Forum for Food Security in Southern Africa

Human Vulnerability and Food Insecurity: Policy Implications

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Theme Paper 3

Human Vulnerability and Food Insecurity: Policy Implications

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Theme Paper 3

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Executive Summary

1. This paper reviews vulnerability concepts and relates these to proximate as well as long run factors implicated in the food security crisis in southern Africa. Vulnerability is not the same as poverty or food insecurity that describe livelihood states at a particular point in time. Vulnerability is a ‘forward looking’ concept that seeks to describe how prone individuals and families are to being unable to cope with uncertain adverse events that may happen to them, like prolonged lack of rainfall, or infection by the AIDS virus. The paper adopts the Devereux (2002) definition of vulnerability as “the exposure and sensitivity to livelihood shocks”. In this, the sensitivity component is critical, since it denotes that a small adverse shock will have a large adverse effect on the survival capabilities of the people that it strikes.

2. Vulnerability operates at different levels of aggregation. It is most frequently invoked in the context of understanding the relationships between risk and coping at household level. For a given risk profile, it is the varying asset status of households that determines how vulnerable they are to shocks. Variations in assets, or the ability to deploy them productively, are important for identifying vulnerable groups that represent a horizontal aggregation of people who share similar features (e.g. the elderly, widowed, divorced, disabled, chronically ill etc.).

3. The ability to distinguish vulnerable groups enables social support to be temporally and spatially targeted in order to prevent such groups from sliding into destitution when shocks occur. Some groups may be chronically vulnerable, requiring support on a routine basis; others may experience transitory vulnerability (e.g. in the lean season before the next harvest). It is probable that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in southern Africa has substantially increased the population proportions that should be considered chronically vulnerable. This leads to the desirability of scaling up the scope of the concept, to vulnerable populations rather than groups. Vulnerable groups remain, however, nested within such larger populations.

4. At the level of vulnerable populations, the emphasis shifts from specific variations in assets and coping capabilities, to the factors causing these to deteriorate on a broad scale. Vulnerability appears to be growing across the southern African region, with the exception of Mozambique where some important trends are moving in the right direction from a very low starting point; some principal causes of broad scale rising vulnerability are:

   a. growth failures, rising poverty and declining migration options
   b. market failures in the context of market liberalisation
   c. the high incidence and continuing spread of HIV/AIDS
   d. politics and governance factors, at regional, national and local levels

5. These four factors create widespread adverse impacts on the ability of people to manage risk, and to cope with risky events when they occur. Falling GDP whether in total or per capita terms increases vulnerability wherever it occurs. This is because it implies diminishing economic activity, less employment, less cash generation, and shrinking opportunities for everyone, irrespective of whether they are poor or rich.

6. In the rural and agricultural economies of the southern African countries, market liberalisation has had a more mixed effect on growth, poverty and vulnerability than its enthusiasts are prepared to acknowledge. This is not meant as an apology for former parastatal agencies that themselves were deeply flawed. Nevertheless liberalisation has increased price risks, raised ratios between input and output prices, resulted in uneven private market coverage, and reduced the outreach of advisory services to crops and livestock. Its most severe effects have been on remote and subsistence farmers, since these are ignored by private traders, or their output prices are depressed due to the high unit marketing costs of the transactions in which they engage.

7. The spread of HIV/AIDS, estimated to have infected between 20 and 25 per cent of working age adults in the five countries, is undoubtedly a major contributor to rising vulnerability in the region. However, whether it can be depicted as *the* cause of “new variant famines” is a debatable proposition. The point is well taken that the depletion of labour as an asset is a new departure compared to previous asset vulnerabilities. But other things are going on too. There is a rather too static finality in the end conclusion of the “new variant famine” hypothesis. The relations between people and land in the agrarian economy will evolve as morbidity and mortality from HIV/AIDS increases, and outcomes for proneness to acute food insecurity triggered by natural events are likely to be a great deal more roundabout, and to change over time, as compared to the narrow labour shortage scenario envisaged by the new variant famine hypothesis.

8. The emerging policy framework comprising PRSPs and decentralisation is considered from the viewpoint of its likely impact on vulnerabilities. Evidence from countries outside the region introduces a note of scepticism about the ability of policies currently prioritised by donors to contribute to reducing vulnerability in southern Africa, and some policies may inadvertently increase vulnerability, by underpinning local level institutional environments that increase rather than diminish livelihood risks.

9. PRSPs tend to favour sectoral targets in areas like education, health, or rural roads, but fail to address the diversified nature of livelihoods, nor the governance environment that might facilitate and encourage the multiplication of diverse economic activities rather than block and undermine them. Under some circumstances, indeed ones that can be observed in adjacent countries, decentralisation may undermine the goals of PRSPs due to the revenue needs of district councils and the approaches they take to taxation of their constituents in order to meet those needs.

10. Defects in the transmission of information during the current crisis suggest that neither donors nor governments are free of charges of lack of urgency, indifference or culpable decisions not to take action on information received; however, particular governments seem to have been prone to adopting the least helpful across the range of responses. Humanitarian agencies have to work within these unpromising political contexts. Vulnerability already provides the conceptual underpinning for tools that have proved effective for detecting households and populations beginning to run into serious trouble following a shock or series of adverse events. NGOs and international agencies working in the food security area routinely make use of these tools, and did so, albeit in a rather fragmented way, in the early stages of this crisis; however, action by donor and government decision makers was slow to follow on from the initial findings of such exercises.

11. The central policy challenge that emerges from this paper concerns the willingness of the public sector to provide enabling environments for diverse economic activity to flourish, whether in urban or in rural areas. Enabling environments are poorly specified, or neglected entirely, in PRSPs. In relation to decentralised local government, they are an act of faith, predicated on a narrative about electorates being able to hold elected local representatives to account in the raising of revenues and the delivery of services. Evidence from countries that are further down the decentralisation road than the southern African countries suggest that this narrative may be predicated on large dollops of wishful thinking.

12. In the absence of enabling environments, it is difficult to see how the poor are supposed 'to construct their own pathways out of poverty', stated in various different ways as the fundamental goal of the PRSP framework. When monetised economic activity is essentially seen by public officialdom as 'fair game' for the imposition of both legal and illegal taxes, dues, fees, licenses, movement restrictions and so on; then the motivation to start-up new enterprises or expand existing ones is severely debilitated. The fallback position is subsistence farming, and reliance on subsistence food production is just about the most vulnerable place to be. The main policy implication derived from this theme paper then, is that the contemporary donor-government policy framework (PRSPs and decentralisation) needs substantial re-thinking and strengthening concerning the facilitating institutional context that it manifestly fails to specify, that would give people space to thrive rather than just survive.

13. Some international agencies have rushed into identifying future policies that they consider could make a significant difference to the future occurrence of 2001-03 type events and outcomes. Primarily, these advocate strengthening food supply, within an overall narrative of small-farm growth as the source of transformation in southern African countries. As the principle way forward for reducing future vulnerabilities, this proposition rests on arguable premises. One such premise is that southern African countries have failed in the past to promote small-farm based rural development, which may be true in some places and times, but not others. Another is that there is a huge growth potential in the small-farm sector if only the power of new technologies were

unleashed. A third is that a rapidly growing agriculture will create substantial multipliers in the rest of the economy (the so-called rural growth linkage model).

14. Livelihoods research suggests that quite different forces work on relative poverty and wealth in rural areas in southern African countries than the line of argument so persistently pursued by the agricultural growth linkage enthusiasts. All rural families straddle farm and non-farm activities. The most successful of them construct a non-farm component of their livelihood portfolio that comprises activities and enterprises that are not directly related to agriculture. This provides them with the resources to improve their farm productivity and therefore strengthen their livelihoods further. The less successful remain in subsistence agriculture and undertake low wage casual work on other farms. The key to rising farm productivity is urban and non-farm economic growth, not farm output on its own. This also reduces vulnerability because it creates diverse income streams that are less prone than reliance on food crop agriculture to crisis in the face of natural shocks.

15. When this line of reasoning is connected to the idea of enabling rather than disabling institutional contexts, then the policy implications are clear. In the words of Moser (1998), ‘people’s own inventive solutions’ need to be released from the suffocation of a public sector institutional environment that often preoccupies itself with hampering and blocking people’s efforts to devise new livelihood sources rather than encouraging and facilitating them to do so.

DRAFT 2

Forum for Food Security in Southern Africa

Theme Paper 3

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Starting Points

The purpose of this theme paper is to review vulnerability concepts and relate these to proximate as well as long-run factors implicated in the 2001-03 food security crisis in southern Africa. This purpose is, however, tackled in a particular way in an effort to 'scale up' the scope of vulnerability in order to encompass broader aspects of development in the region than those captured by household and community level analyses on their own. In order to do this, livelihoods ideas are extended to include macro-micro links to rural livelihoods, especially with respect to public sector institutional environments within which individuals and families construct and adapt their livelihoods.

The countries covered in this review are Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho. Four out of these five countries have Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs);[1] and several of them are tentatively beginning to pursue democratic decentralisation by creating elected district councils or assemblies to conduct local government. PRSPs and decentralisation are the twin pillars of the donor-government funding framework that is becoming prevalent throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, and which includes direct budget support by donors and fiscal decentralisation to local councils. It matters a great deal to the future vulnerability of rural and urban populations in these countries whether these two strategic thrusts genuinely create more conducive environments for people to construct robust and improving livelihoods. Arriving at some preliminary views about this is an important task of this paper.

The paper is structured as follows. The next two sections are concerned with defining vulnerability and its adjacent processes, initially as a household level construct and later in relation to vulnerable groups, broader populations and longer term trends and pressures. Examples or illustrations drawn from the experience of the 2001-03 period in the study countries are called upon where relevant. Distinctions are drawn between vulnerable groups and vulnerable populations, and between chronic and transitory vulnerability. This is followed by a consideration of the factors causing rising vulnerability in southern Africa including growth failures, market liberalisation failures, HIV/AIDS, and politics and governance issues. Particular attention is given to the proposition that the 2001-03 crisis represented a 'new variant famine' created by the severity of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the region

[*] A previous draft has been revised in the light of helpful comments received from Stephen Devereux, Mike Drinkwater, Paul Harvey and Rachel Slater. I am grateful to those reviewers, as well as to participants in the e-discussion group, for bringing to my attention flaws in the earlier draft, and for making suggestions for changes to the text which in many instances have been incorporated into this revision. Views expressed herein remain solely the responsibility of the author.

(de Waal, 2002). From here, the paper moves on to examine emerging overarching policy frameworks, principally comprising PRSPs and decentralisation, and the prospects these offer for reducing vulnerabilities in the future. Finally, the paper considers the role and scope of vulnerability assessments as contributors to the information flow that provides policy actors with the basis to respond to indicators of livelihood stress in the short and long term.

Defining vulnerability: living on the edge

The concept of vulnerability has been around in the poverty and famine literature for a long time, yet ambiguities in its interpretation persist in food security and related literatures, and are manifested in some of the writing about the 2001-03 southern African food security crisis. A neat definition is provided by Devereux (2002) to the effect that "vulnerability denotes both exposure and sensitivity to livelihood shocks". Some quite complicated ideas underlie such a succinct definition, and the intention is to draw these out here. In the meantime, the phrase 'living on the edge' provides a graphic image of the livelihood circumstances that vulnerability tries to convey.[2] Living on the edge evokes the sense of a small push sending a person or people over the edge, and it is just this knife edge between ability to survive and thrive, and sudden loss of ability to do so, that vulnerability seeks to describe. Rising vulnerability over time is then a matter of how close to the edge people are being pushed by factors that are outside their control.[3]

A paper by Alwang *et al* (2001) seeks to synthesize differing understandings of vulnerability into a single framework that can be widely shared, and the ideas that they put forward, drawing on the work of many others, are helpful for clarifying the vulnerability concept. In the first instance, it is important to be clear about the thing or status that a person or population is vulnerable to. In this paper, the interest is in vulnerability to an acute decline in access to food. People can be vulnerable to many other things: income falling below a certain level; a wide variety of illnesses and infectious diseases; accidents at work; atmospheric pollution and so on.

Although it has been stated often enough, there is no harm in re-affirming that vulnerability is not the same as poverty. Poverty, certainly as defined by economists, describes a state with respect to an absolute or relative norm (e.g. a poverty line).[4] Vulnerability, by contrast, refers to proneness to a sudden, catastrophic, fall in the level of a variable, in this instance access to enough food (i.e. once again it is about susceptibility to falling over the edge). Of course rising poverty is a factor contributing to rising vulnerability (being pushed closer to the edge), but this does not make it the same thing. Poor people may not be vulnerable if they live in relatively stable contexts with good infrastructure, communications, and social support systems. Conversely, non-poor people can be vulnerable if they live in unstable contexts characterised by widespread uncertainty.

Vulnerability is a "forward looking" concept (Alwang *et al*, 2001: 1): it seeks to describe people's proneness to a future acute loss in their capability to acquire food. It is for this reason that vulnerability ideas can play an important role in predicting the onset of food crises, a consideration that this paper returns to in due course. One useful way of capturing this forward looking feature is to view vulnerability as a sequence, described by Alwang *et al.* as a "risk chain":

- people confront a variety of risks in the routine pursuit of their livelihoods; some of these risks pertain to potentially catastrophic events or 'shocks' (e.g. floods, droughts), while others represent pervasive uncertainty in the livelihood environment stemming from numerous short, medium and long run causes

- people actively manage risk in a variety of ways; some of them to do with anticipating the eventuality of shocks in advance (*ex ante* risk management) and some to do with actions after a shock has occurred (*ex post* coping) (Webb, *et al*., 1992; Carter, 1997)

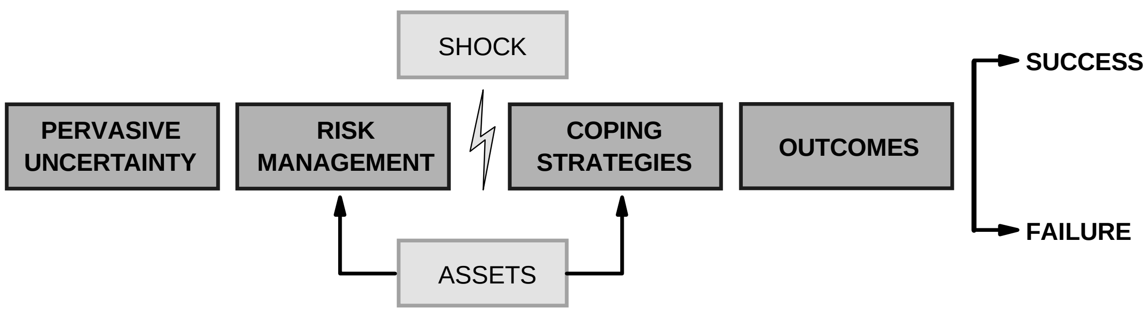
- examples of *ex ante* risk management include building up stores, making savings, nurturing social networks, growing drought-resistant crops, building up livestock herds, diversifying crops and income sources, and so on (Walker & Jodha, 1986; Swift, 1989); successful management reduces risk overall by spreading it across assets and activities that have different types of risk associated with them (so-called 'risk spreading')

- examples of *ex post* coping include seeking off-farm employment, migrating, removing children from school, having less meals, selling livestock, and so on (more on coping strategies below)

- coping behaviours result in outcomes: success or failure to avert acute food failure

This simplified vulnerability sequence is illustrated in Figure 1 below. Critical to the degree of vulnerability represented by risk management and coping within the chain is the asset status of households and how this is changing over different time periods. This is where vulnerability links closely to the sustainable livelihoods framework with its emphasis on assets, activities and outcomes within vulnerability and institutional contexts (Carney, 1998; Scoones, 1998). The SL framework itself represents an extended version, particularly on the policy and institutions side, of a preceding approach referred to as the 'asset vulnerability framework' (Swift, 1989; Moser, 1998).

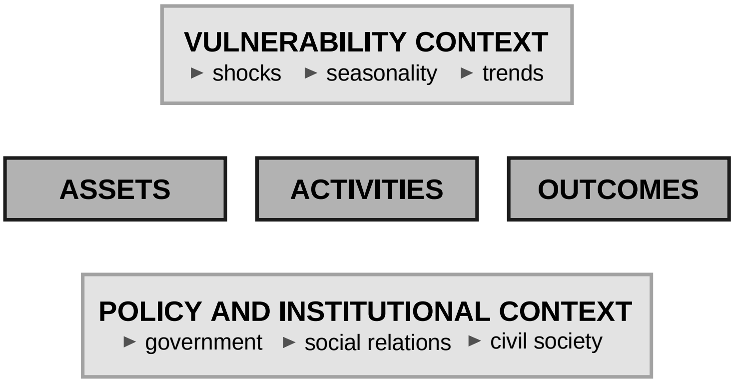
Figure 1: Vulnerability as a Risk Sequence



Source: author's interpretation of Alwang *et al.* (2001)

By way of comparison, Figure 2 represents the livelihoods framework in its simplest possible form.[5] The livelihoods framework regards awareness of the asset status of poor individuals or households as fundamental to an understanding of the options open to them. One of its basic tenets, therefore, is that poverty policy should be concerned with raising the asset status of the poor, or enabling existing assets that are idle or underemployed to be used productively. The approach looks positively at what is possible rather than negatively at how desperate things are. As articulated by Moser (1998: p.1) it seeks “to identify what the poor have rather than what they do not have” and “[to] strengthen people’s own inventive solutions, rather than substitute for, block or undermine them”.

Figure 2: The Basic Livelihoods Framework



Source: author’s representation of the core livelihood components (see Scoones, 1998; Ellis, 2000)

The vulnerability context as depicted in livelihood frameworks like that above refers to the same thing as ‘pervasive uncertainty’ in the vulnerability sequence. The assets, activities and outcomes associated with constructing viable and robust livelihoods implicitly contain within them risk management behaviours, and relative success at achieving a robust livelihood gives the individual or household a greater capability to deal with risk both before and after the advent of a risky event, or shock. In the light of the Moser (1998) quotation given above, the policy and institutional context is critical to the construction of improving livelihoods since it is this context that either blocks and disables, or encourages and enables, improving livelihoods. Later in this paper, the proposition will be advanced that policy and institutional contexts in southern African countries are often discouraging, and are therefore part of the problem of rising rural vulnerability not part of its solution. Public sector behaviours at local level may also be erratic and add to the pervasive uncertainty surrounding rural livelihoods.

Returning to Figure 1, *ex ante* risk management strategies are largely to do with building up assets in order to provide the household with buffers against uncertain events (Swift, 1989). They are also about diversifying activities on- and off-farm (Ellis, 1998; 2000). In order to have the greatest possible risk ameliorating effect, this diversity needs to comprise activities that have differing risk profiles from each other (e.g. a brother with a bicycle taxi in town, rather than a job on the next farm). Successful asset building can result in virtuous spirals of accumulation, in which assets are traded up in sequence, for example, chickens to goats, to cattle, to land; or, cash from non-farm income to farm inputs to higher farm income to land or to livestock. The scope to do this is curtailed in national economies undergoing generalised economic stagnation or crisis, and this is relevant to interpreting some of the mosaic of factors that precipitated the food crisis in the study countries.

Ex post coping behaviours include non-erosive responses (reducing consumption of non-food items, sending a family member to town to look for work, gathering wild food, doing with less food); and erosive responses (selling assets), causing a downward spiral in the asset status of the social unit. Much has been written on the sequences of asset disposal that distinguish the downside response to a gathering crisis (Watts, 1983; Corbett, 1988; Davies, 1993; 1996; Devereux, 1993; 2001). In general, families will seek to protect their ability to recover from the shock, and therefore will dispose of moveable assets first: savings, stocks, livestock. Later on, they may dispose of implements, buildings, even land, thus placing themselves in the position of inability to recover from the shock in the future.

A factor that may be relevant for interpreting the southern Africa 2001-03 crisis is the degree to which behaviours regarded as coping in one era, come to be regarded as normal in another (Davies, 1993; 1996). In other words the entire baseline of non-crisis rural livelihoods may shift closer to the edge. Many factors are likely to be implicated in this, but it is evident that for populations to recover fully from a previous shock, enough dynamism must creep back into rural and national economies for jobs to be created, cash to be generated, assets purchased and so on. If this fails to happen, then an incomplete recovery will occur, and rural populations will exhibit raised vulnerability for the long term. Indeed, a previous shock does not necessarily have to be responsible for this, and, amongst other factors, the growing prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the study countries has contributed to this heightened vulnerability (on which, see more below).

Coping behaviours open up the potential for devising indicators of rising vulnerability that could be utilised in vulnerability assessment methods that seek to identify a population in difficulty in time to avert a full-blown crisis. The performance of such methods in the context of food security information systems in the region is considered in due course. Here certain interlinked processes that occur within coping are worth noting. Since ability to acquire food is the critical issue, it is price ratios between what people do to raise cash, and the price of food that is important, not the price of food on its own.[6] The advent of sharply adverse trends in the ratio of wage rates or livestock sales prices compared to the maize price is one indicator that a local economy may be entering coping mode. The relative exhaustion of food reserves, food rationing within the household, withdrawing children from school, sending children to live with relatives elsewhere, sending family members that would normally be in residence away to search for work, are complementary pieces of evidence.

Before leaving Figure 1 behind, it will be apparent from the diagram that vulnerability is not a measurable concept. Therefore assessing the direction in which vulnerability is moving (are people becoming more or less vulnerable?) can only be done through indirect indicators (such as those listed in the preceding paragraph). On occasion, it may be possible to attach probability to particular risky events (e.g. drought occurs in this region on average every six years), but this is typically not very helpful because it still does not say when the drought will occur. An *ex post* measure of vulnerability favoured by some economists (who as a discipline tend to like measuring things) is to look at outcomes: what was the actual decline in food availability that occurred, or what proportion of the population were unable to cope with the drought. This is really not very helpful. It relies on rather narrow and selective ex-post attributes of vulnerability, and it provides scant information useful to avoid future human misery, which is what the vulnerability concept seeks to contribute towards.

When the kind of vulnerability that is under consideration is vulnerability to food failure, then food insecurity is not really distinguishable from vulnerability as a separate concept. The typical departure point for discussions about food insecurity is its juxtaposition to its opposite i.e. food security, or ‘access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life’ (World Bank, 1986). From there many factors can be implicated in making people less than food secure: seasonality, being food deficit from own production even in normal years, and the abundance of risk factors that comprise the ‘pervasive uncertainty’ of Figure 1 above. However, both livelihoods and entitlement approaches mean that the purely food balance aspects of food security or insecurity provide an incomplete picture at household level. It is livelihood status rather than food status that determines food insecurity, and it is the same livelihood status (assets, activities and outcomes) that determines whether people are more, or less, vulnerable to food failure as a consequence of a shock.

In this context it is relevant to point out that food insecurity and nutritional insecurity are not synonymous, and this can be important for vulnerability assessment methods that seek to identify the populations most at risk of a nutritional deficit as a crisis begins to unfold. The point is illustrated by reference to zones that are heavily reliant on root crops compared to those that are reliant on maize. The former type of farming area may be more prone to nutritional deficit than the latter type of farming area; however, when maize shortages are the main preoccupation of humanitarian agencies they are likely to prioritize the delivery of grain supplies to the maize deficit areas.

Further ideas that have been used to deepen the concept of vulnerability are those of resilience and sensitivity, which originate in ecological (Holling, 1973) and natural resource management literatures (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Bayliss-Smith, 1991). Resilience refers to the ability of an ecological or livelihood system to “bounce back” from stress or shocks. Diversity is an important factor contributing to resilience in both natural and human systems (Altieri, 1995). For example, a farming system can be said to be resilient when a mid-season rain failure adversely affects only a proportion of the multiple crops cultivated. Sensitivity refers to the magnitude of a system’s response to an external event, for example, if a small change in the price of rice rapidly causes widespread undernutrition in a human population, then the livelihood system is acutely sensitive to even this minor shock. When applied to natural resource systems, sensitivity refers to the magnitude of the change in ecological systems set in motion by a particular process of human interference.

Resilience and sensitivity permit livelihoods to be described as a gradation from being highly robust to highly vulnerable, with respect to food security outcomes. The most robust livelihood system is one that displays high resilience and low sensitivity; while the most vulnerable displays low resilience and high sensitivity (see Figure 3 below, adapted from Davies, 1996). Low resilience can result either from failure to recover fully from an earlier shock or from adverse trends that erode household assets and opportunities over time. The latter would correspond to Davies (1996) notion of gradual livelihood adaptation towards less resilience than prevailed before.

Figure 3: Resilience and Sensitivity as Vulnerability Dimensions

		Resilience	
		High	**Low**
Sensitivity	**High**	Vulnerable	Highly Vulnerable
	Low	Robust	Vulnerable

Source: adapted from Davies (1996)

Vulnerability assessments undertaken during the course of the 2001-03 southern Africa food security crisis found the full range of coping behaviours that have been observed in other places and other times. These included (SADC FANR, 2002a-e; 2003):

- reducing expenditure on non-food items
- substitution between foods (cassava for maize)
- smaller meals
- fewer mealtimes per day
- payment in food for casual labour
- bartering for food
- collection and consumption of wild food
- drawing down on social networks
- livestock sales
- withdrawing children from school
- increased prostitution
- borrowing from moneylenders

Also prevalent were rapidly changing price ratios during the middle period of the crisis, mainly in early- to mid-2002 in most countries. Severe falls in the real wage rate (the nominal wage divided by the price of maize) whether calculated in cash or barter terms, and sharp downward trends in the real value of livestock sales (livestock prices divided by the price of maize), were observed.[7]

In summary up to this point, vulnerability is defined here following Devereux (2002) as degree of exposure and sensitivity to livelihood shocks; or, in short, living on the edge. It is apparent that vulnerability has both narrow and wide interpretations. Its narrow interpretation refers to the micro level of the household or similar social unit (compound etc.) and seeks to describe the risks that people confront, the anticipatory management of those risks and what happens when one or other (or a combination of) those uncertain events come to pass, in the form of mitigation, coping and outcomes. This micro level approach can be, and is, scaled up horizontally when vulnerability assessment mapping is undertaken as part of food crisis information gathering at sub-national, national or regional levels. However, vulnerability potentially has a broader application. People's livelihood chances are not just determined by local level events, but by political, social and economic trends that are national, regional and sometimes even global in character.

Vulnerable groups and vulnerable populations

Different social groups in both rural and urban areas vary in the robustness or vulnerability of their livelihoods, and an understanding of these variations plays a key policy role in targeted interventions designed to provide fall-back support for those that are most vulnerable, while excluding the less vulnerable from the safety nets that are put in place. Particular groups may be vulnerable for quite different reasons, and therefore the type of support that is appropriate for them may also differ. Some examples of groups that are routinely identified in southern Africa as more vulnerable than the population at large are:

- children under the age of 5 (vulnerable especially to undernutrition, malnutrition and infectious diseases)
- lactating mothers (vulnerable to undernutrition in the context of nursing babies)
- the elderly (vulnerable due to loss of assets, or ability to use their assets productively, or additional burdens of care for the ill and orphans due to HIV/AIDS)
- widows and divorced women (vulnerable due to loss of access rights to land, lack of time to cultivate land, and loss of previous partner's contribution to household livelihood)
- female headed households (vulnerable for the same reasons as the preceding category)[8]
- people with disabilities (lack of access to production or earning opportunities; social exclusion)
- families with members with HIV/AIDS or other chronic illnesses (vulnerable due to lack of labour, and disposal of assets to cover medical costs)
- remote rural populations (vulnerable due to too much reliance on a single livelihood source, lack of diversification options, high transport costs, poor information)

It can be seen that predisposing factors leading to vulnerability differ across these groups: some of them are to do with household demographics and intra-household food distribution issues, some to do with social and institutional access rights to assets (usually land), some to do with depletion of available household labour, some to do with lack of livelihood options. Gender plays a significant part in these different vulnerabilities – women are often more vulnerable than men, and this includes women as carers in HIV/AIDS households, and, in southern Africa, the greater prevalence of the HIV infection amongst women compared to men (estimated at 1.2 women for every man infected).

The identification of vulnerable groups facilitates, but by no means entirely clarifies, the basis under which targeted interventions may be devised (see Social Protection theme paper). For one thing, even within a vulnerable group, some members will not be vulnerable; for example, not all female headed households are vulnerable. Secondly, vulnerabilities stemming from cultural norms regarding access rights to resources by particular categories of people can lead to particular difficulties for effective targeting (this applies to the elderly, widows, divorcees etc). Thirdly, there is a risk that the same vulnerable groups are always unthinkingly ascribed with the quality of heightened vulnerability, leading to neglect of new vulnerable groups that are created by emerging events (for example, laid off estate workers in Malawi). Fourth, the idea of vulnerable groups tends to be determinedly apolitical, thus avoiding identification of groups made vulnerable by political action (for example, farm workers losing their jobs in Zimbabwe).

Consideration of vulnerable groups leads to the notion of distinguishing ‘chronic vulnerability’ from ‘transitory vulnerability’. This is analogous to the distinction between chronic poverty and transient poverty (see Hulme & Shepherd, 2003). Chronic vulnerability denotes persistence of the state of being vulnerable (in this instance, to food crisis). Following Hulme & Shepherd’s schema for chronic poverty, persistence could be defined either by duration of being continuously vulnerable, or by the proportion of the annual cycle during which people are vulnerable. For example, it might be argued that being vulnerable continuously for three years, or being routinely vulnerable for nine out of twelve months, both constitute forms of chronic vulnerability. Households that only produce enough maize to last three or four months, and have few alternatives for generating entitlements to maize, would fall into this latter category.

Many of the vulnerable groups identified above are likely to fall into a chronic vulnerability category; in other words they are persistently highly vulnerable to failing to secure enough food. In rural areas of southern African countries a large proportion of the rural population also experience transitory vulnerability for seasonal reasons. This transitory vulnerability is well documented and occurs in the last few months before the next maize crop is ready to harvest, when food stocks are exhausted and the onset of rains increases the likelihood of water borne diseases and malaria. A shock occurring in this period, for example floods or conflict or a sharp downturn in economic activity are likely to push people over the edge, even though at other times of the year they may be more resilient. Clearly not all vulnerabilities can be neatly classified in this way; household livelihood circumstances that may have been regarded as defining transitory vulnerability in the past (e.g. maize stocks running out 8-10 months after harvest) could take on the character of chronic vulnerability if objective conditions deteriorate over time (e.g. maize stocks may routinely run out after 3-4 months, and alternative means to acquire food may shrink).

The distinction between chronic and transitory vulnerability adds value if its application in a policy context results in better designed safety net interventions, improved capability of predicting the onset of a crisis, or more effective pro-poor growth strategies. As with so many dimensions of livelihoods in very poor countries, there will be instances that can be sharply and confidently defined by such categorisation, and continuums that are much less susceptible to accurate policy definition.

Providing effective social support or safety nets for vulnerable groups is a continuing policy challenge that goes on to some degree irrespective of the presence or absence of a widespread livelihood threat. On the other hand, designated vulnerable groups are likely to be amongst the first population categories that exhaust their coping capabilities when a crisis occurs. Moreover, it matters considerably to poverty and food security policy whether the membership of vulnerable groups is growing, staying roughly the same, or shrinking in absolute numbers over time. The membership of certain types of vulnerable group may rise in a fast growing market economy due to increased social differentiation in rural areas, the commoditisation of land and other resources, and the decline of the so-called moral economy. However, rapid economic growth, unless it is highly skewed towards a few capital-intensive sectors, will more generally tend to decrease the prevalence of vulnerability in a country and provide conditions in which people experience expanding options for moving away from the edge.

In the context of recent southern African events, it is evident that vulnerability to food crisis was more widely spread across populations than could be explained by reference to specific vulnerable groups. Vulnerable populations seems an appropriate term to describe this. From the earlier defining attributes of vulnerability, populations can become more vulnerable either due to rising risks or due to less ability to manage risk or due to deterioration in their coping capabilities, or, indeed, a combination of all of these adverse circumstances. Rising risks can occur for environmental, market or governance reasons. The implicit assumption often seems to be made that rising environmental risks predominate (global warming, more frequent *el nino* events, exhausted soils etc.);[9] however, this does not need to be the case. Market risks increase when previous parastatal bodies that fixed prices of inputs and outputs are dismantled, and inadequately replaced by fragmentary private coverage. Less ability to manage risk is to do with erosion of the asset and activity basis of livelihoods, and this can occur due to broader trends and events (HIV/AIDS, declining civil security, declining per capita incomes and so on). Coping capabilities can weaken due to failure to recover fully from preceding shocks, or because coping behaviours that were formerly only brought into play when shocks occurred become the norm by which families eke out a livelihood close to the edge. In the following section, these factors and strands contributing to a generalised increase in vulnerability are explored for the affected countries in southern Africa.

Factors causing rising vulnerability in southern Africa

From early on in the evolution of the 2001-03 food crisis, it became apparent that this was a complex disaster with interwoven causes, triggers and responses that varied within and between countries of the region. The proximate trigger for the crisis did not take the form of a single prolonged drought event affecting all areas of all countries to a similar degree. Instead some countries had unseasonally heavy rainfall just before harvest time in 2001 (parts of Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique); parts of several countries experienced drought, other parts had normal rainfall in 2002; parts of Mozambique were still recovering from severe flooding in previous seasons. Some triggers were political as much as environmental (Zimbabwe). So, too, causes and consequences exhibit some similar patterns, and some that differ, across countries.

(1) *Growth failures, poverty, and loss of migration options*

It is instructive to begin this section of the paper with an overview of growth and poverty aspects of the countries under review. Relevant data is compiled in Table 1.

Economic and social indicators vary across this group of countries, yet patterns can be observed and trends rather than static indicators are implicated in the deteriorating livelihood circumstances that sub-groups of countries have in common. As an example of this, per capita national income in 2000 ranged between US$170 (Malawi) and US$540 (Lesotho); however, trends in this indicator are almost everywhere negative (Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho) or growing negligibly (Malawi). Only Mozambique in this group of countries has been doing well in the per capita growth stakes, and even here a sharp deceleration in the rate of increase is observed to have occurred in the most recent period, 1999-2002. Social indicators place all the countries amongst the least developed countries in the world according to life expectancy, infant mortality, and adult literacy. Many of these indicators are on downward rather than upward trajectories, especially due to the incidence of HIV/AIDS infection within them that is the highest in the world (more on this below).

We do not have to look far, then, for one cause of increasing vulnerability. Prolonged declines in per capita income have seriously detrimental effects on livelihoods in any economy (consider what happens even in industrialised countries when there are more than two years of recession). This is because they imply shrinking rather than expanding livelihood options, and this has cumulative effects downwards, just as cumulative effects upwards are experienced under growth. In the context of countries with the sectoral economic structure shown in Table 1, these cumulative effects will have been particularly severe in rural areas that represent between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of populations but only generate between 20 and 40 per cent of GDP. As cash earning opportunities shrink, so small farmers tend to retreat into a mainly subsistence mode of livelihood, and it is the rural poor in particular that come to rely chiefly on subsistence and in so doing find themselves in highly vulnerable circumstances with respect to future shocks (see Box 1).

Table 1: Economic, Social and Poverty Indicators, 2000

Category	**Units**	**Zambia**	**Malawi**	**Zimbabwe**	**Mozam-bique**	**Lesotho**
Economic Data 2000						
GNI Per Capita	*US$*	300	170	480	210	540
Rank	*rank*	176	200	158	193	77
Growth Rate 1988-2000	*% p.a.*	-2.2	0.6	-0.4	3.4	-0.4
GDP	*US$m*	2,911	1,697	7,392	3,754	899
Growth 1990-2000	*%*	0.5	3.8	2.5	6.4	4.1
Growth 1999-2002	*% p.a*	1.3	-0.7	-6.7	2.0	-0.1
Agriculture GDP Share	*%*	27	42	18	24	17
Population 2000						
Total Population	*million*	10.1	10.3	12.6	17.7	2.0
Growth Rate 1980-2000	*% p.a.*	2.8	2.6	2.9	1.9	2.0
Rural	*% total*	55	85	65	60	72
Urban	*% total*	45	15	35	40	28
Social Indicators 2000						
HDI Index	*index*	0.433	0.400	0.551	0.322	0.535
Rank	*rank*	153	163	128	170	132
Life Expectancy	*years*	41.4	40.0	42.9	39.3	45.7
Infant Mortality	*per '000*	112	117	73	126	92
Adult Literacy	*%*	78.1	60.1	88.7	44.0	83.4
Official Aid Flows 2000						
Total Aid	*US$m*	795	445	178	876	41
Aid as share of GDP	*%*	27.3	26.2	2.4	23.3	4.6
Aid Per Capita	*US$*	78.7	43.2	14.1	49.5	20.5
Poverty Headcount	***year***	**1998**	**1997-98**	**1995-96**	**1996-97**	**1993**
Rural	*%*	84.0	66.5	76.2	71.2	53.9
Urban	*%*	56.0	54.9	41.1	62.0	27.8
National	*%*	72.9	65.3	63.3	69.4	49.2

Sources: Zimbabwe (1998), Lesotho (2000), Mozambique (2001), Zambia (2002), Malawi (2000; 2002), World Bank (2002a, 2002b, 2002c), UNDP (2002), Kalinda *et al.* (2003)

Estimates of the prevalence of absolute poverty in the five countries come from household income and expenditure surveys that are national in scope, and aim to be representative of the country as a whole (Table 1 again). Four out of the five countries have strikingly high headcount measures of poverty, ranging between 63 per cent for Zimbabwe and 73 per cent for Zambia.[10] These figures are put into perspective by comparison with the countries immediately to the north of this region: in East Africa which is also considered a very poor part of the world, national poverty rates are 35 per cent in Uganda and Tanzania and 52 per cent in Kenya, a country notorious for prolonged weak governance and economic mismanagement over many years (Ellis & Freeman, 2003). Note also that rural poverty rates are always higher than urban ones, and that Zambia and Zimbabwe are especially notable with respect to this difference. While poverty and vulnerability are not synonymous, poverty rates at the levels shown are indicative of widespread vulnerability taking into account the risky character of livelihood contexts in all the countries.

Repeat nationally representative poverty surveys are rare in the region, and only Zambia has expenditure-based poverty data at intermittent intervals through the 1990s. However, even here differences between survey instruments between the early and late 1990s probably mean lack of strict comparability between two earlier (1991 and 1993) and two later (1996 and 1998) surveys (Zambia, 2002: 22). Bearing in mind this caveat, overall poverty in Zambia seems to have changed little during the 1990s (70-74 per cent in all surveys). On the other hand, there are signs that in the second half of the 1990s big changes in relative urban and rural poverty ratios may have been occurring. Specifically, urban poverty rates seem to have risen from around 46 per cent earlier in the decade to 56 per cent in 1998. It also seems likely, although not statistically substantiated, that urban poverty in Zimbabwe will have risen steeply in the past few years, due to the drastic fall in national income, high rates of layoffs, and spiralling inflation since 2002.

Box 1 Subsistence Oriented Livelihood

In various places in this paper, reference is made to the retreat into subsistence that tends to be a feature of a prolonged deterioration in the risk environment confronting the rural poor in southern African countries. This retreat into subsistence is provoked by uncertainty, growth, and governance factors that individually may not appear to be of great significance, but in combination result in withdrawal from the money economy:

- increased market risks (unstable prices) following market liberalisation
- collapsed marketing arrangements for former cash crops
- failure of private traders to fill the vacuum caused by dismantled parastatals
- shrinking non-farm, including urban, job opportunities due to growth failure (Francis, 2000, details the effects of this in several countries)
- deteriorating civil security in villages and on roads (theft of produce etc.)
- crop cesses and movement taxes on livestock that discourage market participation
- roadblocks that levy spurious fees and fines on traders with goods in transit

For the household, the retreat into subsistence seeks to secure a viable livelihood with minimum recourse to the market, but in the process this renders the household even more vulnerable to food insecurity caused by the occurrence of natural hazards, due to the fall in exchange entitlements that withdrawal from the market represents.

A final factor that is relevant in the current context is the sharp decline of migration to South Africa as a means for generating remittance income in the SADC region. From the early 1990s onwards, migrants have been retrenched or repatriated from South African mines and factories. In Malawi, this had a devastating effect on rural cash incomes during the 1990s. In Mozambique, its effects were severe but overshadowed by the even more adverse effects on livelihoods of civil war. In Zimbabwe and Zambia it played a significant contributory factor in shrinking the cash economy. In Lesotho, estimates suggest that migrant labour employed in South

Africa fell from a peak of 250,000 in the 1980s to around 60,000 by 2000 (Lesotho, 2000). At one time remittance income contributed on average 70 per cent of rural household incomes.

In summary, then, from an economic performance perspective, trends have been truly dire in the region not just in the short-term of the last few years but going back at least to the early 1990s. Mozambique is the only country that differs in this regard, but then, like Uganda, this is an economy that is rebuilding from almost total devastation in its not so distant past. Negative macroeconomic trends inevitably increase vulnerability, not just in small pockets here and there, but across populations that even in more buoyant macroeconomic circumstances would tend to experience high risks and have weak fallback positions.

(2) *Market liberalisation failures*

A second background factor contributing to rising vulnerability in the southern African region is the failure of SAP reforms to replace former (flawed) state delivery systems to agriculture by viable market alternatives. This reason is examined more fully in a separate paper (see Market Development theme paper). Drawing in addition on findings from East African countries, the transition from state to private markets and services has been distinguished by some, if not always all, of the following features:

- increased market risk in general: fluctuating output prices and steeply rising input prices typically caused by currency devaluations;
- trader disinterest in remote locations (high transport costs), and in high subsistence rural areas (where the volume of marketed output offered for sale is low)
- a combination of both remoteness and high subsistence results in market collapse (few or no traders) and contraction of the monetised economy in those places
- availability of inputs in many places is low, non-existent, or characterised by soaring prices, for the same reasons
- declining efficacy, even moribund, agricultural advice services, due to budget cuts that disable extension officers from visiting farms and villages (in a cross-country livelihood study conducted in Malawi and East Africa, not a single one out of 37 villages in 4 countries had seen a government extension officer in ten years)[11]
- privatised veterinary services that work unevenly, and that leave large policy gaps when serious livestock disease outbreaks occur

These factors will have certainly been a contributory factor to stagnating or falling farm productivity in many parts of the region. More than this they have to some degree created perverse incentives pushing farm households back into subsistence rather than encouraging them out into the marketplace. This in turn reduces their capability to compensate for food deficits from own supplies by market purchases. No one is advocating a return to discredited monopoly parastatals, nevertheless the mistaken belief that fully articulated and competitive markets would spring into being the instant the market liberalisation button was pressed has led to no subtlety in the transition to markets, and the indiscriminate jettisoning of good as well as bad strands in former public agricultural policies. The apparently beneficial impacts of the

Malawi Starter Pack schemes on national maize availability (Levy *et al.*, 2000; Levy & Barahona, 2001; Potter, 2003) suggest that carefully designed agricultural support policies could be more effective, and less costly to government and donor budgets in the long run, than the abandonment of all such policies resulting in a permanent requirement to fund social safety nets.

(3) *HIV/AIDS and the New Variant Famine Hypothesis*

A third underlying factor implicated in rising vulnerability in the region is the prevalence, demographics and trend of HIV/AIDS in the region. Some basic data on the estimated prevalence, mortality and orphan effects of HIV/AIDS is provided in Table 2.

The vulnerability analysis of HIV/AIDS can be approached utilising the same conceptual apparatus that applies to other risks and other coping sequences, with the implication that rising vulnerability caused by the HIV/AIDS pandemic is a sub-set of, and exacerbates, rising vulnerability from multiple other causes. At the individual and household level HIV/AIDS can be regarded as a risky event, albeit one that differs from market or natural risks in that probabilities of infection are altered by social understandings of the disease and the precautionary steps that can be taken to prevent its spread. HIV/AIDS has direct and indirect effects on the asset status of the household, persisting over a long period, and leading towards decreased resilience and heightened sensitivity to even minor shocks (Kalinda *et al.*, 2003).

Table 2: HIV/AIDS Statistics and Status

	Estimated Number of People Living with HIV/AIDS in 2003			Aids Orphans	New Aids Deaths
	Total	Adults	Adult Rate	2001	2001
Zimbabwe	2,300,000	2,000,000	33.7%	780,000	200,000
Zambia	1,200,000	1,000,000	21.5%	570,000	120,000
Mozambique	1,100,000	1,000,000	13.0%	420,000	60,000
Malawi	850,000	780,000	15.0%	470,000	80,000
Lesotho	360,000	330,000	31.0%	73,000	25,000
Swaziland	170,000	150,000	33.4%	35,000	12,000
TOTAL:	**5,980,000**	**5,260,000**	**20.4%**	**2,448,000**	**497,000**

Source: SADC-FANR (2003) citing UNAIDS (2002)

First, labour quality and quantity are reduced, initially in terms of productivity when the HIV-infected person falls ill, and later the labour supply of the household declines when that person is no longer able to contribute and eventually dies.[12] The probability that more than one adult per family is infected is high, given the heterosexual transmission of the disease in Africa. A compounding factor is that infection rates are higher among women, who account for 70 per cent of the labour force for cultivation in most SSA countries, the proportion rising to nearer 80 per cent for food production. In addition, other household members must divert labour time in production or other earning activities in order to provide care for ill household members, and in many societies, traditional mourning customs also absorb lengthy periods of time, and involve significant funeral costs.

Second, HIV/AIDS erodes household assets aside from labour. Cash savings that might have been used to fund farm inputs or hire wage labour are spent on medical fees and drugs. Sequences of asset disposals, similar to those associated with famine, occur, weakening the capability of households to respond to any additional crisis beyond AIDS itself. For women that are widowed by AIDS, the decline does not stop with their partner's death. In many SSA societies, they lose rights to continue to cultivate their husband's land, and they may become ostracised socially. A variety of response management, or coping strategies, associated with HIV/AIDS have been observed in southern African countries: reduction in the area under cultivation; delay in farming operations such as tillage, sowing and weeding; reduction in the ability to control crop pests; decline in crop yields; loss of soil fertility; shift from labour intensive (e.g. cereals) to less labour-intensive crops (such as cassava and sweet potatoes); shift from cash-oriented production to subsistence production; and loss of agricultural knowledge and farm management skills.

The high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in southern African countries has led to the proposition that this may be the determining factor reducing the capability of populations to cope with external shocks. This proposition has been termed 'new variant famine' due to certain features that distinguish it from so-called 'old famines', principally associated with the onset of droughts (de Waal, 2002).[13] The comparison is summarised in Table 3 below. The starting point is risk management, and it is proposed that whereas drought risks are anticipated in the custom and design of farming systems in Africa, HIV/AIDS risks most decidedly are not so, because the risk is new in historical terms, and less than a generation has had the chance to learn from the experience of living with HIV/AIDS.

Both old and new famines possess some coping strategies in common, but others differ markedly. In particular, adults consuming less food is a viable strategy in a drought famine but not an option for adults made ill by AIDS; asset sales for coping leaves labour and its skills intact in a drought famine, while HIV/AIDS depletes labour and its skills; labour- intensive livelihood activities continue up to moment that famine strikes in a drought famine, but are increasingly neglected in HIV/AIDs households, reducing resilience. Once famine seriously takes hold, additional differences can be observed. In drought famines, mortality occurs mainly amongst children and the elderly; the dependency ratio falls; and more men die than women. In HIV/AIDS famines, mortality mainly strikes working age adults, the dependency ratio rises, and more women die than men. Finally, agrarian livelihoods do typically recover from a drought famine, and social networks that were drawn upon in order to cope can be rebuilt. However, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS may make agrarian livelihoods as currently structured unsustainable, and social networks become overburdened by caring for orphans.

The pivotal aspect of this comparison, and the deductions made from it, is what happens to household labour. It is the depletion of working adults (with experience and skills) in the household that is the defining characteristic of de Waal's new variant famine compared to other causes and effects that arise in a wide variety of vulnerability scenarios. Yet there is something rather too static about the endpoint of the new variant famine hypothesis. At household and community levels, HIV/AIDS adaptation, like other factors in evolving livelihoods, is a continuing process, not a linear sequence of events with a single definite destination.

There is an implicit assumption in a lot of writing on HIV/AIDS that it is the rural family that bears the brunt of the caring burden for both rural and urban citizens infected by the virus. Indeed, this assumption underlies quite a lot of the argument in de Waal's (2002) thinkpiece.

Table 3: Features of Old and New Variant Famines Compared

"Old Famines"	**"New Variant Famine"**
risk of drought is built into farming systems	risk of HIV/AIDS is not built into farming systems
food rationing as coping strategy widespread	food rationing not possible for people ill as a result of AIDS
asset sales for coping leaves labour and its skills intact	the labour asset is depleted, and skills and knowledge lost
labour-intensive operations continue before the crisis and can be resumed afterwards	labour-intensive operations are neglected before the crisis, reducing resilience
mortality mainly young and old	mortality mainly economically active adults
more men die than women	more women die than men
dependency ratio falls	dependency ratio rises
social networks can be rebuilt	social networks overstretched by orphans
agrarian livelihoods recover	agrarian livelihoods are unsustainable

Source: compiled by the author from the argument put forward in de Waal (2002)

Yet the evidence on this is fragmentary and mixed. HIV/AIDS is also a disease of urban areas, transport corridors and mobile populations. Deep rural areas can be less affected than better linked places. Not all ill people are sent back to rural areas for their care, and it is likely that urban families have a considerable caring role, as well as all the associated costs and loss of assets that this entails. While this does not alter the basic chain of reasoning in the new variant famine hypothesis, it does suggest that the specifically rural vulnerability impact may have been overdrawn.

(4) *Political and governance factors*

It is becoming increasingly well understood that famines have political causes as well as environmental, economic, and livelihood ones. This insight has hitherto mainly been applied to the proximate failures of states to respond to advance signals that their citizens are sliding into a food security crisis: "failures of public action must be incorporated into the causal analysis of famines" (Devereux, 2000). It is evident that accurate prediction provided by famine early warning systems is to no avail if political leaderships choose to ignore the evidence that these provide (de Waal, 1997). Some African famines can be characterised in an overt way as "political famines" (Edkins,

2002) in that governments have been deliberately culpable of failing to organise or permit a humanitarian response when famine has struck particular populations within their countries.

The response, or lack of it, by government to emerging evidence of a food crisis is one end of a spectrum of political and governance factors that have implications for the vulnerability status of populations (see Policy Processes theme paper for a more extended discussion of political factors in the 2001-03 crisis). There is growing recognition that weak and inadequate governance is not just about corruption at the heart of central government, it is about the prevailing way that the public sector interacts with private citizens at every level of government from sub-district and district officials upwards to central government. This relationship often has the aspect of predator and prey rather than the government-citizen guise in which it is typically cloaked (Fjeldstad, 2001a; 2001b), and there are causal factors that help to explain this. The period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s saw a most profound real erosion in public sector salaries and conditions of service in all SSA countries (Jamal & Weeks, 1993). One of several downstream side-effects is an ubiquitous propensity to view private sector activity, however small and fragile, as a potential source of supplementary income generation. The institutional arrangements that arise in such conditions are full of contradictory behaviours on both sides of the public-private divide, with detrimental implications for poverty reduction in the long run (Wood, 2003). In the current context, they imply a different and more pervasive set of factors contributing to rising vulnerability than those typically identified in the discussion about politics and governance in relation to famines.

(5) Livelihood Patterns and the Dynamics of Vulnerability

The preceding discussion identifies four underlying groups of factors that singly or jointly are contributing to rising food access vulnerability in southern African countries. In shorthand these are growth, market, HIV/AIDS, and governance reasons. Their effects are erosion of the assets basis of rural livelihoods, diminished opportunities, and less capability to manage risk and cope with small and large shocks.

These factors are empirically verified by livelihoods studies undertaken in the last few years, not just in the five countries that are examined in this theme paper, but in adjacent countries that share similarities in agro-ecological conditions and agrarian structures. Some stylized “facts” that emerge from rural livelihoods research are as follows:[14]

- the rural poor tend to exhibit a highly eroded asset status, manifested by land holdings below 0.5 ha., no cattle or goats, low levels of educational attainment of household members, no savings, and decline in some elements of ‘social capital’ (community level social support; civil security); to these must be added the depleting effects on household labour caused by HIV/AIDS infections;

- a tremendous reliance on subsistence amongst customary tenure small farmers in general, and especially amongst poor rural households: subsistence ratios with respect to maize production are commonly in the range of 80 to 95 per cent, and for grain deficit households can be routinely 100 per cent (zero market sales);

- the emergence over the past 5-10 years of an expanding category of subsistence farm household that can only at best produce enough maize to cover 6-8 months consumption, this coverage shrinking to 3-5 months in years when there are climatic shocks (too much rain, hailstorms, shortened rains, droughts etc.);

- subsistence ratios in total household income that decline steeply with rising per capita income: for example, in a Malawi study comprising 280 households, the lowest income quartile exhibited a subsistence ratio in total income of 44 per cent, while for the highest income quartile this fell to 18 per cent (Ellis, Kutengule & Nyasulu, 2003);

- reliance on crop and livestock production in total livelihood portfolios that decline as per capita income rises: for example, in a Tanzania study comprising 344 households, the share of crop and livestock production in total household incomes fell from 68 per cent to 43 per cent between the bottom and top income quartiles (Ellis & Mdoe, 2003);

- correspondingly, non-farm self-employment (trading, brewing, kiosks, brick making etc.) rises steeply as per capita income rises; in the Tanzania study referred to above, this set of livelihood activities rose from 11 to 44 per cent of total household income between the bottom and top income quartiles;

- agricultural productivity per hectare that rises steeply across the income ranges: a comparison between Malawi and three East African countries is given in Table 3 below, wherein it can be seen that net agricultural output per hectare in a series of country samples was between 3 and 6 times higher for the top income quartile of households compared to lowest income quartile.[15]

Table 4: Four Countries: Net Agricultural Output per Ha, by Income Quartile (US$/ha)

Country	Income Quartile				Ratio
	I	II	III	IV	IV:I
Uganda	131	215	295	487	3.7
Kenya	135	266	358	430	3.2
Tanzania	81	108	156	381	4.7
Malawi	18	44	84	109	6.0

Source: Ellis & Freeman (2003)

These widely observed rural livelihood patterns shed light on the dynamics of vulnerability in the region. The poorest and most vulnerable are those most heavily reliant on agriculture, and most strongly locked into subsistence within agriculture. The same category of the rural poor also tend to be dependent on work on other farms (such as *ganyu* in Malawi) in order to cover the deficit in their household food balance. This exacerbates rather than diminishes their vulnerability for two reasons: first, labour on other farms can mean neglect of good cultivation practices on own farms (Alwang, 1999); and, second, work on other farms proves an unreliable buffer when adverse natural events occur that affect all farms in a geographical zone.

The overall monetisation of the agrarian economy is highly pertinent to the vulnerability status of rural populations. If markets are working well, and trade and exchange are flourishing, then this increases the cash in circulation in rural areas and gives individuals broader alternatives to construct diverse livelihoods that help to reduce vulnerability. The prevalence of subsistence behaviour observed in livelihood studies in the region militates against these conditions occurring; indeed, on the contrary, the more families seek, or are pushed into seeking, security from subsistence, the less options are created to construct more diverse and secure livelihoods. This is because the cash economy, literally, shrinks; and with this happening, the scope for monetised activity of all kinds also shrinks.

Potential exit routes from poverty and vulnerability are to some extent revealed by the livelihood patterns of the better off. Fundamentally, these patterns reveal an interdependence in the achievement of livelihood security between diverse non-farm and farm components, in which the farm component simultaneously becomes more productive and diminishes in importance within a diverse livelihood portfolio. Better off households are distinguished by virtuous spirals of accumulation typically involving diverse livestock ownership, engagement in non-farm self employment, and diversity of on-farm and non-farm income sources (Ellis & Freeman, 2003: p.1).

Enlarging the Canvas: PRSPs and Decentralisation as Policy Frameworks

(1) *PRSPs, HIPC and some gaps*

The working of the wider policy framework is crucial for the future capability of vulnerable people and populations in the case-study countries to construct more robust livelihoods. As mentioned right at the beginning of this paper, donors are placing enormous faith in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and decentralisation in order to put in place a public sector context that is favourable to poverty reduction and to providing ordinary citizens with the capability to veto bad policies or implementation pursued by their elected representatives. In this section we critically examine this policy framework, with respect, first, to PRSPs then to decentralisation.

Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have become the over-arching policy framework governing donor-government relationships in sub-Saharan Africa, and aid flows for poverty reduction objectives are closely tied to the policy process that surrounds PRSPs. For these reasons, the vulnerability contexts described in previous sections of this paper need to be related to PRSPs. In particular, it is useful to derive a preliminary view as to the strengths and weaknesses of PRSPs for delivering on a reduction in poverty and vulnerability in the southern African countries. First, some background. The World Bank defines a PRSP as follows:

> “Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) describe a country's macroeconomic, structural and social policies and programs to promote growth and reduce poverty, as well as associated external financing needs. PRSPs are prepared by governments through a participatory process involving civil society and development partners, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)”(World Bank & IMF, 2002)

The PRSP framework replaced structural adjustment programmes in 1999, and the term PRSP was formally adopted by the international financial institutions in September of that year (World Bank & IMF, 2002). The framework seems to have emerged from a number of changes in the ideas of the donor community, and in international pressure for debt relief, that occurred during the 1990s. One was the decision to provide debt relief to a group of least developed countries under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative which was agreed in 1996, and then enhanced in terms of countries and amount of debt to be cancelled in mid-1999. The HIPC process was seen as requiring a commitment by governments that the resources they gained from having their debts cancelled would be orientated towards poverty reduction objectives.

Other considerations also played their part in the advent of PRSPs. There was increasing impatience with the failure of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) to make any inroads on governance problems in low income countries, despite the conditions set out in SAPs. It also came to be perceived that by-passing governments by channelling aid through NGOs or through relatively autonomous donor-funded projects, was postponing indefinitely the day that government performance itself would need to be put centrally on the agenda of donor-government relationships. The PRSP framework reverses past practice in these regards by placing the PRSP in the middle of government policy, and making its funding contingent on good behaviour with respect to central government budget management (usually referred to as public expenditure management or PEM). Donors are moving behind PRSPs in the form of channelling aid to central budget support, and away from projects and sectoral programmes (Ruffer and Lawson, 2002).

Three out of the five countries considered in this paper are accorded the status of being Heavily Indebted Poor Countries under the enhanced HIPC initiative (Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique). The same three countries possess a PRSP, and Lesotho has an Interim PRSP (I-PRSP).[16] In all countries, and this includes Zimbabwe, the first moves towards an integrated approach to poverty occurred during the mid-1990s, but it was the establishment of the PRSP framework as part of the enhanced HIPC initiative, and as a replacement for structural adjustment lending by the IMF and World Bank that precipitated the preparation of interim and final PRSP documents. The publication dates of first round full PRSPs were April 2001 (Mozambique), March 2002 (Zambia) and April 2002 (Malawi). Lesotho published its I-PRSP in December 2000.

Debt relief under the enhanced HIPC has a number of sequential stages, involving *inter alia*, endorsement of the PRSP by the IMF and World Bank (‘decision point’) and evidence of one year’s successful implementation before the agreed amount of debt is cancelled (‘completion point’). Mozambique reached the completion point in September 2001, and under the original and enhanced HIPC frameworks has altogether had US$2 billion debt cancelled in net present value terms. Malawi and Zambia both reached decision point in December 2000, but their completion point is described as ‘floating’ meaning that the IMF and the World Bank have ongoing reservations about PRSP implementation and associated budgetary disciplines in those two countries. Lesotho’s per capita income places it outside the range to which HIPC applies, and Zimbabwe is currently out of the loop of these processes.

PRSPs contain many strands and themes in common, and are similar, too, in that some elements of them are elaborated and costed in great detail, while others fall back on generic statements of intent. Their goals typically include sustainable growth, macroeconomic stability, good governance, human capital development, improving the quality of life of the poor, and increasing the ability of the poor to raise their own incomes, or, as stated in the Malawi PRSP "to create the conditions whereby the poor can reduce their own poverty" (Malawi, 2002: 9). This last objective is amongst the least well elaborated in all PRSPs, yet may turn out to be the really critical flaw in current policy thinking. While components such as school building targets, or safety net supports, are often quite precisely specified and costed, the changes in public roles and modes of conduct required in order to facilitate the poor to construct their own routes out of poverty are barely considered.

The emerging picture is that the poverty reduction approach ushered in by PRSPs works best for big expenditures on services where targets are relatively straightforward to specify, the costs of what is intended can be estimated fairly accurately, budgets can be tracked, compliance with accounting procedures can be monitored, and outcomes accurately measured. Education, health and roads comply in varying degrees with these aspects, exemplified by the universal primary education target of the millenium development goals. The elusive 'enabling environment' that is required in order to facilitate pro-poor growth and widen the asset and activity options of the poor is feebly specified in all PRSPs, as also is the delivery of 'soft' services such as appropriate advice on agricultural technologies to the rural poor. These do not require the same scale of donor funding as education or roads, but without progress happening in them, the outcomes for reducing poverty and vulnerability of the big expenditures may turn out to be a lot less impressive than is currently hoped.

(2) *Decentralisation: panacea or promoter of poor governance*

The second major strand of current donor thinking, often built into, or linked to PRSPs through funding priorities, is decentralisation of government. Ideally, what is envisaged is 'democratic decentralisation' involving electoral processes at sub-district and district levels and the creation of autonomous decision-making bodies at the district level. However, in the absence of moves towards this, donor emphasis is on improving the responsiveness and participatory character of decentralised branches of central government at district level.

Decentralisation policies are currently being pursued with varying degrees of enthusiasm in a large number of Sub-Saharan African countries, including some in southern Africa. In the literature, a major reason given for decentralisation is the political demand for greater autonomy arising from distinct localities within a country (Manor 1999; Blair 2000; Johnson 2001). This provides a feeble explanation of an apparent rush to decentralise across countries with distinct economic, political and social histories. Rather, decentralisation seems to represent for donors a second line of attack on poor governance, partly by reducing the command over resources of the centre, and partly with a view to creating space for ordinary citizens to have more 'voice' in public decision making processes (Crook & Manor, 1998). Governments in developing countries are going along with this to the extent that they have found it convenient to do so, and in forms that have suited their own political strengths and weaknesses.

The five countries in this paper have only made tentative steps towards decentralisation, although it is clear from comments made by the IMF and World Bank in PRSP evaluation reports that accelerated adoption of decentralised government is accorded high priority by those institutions. For example, a joint staff assessment of the Zambia PRSP contains the following exhortation: “it is essential that a road map for decentralization and capacity building is developed with a list of required technical assistance and a timetable for implementation” (IMF & World Bank, 2002: p.10). Malawi began to decentralise as long ago as 1990, but the process has subsequently proceeded in fits and starts, and with little real enthusiasm by the country’s political leadership. Nevertheless, 27 rural, eight town, three city and one municipal assemblies were created, and elections to these were held in 2001, characterised, as it happens, by very low voter turnout.

Decentralisation poses new challenges for reversing the adverse trends that contribute to rising vulnerability in southern African countries (Watson, 2002). While on the face of it decentralisation is about devolving power to district levels, improving democracy and participation, and adapting service delivery to local priorities, decentralisation also creates political and bureaucratic entities that are able to pass and enforce by-laws and collect taxes in order to contribute to their budgets and running costs. Most of the literature on decentralisation views these powers from the viewpoint of strengthening nascent district councils, and improving the revenue "yield" that will enable them to function with increased autonomy from central government in the future (Bird, 1990; Manor, 1999). Yet these powers may result in tax and license burdens that block and disable wealth generation in rural areas, and counteract other efforts to reduce poverty and vulnerability (Francis & James, 2003).

Rural taxation is an aspect of rural livelihoods that is little researched in the case-study countries. Rural tax regimes are overlooked because their revenue yield at central government level is insignificant compared to other sources of government income.[17] Some taxes are formal e.g. market dues and business licenses; others are informal and variable e.g. a basket of fish that must be given to the chief or village leader in order to be allowed to go fishing. Still others are bribes that must be paid to gatekeepers – fisheries, forestry and livestock officers, police, army, customs officials – in order to do things like move livestock, trade in fish, carry crops from one village or town to another, engage in cross border trade and so on.

The apparently small levels of these various payments give the false impression that they are unimportant to the economic vigour of rural areas, and of minor significance compared to other factors in explaining rising poverty and vulnerability. This is not so, as research in adjacent countries has demonstrated (Fjeldstad, 2001a; 2001b; 2002; Ellis & Bahiigwa, 2003). The enormous range and variety of such payments adds to the oppressive hopelessness of individual and household level attempts to construct routes out of poverty. While small in tax revenue generation terms, market dues can, for example represent up to 30 per cent of the farm gate value of items being sold; likewise business licenses that are applied to even the most micro of start-up enterprises can represent a substantial proportion of net income generated. There is typically a strong anti-poor bias in tax and licensing regimes: market dues are proportionately higher on small quantities of produce (a basket or a heap) than on large ones (a sack or truckload); flat rate business licenses represent a larger proportion of turnover for smaller than larger enterprises operating in the same line of business.

Even without full tax raising powers being granted to elected local governments, these taxes tend to be multiple, complicated, bear no relation to service delivery, create numerous rent seeking opportunities (‘gratifications’ as they are termed in Malawi), and accentuate relations of mistrust and subordination between ordinary citizens and those who possess revenue generating powers over them. The really big question that hangs over the promotion of decentralisation by the international financial institutions is whether these deleterious effects will be reduced or exacerbated by the approach taken to fiscal decentralisation. For the case-study countries this question lies in the future, but it does no harm to raise it as a critical issue in these early stages. Reducing vulnerability in the southern African countries will certainly not be helped by the advent of cash-strapped elected district councils, rapaciously seeking funds from their impoverished constituents in order to pay the sitting allowances of councillors.

The Role and Scope of Vulnerability Assessments

The previous two sections have considered the main components of vulnerability in southern Africa and the policy environment within which deepening vulnerability is taking place. However, the ability of governments, aid agencies and donors to respond to vulnerability depends, to an extent, on the quality and timeliness of information that is available on vulnerability. This section considers some of the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to vulnerability assessment.

Vulnerability assessment exercises are a well-established part of food security information systems in southern Africa; however, this does not mean that they fit seamlessly into a routinely effective vulnerability monitoring framework; nor that they necessarily make effective use of the kinds of indicator of rising vulnerability mentioned in earlier discussion.[18] The political context of food security decision-making is the subject of a separate theme paper in this series (Policy Processes) so little more will be said about that here, except to note:

- each country possesses multiple food security agencies, and the coordination between these can be somewhat less than ideal when a crisis arises;
- these agencies have different organisational “homes”, for example, Ministry of Agriculture or Vice-President’s Office, or they are semi-autonomous and therefore tend to be ignored by key decision makers;
- all southern African countries have long term famine early warning systems that date from FAO initiatives in the 1980s, and these are nowadays coordinated as a regional food security system (known as FEWSNET) under SADC, with substantive long term funding from USAID and other donors;
- confronted with a deteriorating food security situation in the early 2000s, a system of country level Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs) was established, and these are coordinated by an overall RVAC (Regional Vulnerability Assessment Committee) with headquarters in Harare, Zimbabwe;

- a country VAC comprises representatives from all the main national food security stakeholders: Ministry of Agriculture, Central Statistics Office, Meteorology Department, Disaster Management Unit (or equivalent, if applicable), National Food and Nutrition Unit, NGOs, National Early Warning System (NEWS), WFP, UNICEF and so on;
- in 2002 the country VACs commissioned or undertook community vulnerability assessments (CVAs), as part of a series of country emergency food security assessments funded under the SADC-FANR (Food Agriculture and Natural Resources) programme funded by DFID, WFP and USAID;
- international NGOs such as SCF, CARE, ActionAid etc may conduct their own vulnerability assessments in locations where they are engaged in long term development work, and these may or may not be coordinated between each other or with national-level endeavours.

Most vulnerability assessment work undertaken in the region is based on some version of Save the Children's Household Economy Approach (SCF, 2000). This recognises the central components of vulnerability as outlined earlier, and is oriented towards practical and rapid assessment methods, leading to reasonably rapid findings to feed into policy. Even with its various shortcuts, however, a baseline livelihoods study undertaken according to the full HEA manual represents a fairly formidable undertaking. A simplified variant of the method adopted by FEWSNET is depicted in Figure 4 below (FEWSNET, 2000).

Note that this sets itself up as a basic equation stated as:

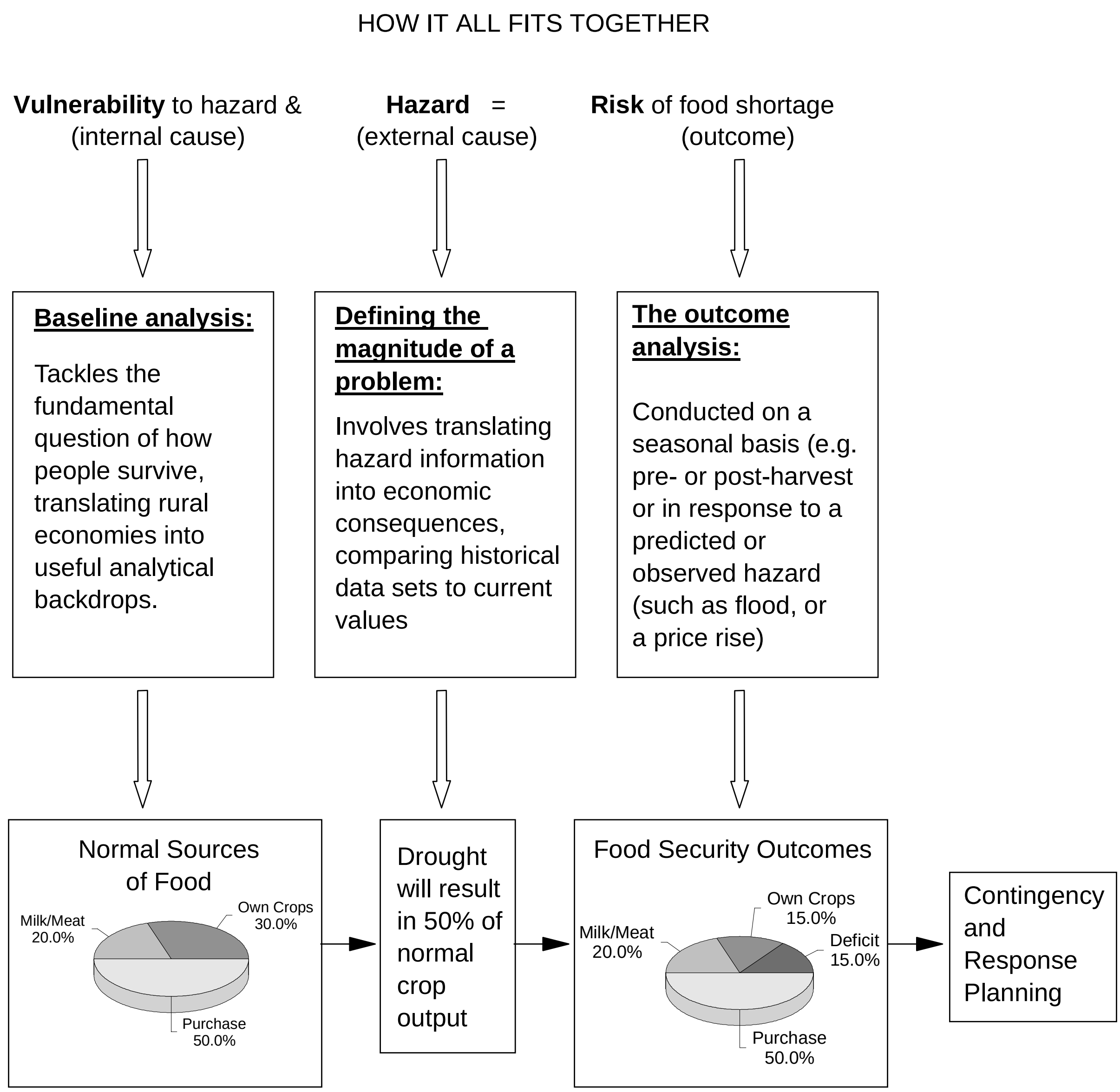
Vulnerability	+	Hazard	=	Risk of Food Shortage
(internal cause)		(external cause)		(outcome)

BOX 2 **Differing Interpretations of the Vulnerability Definition**

It has been stated earlier in the text that vulnerability is 'exposure and sensitivity to livelihood shocks', and, furthermore, that what people are vulnerable to e.g. illness or food insecurity should be made explicit in usage of the term.
The household food economy model treats the risky event as the thing that people are vulnerable to, for example, 'people are vulnerable to drought' (Bush, 2003). This then poses food insecurity as Risk (i.e. probability of food insecurity occurring) being a function of Vulnerability (to an adverse event) and Hazard (the event itself). Hence the equation used by household food economy type models given in the text and in Figure 4.
These two treatments of vulnerability are not really incompatible with each other, given a common understanding of the role of assets and options in making people more or less vulnerable. However, the preference in this theme paper is to consider relative levels of vulnerability as the ability of people to avoid a food deficit if a risky event occurs, rather than a statement about the event itself. The expression 'vulnerability to food insecurity' means that a wide range of risky events – drought, floods, earthquakes, adverse price trends, civil conflict – could push people into a food insecure situation; whereas the expression 'vulnerability to drought' elevates one particular type of event as the causative reason for food insecurity.

This equation may appear a little confusing in terms of terminology (see Box 2). As explored earlier in this paper vulnerability is interpreted as a function of risks (external cause) and coping capability (internal cause) which confronted by a shock results in outcomes (success or failure at dealing with the shock) (see previous discussion and Chambers, 1989). In the FEWSNET method the initial livelihood conditions, described as vulnerability, are separated from the type of hazard experienced and the calculated effect of that hazard, were it to occur. Most of the vulnerability work in this approach occurs in relation to the baseline analysis (initial conditions); the other steps integrate this prior knowledge into a food balance model, which scales up the findings from the first stage in the light of national level food balances and relevant price trends. If the baseline analysis has already been done or updated on a routine basis, the hazard and outcome analysis can be done rapidly and transparently in order to yield quick estimates of outcomes to feed into stakeholder discussions.

Figure 4: FEWSNET Vulnerability Assessment Scheme



Source: diagram redrawn on the basis of FEWSNET (2000: p.1)

A number of steps are involved in carrying out the HEA-type of vulnerability assessment, and some further insights can be gained by summarising these briefly:

(a) the country is divided into relatively homogeneous livelihood zones, based partly on agro-ecological regularities and partly on socio-economic ones (remoteness, type of farming system, pattern of economic activities etc.)
(b) these are called Food Economy Zones, and their purpose is to save investigatory effort as well as target humanitarian responses more efficiently by enabling observations on relatively few communities and households to be scaled up to broad geographical areas (hence the term vulnerability assessment mapping or VAM)
(c) wealth ranking is conducted in order to provide a sampling frame at community level for a household sample; the wealth rank categories themselves provide useful information on the asset status of different types of households
(d) household data focuses on how households normally acquire food from a combination of own production of crops and livestock, and use of cash generated from other activities (this can yield valuable data on diverse household income sources)
(e) an estimate of the impact on crop production of a hazard in that geographical area is made (using remote sensing, meteorological information etc)
(f) a food security outcome is calculated, taking into account previous baseline data on the aggregate household economy, price trends and price ratios (e.g. ratio between wage and maize price)
(g) this food security outcome is scaled up in the context of the national food balance sheet to provide estimates of the likely food gap

This is of course a highly compressed summary, but then, too, the methods sometimes have to be compressed due to lack of time and resources to conduct a fully specified assessment. The FEWSNET method is considered to have particular weaknesses related to superficial understandings of entitlements over food (point (d above), and oversimplication of food balances that either fail to take into account, or exaggerate, the role of root crops like cassava in providing fallback positions for farm households. It also makes little use of vulnerability indicators such as changing price ratios to underpin the urgency of required food security action.

An evident gap in the above synopsis is accurate seasonal knowledge about how the key indicators vary across an annual cycle. Information about this is advocated in the HEA manual, but in practice is time intensive and costly to achieve on a regular basis across many different food economy zones. Other potential gaps are associated with the differential food security circumstances of individuals within households, and with identifying vulnerable groups within the broad category of poor people living in specified zones. With sufficient time for analysis, some of these can be deduced or compiled from the livelihoods data collected at household level; others (e.g. households with members infected by HIV/AIDS) represent particular challenges due to the sensitivity of the information required in order to distinguish them accurately.

Several observers of unfolding events in southern Africa in 2001-03 stated that acting on the data, rather than shortage of data on vulnerability was the critical issue (e.g. SCF, 2002). This seems in hindsight to have been only partially true; there is no doubt that baseline data in many of the countries was patchy, and rapid CVAs had to be done as the crisis gathered momentum in order to overcome information deficits. Moreover, in Zimbabwe for example, events would have been moving at such speed that a new assessment would have been desirable even if a previous one had been done only six months previously.

It is important, perhaps, not to advocate excessive complexity in CVAs done using HEA methods, in the context of acute food insecurity. The need in that context is to have methods that are cost efficient, can be conducted rapidly, can be analysed quickly utilising automated sequences for processing and summarising data, and can reach decision makers in a form that clarifies rather than confuses what needs to be done. In general, the vulnerability assessments undertaken under the SADC FANR system fulfil these functions fairly well, although (depending on where the emphasis is put) some are stronger on the baseline livelihoods analysis, and others on forward estimates of national level food deficits (Marsland, 2003).

HEA-based vulnerability assessment methods are strong on dealing with the immediate sequences of vulnerability associated with household food insecurity. Essentially they embody a household level vulnerability model, which can be aggregated up horizontally across a geographical area within which a reasonable degree of homogeneity in livelihood patterns prevails. As implemented by the southern African VAC system in 2002-03, the assessments tended to have a fairly narrow focus on the food issue, especially when it came to the aggregate national picture. Little scope was provided for exploring the larger causes of vulnerability at national and regional level that will eventually need to be addressed if the populations of those countries are to experience lower vulnerability in the future.

It would seem that a division needs to be adopted between longer term vulnerability monitoring and short-term emergency assessments. It is not advocated here that emergency CVAs should take on topics that are often politically sensitive and controversial, and that would get in the way of getting the message across on food insecurity findings. On the other hand, longer term vulnerability monitoring could incorporate the major contextual issues giving rise to increasing or diminishing vulnerability, in addition to the household level livelihoods analysis envisaged in the HEA approach. These wider causal factors implicated in rising vulnerability need also to be connected to the strategic poverty frameworks that are supposed to be making life better for ordinary people in the SADC region. A PRSP framework that fails over, say, a period of 5-8 years to turn round the livelihood security position of the majority of the mainly rural population in those countries, will be a failed policy framework that is likely to end up being consigned to the same policy scrap heap as the discredited SAPs of the 1980s and 1990s.

Synthesis and policy implications

This paper reviews vulnerability concepts and relates these to proximate as well as long run factors implicated in the food security crisis in southern Africa. Vulnerability is not the same as poverty or food insecurity that describe livelihood states at a particular point in time. Vulnerability is a ‘forward looking’ concept that seeks to describe how prone individuals and families are to being unable to cope with uncertain adverse events that may happen to them, like prolonged lack of rainfall, or infection by the AIDS virus. The paper adopts the Devereux (2002) definition of vulnerability as “the exposure and sensitivity to livelihood shocks”. In this, the sensitivity component is critical, since it denotes that a small adverse shock will have a large adverse effect on the survival capabilities of the people that it strikes.

Vulnerability operates at different levels of aggregation. It is most frequently invoked in the context of understanding the relationships between risk and coping at household level. For a given risk profile, it is the varying asset status of households that determines how vulnerable they are to shocks. Assets are savings, stores and claims (Swift, 1989); they are also in the livelihoods sense, the full range of capitals that enable people to construct and adapt their livelihoods (Bebbington, 1999; Ellis, 2000). Variations in assets, or the ability to deploy them productively, are important for identifying vulnerable groups that represent a horizontal aggregation of people who share similar features (e.g. the elderly, widowed, divorced, disabled, chronically ill etc.).

The ability to distinguish vulnerable groups enables social support to be temporally and spatially targeted in order to prevent such groups from sliding into destitution when shocks occur. Some groups may be chronically vulnerable, requiring support on a routine basis; others may experience transitory vulnerability (e.g. in the lean season before the next harvest). It is probable that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in southern Africa has substantially increased the population proportions that should be considered chronically vulnerable. This leads to the desirability of scaling up the scope of the concept, to vulnerable populations rather than groups. Vulnerable groups remain, however, nested within such larger populations.

At the level of vulnerable populations, the emphasis shifts from specific variations in assets and coping capabilities, to the factors causing these to deteriorate on a broad scale. Vulnerability appears to be growing across the southern African region, with the exception of Mozambique where some important trends are moving in the right direction from a very low starting point; some principal causes of broad scale rising vulnerability are:

- growth failures, rising poverty and declining migration options
- market failures in the context of market liberalisation
- the high incidence and continuing spread of HIV/AIDS
- politics and governance factors, at regional, national and local levels

These four factors create widespread adverse impacts on the ability of people to manage risk, and to cope with risky events when they occur. Falling GDP whether in total or per capita terms increases vulnerability wherever it occurs. This is because it implies diminishing economic activity, less employment, less cash generation, and shrinking opportunities for everyone, irrespective of whether they are poor or rich.

In the rural and agricultural economies of the southern African countries, market liberalisation has had a more mixed effect on growth, poverty and vulnerability than its enthusiasts are prepared to acknowledge. This is not meant as an apology for former parastatal agencies that themselves were deeply flawed. Nevertheless liberalisation has increased price risks, raised ratios between input and output prices, resulted in uneven private market coverage, and reduced the outreach of advisory services to crops and livestock. Its most severe effects have been on remote and subsistence farmers, since these are ignored by private traders, or their output prices are depressed due to the high unit marketing costs of the transactions in which they engage. The international financial institutions have tended to take a somewhat blockheaded approach to liberalisation, allowing no choice or subtlety in retaining effective elements of old policy regimes, and bulldozing through change irrespective of the balance of factors operating in any particular policy strand.

The spread of HIV/AIDS, estimated to have infected between 20 and 25 per cent of working age adults in the five countries, is undoubtedly a major contributor to rising vulnerability in the region. However, whether it can be depicted as *the* cause of "new variant famines" (de Waal, 2002) is a debatable proposition. The point is well taken that the depletion of labour as an asset is a new departure compared to previous asset vulnerabilities. But other things are going on too. There is a rather too static finality in the end conclusion of the "new variant famine" hypothesis. The relations between people and land in the agrarian economy will evolve as morbidity and mortality from HIV/AIDS increases, and outcomes for proneness to famines that are triggered by natural events are likely to be more roundabout than the new variant famine hypothesis allows.

The emerging policy framework comprising PRSPs and decentralisation is considered from the viewpoint of its likely impact on vulnerabilities. Evidence from countries outside the region introduces a note of scepticism about the ability of policies currently prioritised by donors to contribute to reducing vulnerability in southern Africa, and some policies may inadvertently increase vulnerability, by underpinning local level institutional environments that increase rather than diminish livelihood risks. PRSPs tend to favour sectoral targets in areas like education, health, or rural roads, but fail to address the diversified nature of livelihoods, nor the governance environment that might facilitate and encourage the multiplication of diverse economic activities rather than block and undermine them. Under some circumstances, indeed ones that can be observed in adjacent countries, decentralisation may undermine the goals of PRSPs due to the resource needs of district councils and the approaches they take to taxation of their constituents.

Defects in the transmission of information during the current crisis suggest that neither donors nor governments are free of charges of lack of urgency, indifference or culpable decisions not to take action on information received; however, particular governments seem to have been prone to adopting the least helpful across the range of responses. Humanitarian agencies have to work within these unpromising political contexts. Vulnerability already provides the conceptual underpinning for tools that have proved effective for detecting households and populations beginning to run into serious trouble following a shock or series of adverse events. NGOs and international agencies working in the food security area routinely make use of these tools, and did so, albeit in a rather fragmented way, in the early stages of this crisis; however, action by donor and government decision makers was slow to follow on from the initial findings of such exercises.

The central policy challenge that emerges from this paper concerns the willingness of the public sector to provide enabling environments for diverse economic activity to flourish, whether in urban or in rural areas. Enabling environments are poorly specified, or neglected entirely, in PRSPs. In relation to decentralised local government, they are an act of faith, predicated on a narrative about electorates being able to hold elected local representatives to account in the raising of revenues and the delivery of services. Evidence from countries that are further down the decentralisation road than the southern African countries suggest that this narrative may be predicated on large dollops of wishful thinking.

In the absence of enabling environments, it is very difficult to see how the poor are supposed 'to construct their own pathways out of poverty', stated in various different ways as the fundamental goal of the PRSP framework. When monetised economic activity is essentially seen by public officialdom as 'fair game' for the imposition of both legal and illegal taxes, dues, fees, licenses, movement restrictions and so on; then the motivation to start-up new enterprises or expand existing ones is severely debilitated. The fallback position is subsistence farming, and reliance on subsistence food production is just about the most vulnerable place to be. The main policy implication derived from this overview then, is that the contemporary donor-government policy framework (PRSPs and decentralisation) needs substantial re-thinking and strengthening concerning the facilitating institutional context that it manifestly fails to specify, that would give people space to thrive rather than just survive.

Some international agencies have rushed into identifying future policies that they consider could make a significant difference to the future occurrence of 2001-03 type events and outcomes. Primarily, these advocate strengthening food supply, within an overall narrative of small-farm growth as the source of transformation in southern African countries (IFPRI, 2002; von Braun *et al.*, 2003; Mellor, 2003). This is really quite a tired old story that relies on arguable premises in order to give itself legitimacy. One such premise is that southern African countries have failed in the past to promote small-farm based rural development (this is only partly true for some countries, given the input subsidies, credit subsidies, integrated rural development programmes, farming systems research etc that prevailed in many of them from the 1960s to the 1980s). Another is that there is a huge growth potential in the small-farm sector if only the power of new technologies were unleashed (well, if this were true, why did this not occur in the 1980s and 1990s; following on from the earlier successes of the green revolution in Asia). A third is that a rapidly growing agriculture will create substantial multipliers in the rest of the economy (the so-called rural growth linkage model).[19]

Livelihoods research suggests that quite different forces work on relative poverty and wealth in rural areas in southern African countries than the line of argument so persistently pursued by the growth linkage enthusiasts. All rural families straddle farm and non-farm activities. The most successful of them construct a non-farm component of their livelihood portfolio that comprises activities and enterprises that are not directly related to agriculture. This provides them with the resources to improve their farm productivity and therefore strengthen their livelihoods further. The less successful remain in subsistence agriculture and undertake low wage casual work on other farms. The key to rising farm productivity is urban and non-farm economic growth, not farm output on its own. This also reduces vulnerability because it creates diverse income streams that are less prone than reliance on food crop agriculture to crisis in the face of natural shocks.

When this line of reasoning is connected to the idea of enabling rather than disabling institutional contexts, then the policy implications are clear. In the words of Moser (1998), 'people's own inventive solutions' need to be released from the tyranny of a public sector institutional environment that often preoccupies itself more with hampering and blocking people's efforts to devise new livelihood sources than encouraging and facilitating them to do so.

Notes

[1] These are Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia plus Lesotho which has an Interim PRSP, with a full PRSP in preparation.

[2] This phrase was used in the title of a Save the Children report on livelihoods in Mchinji and Salima districts in Malawi (Pearce *et al.*, 1996)

[3] I am indebted to Mike Drinkwater (reviewer's comments) for the following observation: "the terrain is often not flat, so living on the edge can also mean being on the slide, with the edge approaching ever nearer" .

[4] Poverty can also be defined, of course, according to qualitative perceptions such as exclusion and powerlessness; and, indeed, vulnerability is often included within such broader definitions of poverty (e.g. Chambers, 1983)

[5] The livelihoods framework comes in various different diagrammatic versions, although these tend to contain similar components and implied relationships between them (Scoones, 1998; Carney *et al.*, 1999; Carney, 2002).

[6] Note that the same argument would apply to barter. Also the terms of trade by which people are able to convert non-food assets and activities into food is the essence of Sen's (1981) entitlement approach to famine.

[7] The author is indebted to Neil Fisher (*pers. comm.*, 18 June 2003) for highlighting the importance of the food terms of trade of wage income, and also see Levy (2003) for further discussion of these price ratios.

[8] A distinction is sometimes made between *de jure* female-headed households (those that are female-headed for legal reasons such as divorce, widowhood, desertion), and *de facto* female-headed households (where the male household head is away generating income elsewhere). The latter type of household is less likely to be in the persistently vulnerable category than the former type (see e.g. Kennedy and Peters, 1992)

[9] This may be due to the desire of both governments and aid agencies to depoliticise crises; however, politics as a cause of rising vulnerability is gaining credence in the literature (see below).

[10] Figures between countries may not be comparable for definitional reasons, and the Zimbabwe headcount figures cited appear in only one source (Zimbabwe, 1998) and are likely to have deteriorated significantly since 1995-96 when the last survey was undertaken.

[11] This study was called Livelihoods and Diversification Directions Explored by Research (LADDER), an acronym devised to invoke the idea of 'climbing out of poverty'. Working papers from the project can be found at www.odg.uea.ac.uk/ladder

[12] This and the next paragraph draw on material contained in Kalinda *et al.* (2003)

[13] In the original presentation of this argument (de Waal, 2002) it appears as if this proposition is being advanced retrospectively to explain unfolding southern African events in 2002; however, elsewhere it is posed more as a working hypothesis concerning future vulnerabilities to famine (e.g de Waal and Whiteside, 2002)

[14] This discussion draws on cross-country work undertaken in Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya (Ellis & Freeman, 2003) as well as on livelihood factors in southern African countries described in the wide-ranging literature review underlying this theme paper.

[15] Net agricultural output per ha refers to the gross value of crop and livestock production per ha minus cash variable costs (wage labour, cash inputs etc.). The sample sizes underlying this table were 315 rural households in Uganda, 350 in Kenya, 350 in Tanzania, and 280 in Malawi. Data in national currencies were converted to US$ at the exchange rate that prevailed at the time the research was conducted.

[16] These documents are listed in the references under Lesotho (2000), Mozambique (2001), Zambia (2002), and Malawi (2002)

[17] One reason for this is that there is typically considerable revenue leakage between tax collection point and delivery to district level revenue offices.

[18] See Darcy *et al.* (2003) for a more detailed examination of variations and flaws in vulnerability assessments undertaken in the region during the crisis.

[19] Flaws in the reasoning and methods concerning such multipliers were pointed out by critics of the rural growth linkage model more than ten years ago and continue to provide valid counter-arguments (Harriss, 1987; Hart, 1993)

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