and that of their children.

In addition, an institutional analysis addressing the main functions of the institutions involved (e.g. mission, structure and human resources) and their culture and decision making processes was carried out. It was noted that organizations are gender-biased in the same way as society, with men and male interests being dominant. The study demonstrates that a change in institutional structures and cultures is essential to address gender issues in a credible and consistent manner. As a result of this gender analysis, several promising commitments were made:

- The Ministry of Agriculture agreed that changes in gender relations are imperative to attaining its overall objectives. Improving women’s rights to land, control over farm resources, access to credit, extension and general marketing information, involvement in technology development and a more equal division of labor, would all help to attain the general objectives in the sector.
- There was agreement on the need for a separate objective on gender equality within the sector program. This offers a direct opportunity for a separate budget line, ensuring the availability of funds for activities to improve women’s economic security.
- The four major objectives of the agricultural sector program became: enhancing agricultural growth; improving the environmental sustainability of agriculture; improving household nutritional status; improving the economic status of women.
- Structures responsible for the implementation of activities to promote gender equality were established at the national, district and community levels.
- There were improvements in capacity on gender equality matters among the people directly involved in agricultural programming and implementation.

Although it has been ten years since the Kenyan Government of Kenya undertook this research on gender relations in the agricultural sector, little has been done to implement the research findings. As a matter of fact, the Agricultural Sector Investment Programme (ASIP) in which the gender component was embedded was generally haphazardly implemented due to resource constraints and shifting donor priorities. With support from the Netherlands, the then Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development initiated formation and

CASE STUDY OF WOMEN AND FOOD AID IN UKAMBANI

Most of the Ukambani region in eastern Kenya is described as semi-arid with unpredictable patterns of rainfall. The inhabitants of this area are farmers who rely on their crops for food and livelihood security. The effects of climate change in the last 15 to 20 years have made the climate of Ukambani harsher than has ever been experienced before. Over the same period, both economic and agricultural policies underwent a shift that has intensified the area's food insecurity, as government support has been greatly reduced as a result of free market policies. Some parts of Ukambani have experienced total crop failures for the past four years. Instead of harvests, people are attuned to cycles of food aid provision by the World Food Program, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the government. Thus, food insecurity in the area is a combination of both natural and man-made causes.

Impact of chronic food shortages on women and families

Members of women's groups in the Nguutani area of Mwingi District in Ukambani, deal daily with the realities of living in an unstable climate and a society dependent on food aid. Several community based organizations and local NGOs such as Genesis have worked in the area as local distributor of food aid for about ten years but have since become more involved in organizing communities to encourage self-sufficiency and assertion of rights. Similarly, in the Wote area of Makueni District of Ukambani, women's groups such as *Woni wa Wote* are involved in tree planting, bee keeping, manufacturing and selling tie-died fabrics, as well as providing home-based care and support for AIDS orphans. Although similar in many respects, there are significant differences between these two areas. Wote gets more rainfall, enough to support regular crop production. The women's groups in the area are engaged in growing and marketing crops, so there are only minimal food aid activities and rations targeted at the area. However, in Nguutani most people are dependent on food aid and food markets are virtually non-existent.

Perceptions and attitudes towards food aid

While people in both Wote and Nguutani express appreciation for the relative security provided by food aid, women in these communities, interviewed in 2006, expressed a number of concerns:

Food aid is viewed as contributing to irresponsibility and worsening the already unequal relationships between men and women.

It led to a general sense of detachment from farming and other economic activities.

Food-for-work programs are said to expose women to hard work, while the quantity of food provided is small and the quality quite poor. *"Sometimes you spend all day in the food-for-work program doing heavy work and at the end of it they give you just rice or maize and a little bit of beans. It is not a healthy diet especially after a back-breaking work all day,"* said a female respondent in Nguutani.

Much of the food is treated with chemical preservatives, shipped long distances and stored for long periods. Food is usually completely dried, and long cooking hours consumes families' resources like fuel-wood and water and creates additional burden on women.

Food aid is seldom varied and families subsist for long periods on virtually all maize or all rice diets.

Many men came to prefer to sit and wait for food aid intervention rather than attempting to farm or find other work.

People struggle to supplement scant provisions of food-for-work with burning and selling charcoal.

The women in these areas believe that:

Government water projects to provide reliable sources of water would be better investments and would contribute to healthier communities. In fact, irrigation projects undertaken by University of Nairobi in Kibwezi area of Makueni District revealed greater potential in the area using irrigation as the agronomic aspects are deemed quite good.

There is little or no government support for agriculture in the area while agricultural extension has largely disappeared.

strengthening of Gender Equity and Mobilization Support (GEMS) Unit to address gender relations in agriculture. Unfortunately, the GEMS Unit's effectiveness has been hampered by a somewhat utopian approach to agriculture, coupled with inadequate budgets.

At this point, only 6 percent of Kenyan women have land title deeds, even though 96 percent of rural women work on family farms. They provide 75 percent of the labor and directly manage 40 percent of small-holder farms. Despite the greater role played by women in agriculture, access to and control of productive resources such as land, credit and capital still remains in the male domain and is largely fueled by the patriarchal systems in place. Rights over land are important not only in determining agricultural output but also access to other resources such as credit and participation in decision making process.

While all of these rights are critical to the achievement of food security and food sovereignty goals, women continue to contend with legal impediments to ownership of property such as land in addition to facing retrogressive customary laws. Women's capacity to earn and control incomes is important in determining their ability to guarantee household food security. Their domination of agricultural production necessitates the need for a broader recognition of their rights over productive resources in the quest for enhanced food security.

Women's participation in agriculture in Malawi

Malawi is a landlocked country in Southern Africa with a population of about 12 million. It has experienced a series of food crises over the last decade, as well as high rates of HIV/AIDS infections affecting 17 percent of the population. The average life expectancy has decreased from 41 years in 1998 to just 38 years today. According to Malawi Demographic and Health Surveys, almost half of children less than five years old are stunted due to malnutrition.^{ix}

High rates of poverty, climatic shocks, price volatility and macroeconomic policies all contribute to food crises and food insecurity. Under the structural adjustment programs designed by the World Bank and IMF,

the government eliminated fertilizer subsidies to maize farmers and promoted the production of cash crops for export. These economic reforms have resulted in dramatic declines in maize production, especially production by small-scale farmers.

In 2002, the IMF was widely accused of insisting that the government sell off a portion of its Strategic Grain Reserve in order to reduce operating costs. When the harvest failed a few months later, the government was forced to purchase grains at much higher prices from neighboring countries. In recent years, however, the government has been rethinking some of these policies and has reintroduced fertilizer subsidies and marketing support.^x

Women play a crucial role in food production in Malawi. Some 70 percent of full time farmers in Malawi are women, and they contribute 80 percent of the labor in the agriculture sector. Women contribute their labor as producers, processors and marketers of agricultural inputs. They also face many challenges, including high illiteracy rates, limited access to information, cultural practices that constrain women's participation, a lack of awareness of their rights, and their multiple roles and responsibilities in the fields, in the home and in their communities.

Land ownership is a major problem for women farmers. Only 2.7 percent of women are registered owners of commercial land. While current legislation affirms women's rights to land, in many cases local customs and traditions effectively limit women's access to land. This is especially true in the Chitengwa type of marriage, in which the wife settles at the husband's village and husband retains ownership of the land and control over the crops. Powerful traditional leaders and village chiefs may seize parcels of land from vulnerable women, especially older women, widows and women who are occupied with caring for sick relatives. Relatives of deceased husbands may even take parcels of land from widows, leaving them destitute.

Finding new solutions through participation

Over the past few years, the Malawian government has

Stories of struggle and change

Rose Njateni is from Bimphi Village in Dowa but lives in her husband's village, Chitengwa. She and her husband have separate farms. Her husband cultivates tobacco and maize and she is involved in cash maize production using loans from the Tiyanjane Cooperative Society, which she joined at its inception in 2004. However, she has yet to enjoy the fruits of her labor. Despite having worked on the land, her husband owns the land and controls the proceeds from sales of the harvest. Njateni has no say as to how the money is used.



Last year, Njateni convinced her husband to buy a bicycle - to travel to the cooperative more easily - and a mobile phone. However, he never gave them to her and one night, returning from a beer-drinking spree, he was attacked and robbed of both. The family spent their remaining money on hospital bills. Njateni was then forced to turn to her father for a loan to buy inputs for the next growing season and to pay back the cooperative's loan.

Nellie Chimanda is group village head of Likhomo, in Nkoola's area. For many years, women like Chimanda have survived on the sale of brewed beer but with the recent outbreak of tuberculosis, and the increased risk of spreading the disease through the culture of shared beer drinking bowls, women have had to turn to less risky businesses. Chimanda organized a group of women to start a beekeeping initiative. While many of them were thrilled with the new business, some village heads discouraged them from participating. Chimanda insisted and managed to secure land for the project.



With the help of COMPASS, a local development project, and a loan from the Malawi Social Action Fund, the new business got off to a good start. However, one morning, Chimanda woke up to find that the vegetation they had been using for beekeeping had disappeared and the beehives had been burnt. The owner of the land on which the beehives were kept later confessed to the crime.

Relentless, the women then turned to molding bricks for a housing project. Again, the bricks were damaged. The culprits were charged and found guilty and were required to compensate Chimanda. Though she is recognized within her community for her efforts, many of her challenges remain.

increased its outreach to civil society organizations to find more comprehensive solutions to the country's chronic food insecurity. In 2002, a task force was set up to address the immediate crisis and to develop long-term food security strategies. The task force is made up of representatives of civil society, government ministries, donors and the private sector. It was set up with financial and technical support from the European Union.

Through the task force, civil society has been able to

mobilize and have a collective voice on policy processes. Most notably, civil society has become mobilized through the Civil Society Agriculture Network (CISANET) and the Food Security Network (FOSANET), which have facilitated community consultation processes on two key policies: food and nutrition security policy and biotechnology policy. Through their participation in the task force and other efforts, civil society organizations also contributed to the review of the 2005-2006 food crisis response and the government's management of the strategic grain reserves.

Malawian women are also taking steps to become better organized and to demand changes in current policies. In November 2006, more than 40 women farmers from throughout the country met to share their reflections on how government policies affect them and what changes were needed. They observed that while in Malawi women profoundly contribute to agriculture production, the public policies designed to support agriculture do not reflect women's perspectives, needs or concerns. They have inadequate access to productive resources such as land, water, extension services and credit, among other challenges. The women issued the following call to action:

“Participation of women in policy processes and having women in high positions within the Ministries would ensure that their voices are heard and policies are developed with consideration to women's issues.

Participants urge policy makers, donors and stakeholders in the agricultural sector to embark on the following:

- 1.** Sensitize women farmers on their roles in ensuring food security in households. Women need education on their rights of access to productive resources and responsibility towards sustainable food security.
- 2.** Provide technical and financial support for women farmers to organize themselves into a formidable block that can represent their interests in various forums.
- 3.** Equip women farmers with training skills to help them add value to farm products through modern technology so as to counter the adverse effects of trade liberalization.
- 4.** Encourage women farmers to link up with their external and internal counterparts to learn new skills and share experiences.
- 5.** Sensitize women on training and market opportunities that are available locally and abroad. Encourage women farmers' excursions.
- 6.** Address issues of inheritance and property grabbing.

7. Assure easy access to legal assistance for women to uphold their rights.

8. Review marriage systems.

9. Assure access to basic social services in the area of healthcare, education, and markets.

10. Review market structures and price mechanisms in informal markets to protect the interests of women farmers.”

Recommendations

Both chronic hunger, and food emergencies that can lead to acute malnutrition and even starvation, are on the increase in Africa, taking a terrible toll on human life and pushing millions into a vicious cycle of ill health, reduced productivity and deepening poverty. Women hold the key to breaking this cycle, and finding lasting solutions to Africa's food crises.

Not only are rural women among those most vulnerable to food shortages, but more importantly, they are the driving force behind African agriculture. Traditional forms of food aid have largely failed to recognize and enhance the productive capacity of women, and this in turn means that food aid has been ineffective in contributing to lasting solutions to hunger. While short-term emergency food aid is often essential, it must be balanced with longer-term assistance and more comprehensive programs for agricultural development that are designed to support women's crucial contributions to agricultural production and their commitment to feed their families.

The US and other rich country governments should:

- 1.** Stop imposing trade rules and economic policy conditions that make it difficult for African governments to support smallholder farmers, and push them towards excessive reliance on export-driven agriculture at the expense of food crops for local markets.
- 2.** Reform their policies and programs to support rather than undermine innovative approaches to

agriculture and women's roles in food production. Reforms should include such measures as supporting a transition from the provision of food aid as commodities to more flexible cash funding. Cash could be used to purchase food at the regional or local level, making it a more efficient use of scarce resources and potentially supporting the development of local and regional markets. While there would still be cases where it would make most sense to ship commodities from the United States, an increased emphasis on local purchases of food could also bolster efforts to establish local or regional reserves that could be accessed quickly in cases of food emergencies.

3. Increase funding for food aid and agricultural development. Current US food aid funding levels are too low to confront the continuing problems of food crises and hunger. A greater proportion of food aid and other development funding should be directed to ongoing, multi-year programs that address the underlying causes of recurring food crises. Many development organizations advocate increasing food aid funding to US\$2 billion a year, with a much greater proportion dedicated to supporting comprehensive and lasting solutions to food crises.

African governments should:

- 1.** Promote, uphold and enforce women's rights to land, credit, water, seeds and other productive resources.
- 2.** Establish structures at the community, regional and national levels to ensure that women's voices are heard in the design and implementation of food and agriculture policies and donor assistance programs.
- 3.** Expand state-funded programs of treatment, care, nutrition and support for HIV-affected persons, especially in rural areas, so as to reduce the burden of care on women and safeguard their productive roles; and strengthen and uphold women's rights of inheritance to prevent dispossession following the death of male relatives.

4. Make sure that their people's right to food is sustainably fulfilled before pursuing the development of export markets; and go beyond food security (the pursuit of adequate food supplies) to introduce policies that will ensure their nation's food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is a concept supported by a growing number of NGOs and social movements, most notably the global *Via Campesina* farmers' network, which defines it as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems."^{xi} *Via Campesina's* approach to food sovereignty specifically stresses women's roles and rights in food production and the importance of women's participation in decision making bodies on food and agricultural policies.

Food crises can result from natural or man-made disasters. The solutions can and must come from the women and men most affected by hunger and most knowledgeable about local-level approaches that work. The US and other rich countries urgently need to join hands with women farmers and African governments to develop lasting solutions that can secure for once and for all the fundamental right to be free from hunger. Never has a policy challenge been so literally a matter of life and death.

END NOTES

ⁱⁱ Hungry for Solutions: Progress towards securing the Right to Food Ten Years After the World Food Summit, ActionAid International 2006, p. 9-10.

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations, FAO. Website fact sheet: "Gender and Food Security: Agriculture." Accessed Feb. 21, 2007 <www.fao.org/Gender/en/agri-e.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Hungry for Solutions, p. 19.

^{iv} *White Paper on Food Aid Policy*, CARE USA, June 6, 2006.

^v OECD, *The Development Dimension: The Development Effectiveness of Food Aid. DOES TYING MATTER?* 2005.

^{vi} Hezron O. Nyaangito, Jonathan Nzuma, Hellen Ommeh and Mary Mbithi, "Impact of Agricultural Trade and Related Policy Reforms on Food Security in Kenya," Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA), *Discussion Paper #39*, June 2004. In Kenya: Building a Case for More Support", Sept. 2004, in "Kenya's Chronic Food Crisis: Natural Disasters or Logical Consequences?", by Soren Ambrose, August 2006.

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^{viii} KIPPRA *op.cit.* p. 84.

^{ix} Paul Jere, "Crises and Responses in Malawi," *Building Sustainable Futures*, August 2006.

^x *Ibid*.

^{xi} Declaration of Nyéléni World Forum for Food Sovereignty, February 27, 2007.



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