

“Hardly More Than Ameliorative?” Plan International’s Food Aid Programme for Marange, Zimbabwe, 2000s-2010

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Abstract

This paper analyses the impact of food aid on recipient communities in Zimbabwe through the lens of Plan International’s charity programmes in Marange. Although food security can be guaranteed by factors other than agricultural productivity, the need for food aid has been prompted by the regularity of poor harvests experienced in Marange, an area so much dependent upon crop and livestock production. Since colonial times, many households hardly raised the basic three meals a day. Ironically, the post-colonial state has not successfully ameliorated the situation; regardless of its proclamation to end hunger by the turn of 2000. The paper engages debates on the desirability of food aid. Using primary documents at Plan’s Mutare office along with interviews and secondary sources, the paper concludes that food aid stifles prospects of sustainable and durable solutions to food insecurity. Indeed, what started off as emergency operations to cushion vulnerable members of society against shortfalls occasioned by dry spells in Marange, food hand-outs have actually become a permanent feature, thereby perpetuating a serious donor syndrome that needs urgent redress.

Keywords: *Food aid, Marange, food security, vulnerable, donor syndrome, Plan International, households, agricultural productivity.*

1.0 Introduction

Societies cannot prosper unless their people are healthy and well-nourished. Food is one of the body’s needs; it is no exaggeration that it has an undisputed importance to human life and survival (Raikes, 1988). On the basis of this prior knowledge, it is imperative upon individuals, households or whole communities to ensure that food security receives priority. It is also vital for governments to create conditions necessary for food provision to be guaranteed to their citizens if development goals are to be achieved (Faber and Tims, 1988). Households are chronically-food insecure when they consistently fail to meet their minimum energy requirements. Temporary food insecurity results from shocks such as droughts, floods, conflicts or market dysfunctions. Where people are faced with acute hunger in the face of such challenges, food aid programmes are implemented to reduce levels of vulnerability in affected households (Khabele, 1993).

It is difficult, however, to distinguish food insecurity from poverty. Food insecurity is a subset of the wider factor of poverty because people are increasingly forced to derive their livelihood from cultivation dependent on poor soils, unpredictable rainfall patterns and scarce inputs; hence, crop yields are almost always poor. It is against this background that both the post-colonial state and the donor community continued to pursue programmes that focussed on reducing poverty and alleviating food insecurity in the short and long run. The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) facilitates targeting and distribution of food aid to needy and vulnerable groups within and across communities, usually in contexts of emergencies. It carries out these relief operations through its Implementing or Co-operating Partners like Plan International, among others. Although its scope of intervention is wider, Plan International’s core objective is also to fight food insecurity.

This is aptly captured in the words of Simba Machingaidze, (2007), Country Director for Plan International-Zimbabwe, who stressed that: “Food security issues are highly prioritised, given the erratic rainfall patterns characterised by drought and floods, leading to hunger spells in some communities. Plan works with communities and partners food organisations to increase production and income security at household level and beyond.” However, while it can be acknowledged that the WFP/Plan food aid programme yielded positively on the short-term or emergency food security needs of Marange, this area arguably remained food insecure and very poor. Apparently, aid programmes have failed to turn the tide of mounting poverty and food insecurity.

The ‘discovery’ of diamonds in the Chiadzwa ward of Marange in 2006 was greeted optimistically by inhabitants as a route to escape poverty, but since then it grossly failed to meet expectations either. Not only did this ‘discovery’ seem to be a curse, but the ‘opaque’ manner in which the gem was exploited was controversial. Some artisanal miners formed illegal syndicates with armed forces supposedly manning the fields to dig for diamonds. However, the chronically-ill, the elderly and other vulnerable members in this area, still faced hardships with respect to food security. Instead, proposals were made to quickly relocate local inhabitants, but without prospects for compensation. Indeed, soldiers deployed in the diamond fields scheduled meetings with villagers at Mukwada, Chiadzwa, Betera, Chirasika, Chishingwi, Kurauone and Chipindirwe between 2008 and 2010, asking them to warm up to the imminent relocation. (Kusena, 2010). The 2008/2009 agricultural season was a wasted one as households within the radius of Chiadzwa mining operations were informally warned not to cultivate crops as they were expected to have been moved to new areas.

Since independence, government distributed food items to Marange and late-comers such as Plan International and other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or Private Voluntary Organisations (PVOs) did the same. It seems, however, that what was generally overlooked in these efforts was the fact that food production and household incomes could be increased if plans to irrigate the area, using the huge volumes of water from the nearby Odzi River, were implemented. Interestingly, neither government nor donors showed willingness to commit funds for the implementation of such long-term projects that would not only reduce high levels of poverty in Marange, but also redirect people’s attention away from the donor-managed livelihoods instilled in them by years of hand-outs. Government commitment to dealing with food security in Chiadzwa and surrounding wards remained scarce. While it lamented unavailability of funds to monitor and implement irrigation projects in the area, by 2010, profits from local mining operations were being siphoned out without making the slightest effort to improve the community’s food security status.

2.0A Brief History of Plan International

Plan was established in 1937 as ‘Foster Parents Plan for Children in Spain’, providing the needs of children affected by the Spanish Civil War of 1936. It became ‘Foster Parents Plan for War Children’ during the Second World War, working in England, and caring for displaced children across Europe (Plan, 2002). It was only after Europe’s recovery from war that Plan embarked on new programmes worldwide, targeting the disadvantaged. Indeed, it became Plan International in 1956, assisting children and families regardless of the cause of their needs. It commenced operations in Zimbabwe in 1986 by facilitating projects in seven programme units countrywide (Plan International, 2002). The programme units ran by Plan in order of their date of establishment were: Mutare (Zimunya and Marange) 1986; Kwekwe (Silobela and Zhombe) 1990; Mutasa (Honde Valley and Dryland) 1991; Chiredzi (Chiredzi and Mwenezi) 1991; Bulawayo (Tsholotsho and Pumula) 1992; Harare (Mutoko and Epworth) 1993; and Chipinge (Lower and Upper Valley) 1994 (Plan International, 2006/7).

Plan International-Zimbabwe is fully registered as a welfare organisation in terms of the laws of the country. Enshrined in its mission statement is the ‘endeavour to achieve lasting improvements in the quality of life of deprived children in developing countries’ while uniting people across cultures (Plan International, 2002). It is registered under the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare in terms of the Welfare Organisations Act (Chapter 93). Its basic terms of reference as enshrined in the certificate of registration are to: “Enable deprived children, their families and communities to meet their basic needs and increase their ability to participate in, and benefit from, their societies; build relations to increase understanding and unity among people of different cultures and countries and; promote the rights and interests of the children” (Plan International, 2002). However, the organisation could be de-registered if it involved itself in ‘subversive activities’, or if it failed to ‘observe the terms of its registration’, or ‘once its technical agreement had been terminated’ (Plan, 2008).

It should, nevertheless, be stressed that Plan International, like many of the other NGOs operating in Zimbabwe, fell victim to whims and perceptions of the Zimbabwe African People's Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) side of the Unity Government on alleged involvement in 'subversive activities'. For instance, on 28 July, 2009, President Robert Mugabe accused NGOs of meddling in politics, arguing that most of them were 'posing as shadow governments' and 'most exceeding their terms of reference' (*The Herald*, 2009). Mounting suspicion on the operations of PVOs/NGOs in the country in a volatile political climate manifested itself in the suspension of all field work on June 4, 2008, by Nicholas Goche, Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare (Plan International, 2009). Although this particular suspension was lifted on 29 August, 2009, a new set of stringent measures on the *modus operandi* of NGOs was promulgated. These included furnishing the Police and the Local Authority with copies of NGO/PVO registration certificates, and 'displaying the same in their offices' (Plan International, 2009). This also entailed attaching annual programme work plans with budgets and expenditures.

2. 1. The Role of Plan International within the WFP Context

Being only an Implementing Partner, Plan operates within the confines of the laid down procedures of the WFP's food aid targeting and distribution mission. This implies that the successes or failures of any food intervention scheme that it implements are largely a window into the bigger operations of the WFP. The amount of food available for distribution is determined by WFP and in most cases it oversees targeting and distribution modalities. Arguably, it is difficult to effectively judge Plan International's food aid programme independent of WFP because a lot many things are dictated by WFP. In its own right, WFP almost always operates in an invidious position because it is dependent upon donor pledges. What this means is that Plan, like Christian Care, Goal Zimbabwe, Concern Worldwide and such other Co-operating Partners are unable to meet demand in their areas of operation if WFP's donor pledges are limited. Speaking at a two-day workshop held in 2003 at Nyanga Inn, Oliver Manyeranyere, WFP's representative, stressed that WFP was not an NGO but a World Board of Government in the United Nations system and its emergency or relief operations were controlled by donors' responses to its calls for support (Plan International, 2004).

WFP's co-operation with its NGO partners, however, 'dates back to the very origins of the programme' itself. A Memorandum of Understanding is signed at the headquarters' level with several organisations in the NGO community which regulates collaboration in areas of mutual interest, outlining potential common ground for joint humanitarian operations (Plan International, 2004). The principles of co-operation and complementarities underlined this collaboration within a common goal of tackling scourges of hunger and malnutrition afflicting communities. Indeed, WFP's interaction with Plan International was, therefore, indispensable to WFP's own overriding goal to combat hunger and deprivation. However, there were occasions when Plan International and other NGOs sought WFP's collaboration in carrying out their own assistance programmes. In such joint ventures in programme delivery, costs were shared if necessary or undertaken by each organisation separately, but still within the spirit of burden sharing.

Both WFP and Plan International were also compelled to acknowledge obligations of accountability and transparency in undertaking humanitarian operations even if they were funded by voluntary contributions. But, an important thing to note is that all these operations were aimed at assisting Government in its quest to feed its own people; hence, they ought to be interpreted in those contexts. During deliberations in a 'Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Training of Trainers Workshop' held at Mutare Holiday Inn, Goodson Murinye, another WFP representative, categorically stressed that any WFP operation was called an 'assistance programme' (Plan International, 2008). He sought to emphasise that it was the Government's 'prerogative to feed its own people' and that 'all other players came in to assist within a given framework'.

For its part, Government was obliged to 'provide humanitarian space, security and import licences' and 'waiver duties and taxes on importation of food commodities', while WFP brought in food from its donors to Zimbabwe's hungry populations (Plan International, 2008). Implementing Partners invariably got support from WFP in transporting food to intended destinations. Normally, however, it was the responsibility of Partners to identify, engage and contract transport operators accessible to them in order to move food from WFP warehouses to Food Distribution Points (FDPs) in rural areas under their jurisdictions. Plan International provided feed back to WFP and Government each time there was a VGF scheme, highlighting areas of need and successes, depending on the outcome of each distribution exercise. For instance, Fungai Mbetsa, Provincial Administrator for Manicaland, received an update from Manyeranyere on WFP's operations for that year, emphasising on two key developments (Plan International, 2008).

The first one was that food distributions kicked off in the month of October in all the seven districts of Manicaland soon after food was availed by donors. The second and more fundamental issue was the good news that Government had designated the relevant ministry as the official channel of communication with WFP 'for all issues pertaining to the implementation of the Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation' (Plan International, 2008).

The challenges of fluctuating donor response to WFP's food assistance calls weighed more heavily on Plan which was on the ground receiving complaints about inadequate food items distributed to already listed persons. Sometimes, food was so little that it became increasingly difficult to dish it out, given the huge numbers of beneficiaries awaiting it. For example, WFP's figures for planned beneficiaries could be trimmed or halved at short notice if there were changes in anticipated donor pledges, and this seriously affected ground operations as Plan had to contend with giving apologies to victim communities. An 18 September, 2009 e-mail written to WFP by Plan International Mutare's Food Aid Manager, Titus Mafemba, confirmed this reality: 'Please, can you help me to put out the 'fire' in terms of Mutare District's planned beneficiaries now lowered (very late) by 2, 205 people, that is, from 79, 331 to 77,126 people after making commitments to various Plan constituencies....Without any communication from WFP, we accidentally, on Monday, came across the reduced Mutare District caseload. Plan Mutare Programme Unit food aid intervention is now facing credibility and food politics crises for making commitments for almost two months that were altered without pre-warning....(Plan International, 2009). Mafemba was pleading with WFP to revisit alterations made to beneficiary numbers as they had been cut by a significant number. This helps to explain that the WFP/Plan International system was as equally vulnerable and shaky as those people it targeted to rescue from extreme food insecurity.

3.0. The Cancer of Political Interference in Food Aid Targeting and Distribution

Although allegations were advanced that some NGOs harboured hidden agendas and wandered beyond their parameters to influence political decisions, Plan International strove for non-interference. It still faced disruptions from some ZANU-PF activists for various accusations. In some cases, some politicians wanted to carry out both the targeting of beneficiaries and the distribution of food items to constituencies on their own. This sort of behaviour stood at cross-purposes with WFP's own objectives. The tricky thing was that when this happened, distribution to the needy people anxiously awaiting intervention was suspended forthwith; hence, further exacerbating their plight. In its fourth module of the 'Food Aid Targeting and Distribution Guidelines', WFP's key objective was to 'minimise diversions', that is, 'the amount of resources that goes to unintended beneficiaries' (Plan International, 2003).

During the period under review, there had been intense speculation within political circles, especially by ZANU-PF officials on the possibility of NGOs influencing people's vote against the party in favour of Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party. For example, on the eve of the March, 2008 Harmonised Election, Tinaye Chigudu, Provincial Governor for Manicaland retorted: 'It is quite interesting to note that we have NGOs such as Mercy Corps. This organisation originated from one of the poorest areas in the USA.' He added that, 'Interestingly, you find the same organisation here in some parts of Africa, trying to assist people. While we do not condemn such a gesture of goodwill, we will always question the reason behind assisting people far afield when they have poor people where they come from' (*The Manica Post*, 2009).

Similarly, Mugabe took a swipe at NGOs in 2009 when addressing the Global 2009 Dialogue in Uganda's Munyonyo District whose theme was, 'Inclusivity and National Visions'. At least, he had this to say: Zimbabwe may soon reconsider the advisability of letting NGOs operate in the country as most of them are exceeding terms of their registration by posing as shadow governments that threaten viability of the inclusive government. We now have a phenomenon of NGOs or shall I call them phenomena, for they really are a type of government in the background of a formal government? I do not know whether this creature is for the better or for the worse, but in our country, we have seen a situation where they have exceeded, really, their terms of reference and perhaps we might have to reconsider the advisability of having them (*The Herald*, 2009). The truth about these allegations was not easily verifiable in most cases and the slash on the NGOs fell within the routine attacks on the West by Mugabe which had been going on for years on end since 2000. What baffles the mind in this remark, however, is that Mugabe apparently brushes aside the indispensability of NGO work in the country. The practical situation on the ground was that WFP and Plan International continued to face challenges in screening and verifying beneficiaries who overwhelmed FDPs to access food. Ironically, the Government seemed to have demonstrated little capacity to deal with needy cases on its own without securing the assistance of those NGOs.

Several cases of political interference were reported in Marange and other areas which received food aid. For example, in April, 2003, some people in Goromonzi's Munyawiri Ward, who had been de-registered during beneficiary verifications as being undeserving cases, arrived at the FDP to demand rations. The ZANU-PF party officials who accompanied them alleged that the concerned persons were 'removed from registers because of their party affiliation' (Plan International, 2003).

Distributions for that month were suspended when the field staff refused to give in and reinstate the undeserving persons although the suspension was subsequently lifted in May of the same year, following the Provincial Administrator's arbitration. In Umguza District of Matebeleland North, the Provincial Governor 'ordered food aid to be distributed in a region not designated by WFP'. In response, WFP's Implementing Partner operating in that region suspended distributions for a day until a meeting was held with the parties involved. Elsewhere in Mashonaland West Province, distributions were also suspended for many months when ZANU-PF political activists 'jeopardised the security of an Implementing Partner's monitor' (Plan International, 2003). Overall, during the first quarter of 2003 as well as in 2008, numerous cases of political interference and favouritisms in Marange were brought to the attention of WFP by Plan International, many of which included manipulation of beneficiary lists by village heads and their secretaries seeking to unfairly include their relatives and friends.

4.0. Interpretations on the Political Economy of Food Aid

The interpretation of the worth of aid to recipients is varied from individual to individual and from situation to situation. Glennie, (2008:25) posed many pertinent questions about the role of aid in development or lack thereof in Africa, 'Is aid reducing poverty? Is it contributing to economic growth and strengthening institutions?' In addition, 'Is it helping poor and marginalised Africans access their rights? Or is it actually increasing poverty and causing economic decline while harming the development of accountable institutions? Or (more likely) is it doing both? What are its positive and negative effects? Overall, just how important is aid to development in Africa?' The strength of Glennie's analysis is seen in its ability to touch on the various effects of aid. He argues that aid had 'many impacts, some obvious, some subtle, some quantifiable, some hard to measure, some not really important, some fundamental'. His study categorises strands of analyses of the effectiveness of aid into two camps; the aid optimists and the aid pessimists.

He further argued that the history of aid analysis was one of 'see-sawing' between the two camps, concluding that 'analyses of either type, optimistic or pessimistic, tend to be deficient because they limited their scope to selected impacts of aid rather than its overall impact'. Glennie maintains that aid optimists 'tend to avoid discussing some of the negative impacts, despite plenty of evidence' (Glennie, 2008:25). Moyo, *et al* (2000:102) are optimistic about aid provided by NGOs. They noted that NGOs operating in the country had the onerous task of 'filling gaps in government's relief programme management', arguing that they acquired considerable experience in working with the poor. Their observations were reflective of a deep understanding of processes involved in aid programming and implementation as they maintained that; 'NGOs operate close to grassroots; they can adapt to local conditions, and their staffs has experience of working with the poor'. They further agree that, 'In some localities, they are in regular contact with the most vulnerable people, making it easier to identify groups targeted for assistance, particularly in remote areas.

NGOs, thus, have well tested organisation systems for dealing with the vulnerable' (Makumbe, *et al*, 2000:102). These scholars are joined in their thesis by Mellor (1987) quoted by Matlosa, (1993:20) who offers a refreshing but controversial perspective that, 'through the mechanism of food-for-work programmes, food aid can help meet one of the most pressing agricultural development needs in many developing countries, the lack of rural infrastructure. 'In light of this appreciation of the *modus operandi* of NGOs, the argument by Moyo, *et al* (2000) provide insight into the complex operating environment in which they find themselves. Relief work was mostly implemented during times of crisis, particularly following frequent droughts experienced in the country. They emphasized that in those contexts, "government may try to reach the poorest people, whom it usually neglects. The experience of the 1992 drought relief programme has shown that large-scale government operations may succeed in moving large quantities of food relief into affected areas, but may not necessarily succeed in ensuring that food reaches the poorest people targeted" Moyo, *et al* (2000:102). Glennie (2008)'s overall conclusion on the importance of NGO aid seems to be in agreement with that of Moyo, Makumbe and Raftopoulos (2000) as he notes that 'the direct, life-saving impacts of aid are most apparent in emergency situations. When natural disasters strike, foreign governments often play a leading role in providing money and expertise to ease the suffering of those affected and help them to start again.

An important question to grapple with was about where exactly to situate food aid programming in the context of aid generally. The problem that arose was whether food aid could be treated in isolation from financial aid given to recipient countries, some of which had certain conditionality attached to it. It remained debatable whether or not food aid shared similar criticisms as those applied to monetary aid from such organisations as the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Other critical questions bordered on whether food aid was sustainable and long-term or just ameliorative or short-term in its impact. As already noted, aid optimists tend to avoid discussing the crude impacts of food aid in spite of potential evidence to the contrary. Other analysts present a disapproving picture of food aid through placing emphasis on the macro-economic effects it could have which were detrimental to progress.

What seems fairly certain, however, is that food aid, if properly targeted and distributed, is directly ameliorative, particularly in emergencies. However, profound dependency on aid debatably weakens beneficiaries' initiative because they consistently look to food aid as an on-going, year-on-year source of livelihood. Renewed donor focus on governance issues could harm chances of food aid being considered as a genuine rescue package to deserving cases. Conditions attached to aid were motivated in part by donors' whims. For example, Charles Ray, United States Ambassador to Zimbabwe, summed this view unambiguously; "We try to put aid where it is most effective and I do not believe having a rule that says everything must be one way or another. As it stands right now, the bulk of our aid goes directly to communities and goes through NGOs. What works at the moment, because of the restrictions on Zimbabwe, is to channel aid through NGOs or directly to communities" (*The Zimbabwe Independent*, 2009). This shows unambiguously that something or someone was being avoided here. Ray controversially argued that he did not believe in a government that allegedly dictated rules on how NGOs were expected to operate.

The above view was, however, challenged by Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga, Regional Integration and International Co-operation Minister, on the argument that it was the prerogative of government to decide where aid was required. In fact, she reiterated government's determination to control NGO activities in the country by stressing that, "We now require everyone in the country to inform us about their aid work, how much they are spending and which areas they are working on. Right now we do not know and are not sure who is doing what or working with whom and through which NGO" (*The Zimbabwe Independent*, 2009). In his analysis of the role of NGOs in Africa, Shivji, (2007), however, considers aid in its various forms as destructive. Being influenced by his legal expertise as an advocate, Shivji's pessimism about, and disapproval of, NGO work is fully captured by his confession that, 'I do not doubt the noble motivations and good intentions of NGO leaders and activists. But, we do not judge the outcome of a process by the intentions of its authors. We aim to analyse the objective effects of actions, regardless of their intentions'. Shivji's argument is premised on the fact that efforts to end African poverty are popularised, ironically, by neo-colonialists in their 2005 *Make Poverty History*. He questions the authenticity and logic of such a slogan in greater detail: "But how can you make poverty history without understanding the history of poverty?" (Shivji, 2005:5)

Shivji further probes the source of African poverty: "We need to know how the poverty of the five billion of this world came about. Even more acutely, we need to know how the filthy wealth of the 500 multinationals or the 225 richest people was created. We need to know precisely how this great divide, this unbridgeable chasm, is maintained; how it reproduced itself, and how it increasingly deepened and widened" (Shivji, 2005:5). Shivji seems to be making the point that NGO operations and donor choices about aid spending remained an exercise in futility if they were driven by wider geo-political considerations unattached to moral duty and an analysis of ever increasing poverty in recipient countries. One may also concur with Glennie's argument that food aid buys friends if consideration is taken of the January 2008 Chinese aid to Zimbabwe. About 5,000 tonnes of food aid to Zimbabwe was shipped in that year alone (*The Herald*, 27 January, 2008). China's rapid growth and consequent need for vast amounts of raw materials were perhaps behind that new interest in securing aid to Zimbabwe. In Marange, for instance, the Chinese's Anjin Investments was granted permission to mine in Chiadzwa. There were disturbing reports, however, of alleged scant disregard of the welfare of local inhabitants in the area. Commenting on forced relocation of Chiadzwa residents to pave way for diamond exploration and mining, Prosper Ndamera, a villager in the Nechirasika area, revealed how 'the Chinese came and barricaded our village and they would drill wherever they wanted. We really felt that we were no longer wanted' (*The Zimbabwe Independent*, 2010). This whole move leaves room for critics to doubt the timing and motivation of the Chinese aid to Zimbabwe.

5.0. The Roots of Food Insecurity in Zimbabwe

Food insecurity has roots in the country's history of land use patterns between whites and blacks. Robin Palmer notes how the decline of peasant farming across Southern Africa was related to the withdrawal from the commercial production of foodstuffs by African farmers. This was because they were subjected to systematic policies designed to undercut their capacity to compete with white farmers and mining companies (Palmer, 1977). The same observation had earlier been made by Arrighi (1973) who paints a clear picture on the deteriorating African peasantry following colonial encroachment. African agriculture deteriorated faster soon after occupation and the situation remained unchanged throughout the ninety years of colonial rule. Indeed, the ability of Africans to deal directly with problems of food shortages was damaged by a series of discriminatory political and economic laws. White settler hegemony was extended over blacks, particularly through the 1930 Land Apportionment Act, the Maize Control Act of 1931 and the 1951 Native Land Husbandry Act (Keyter, 1978; Machingaidze, 1980). The overall negative impact of these policies on food security was undeniable. Minority control over land and agricultural markets was effectively consolidated. The black majority was consequently confined to increasingly overcrowded areas of poor soils and unreliable, low and erratic rainfall. Such was the situation in which Marange communal lands found themselves. The area has poor and exhausted soils, receives little annual rainfall and is extremely hot, especially the Chiadzwa, Chirasika, Mafararikwa, Mutsago, Mukuni and Mukwada wards.

Apart from historical aspects of food insecurity raised above, other political and economic factors played a big role as well. In spite of agriculture's continued importance in the country's economy, the Mugabe government in 1980 was tied hands and feet by provisions of the Lancaster Constitution to fully position itself to dealing adequately with sustainable agriculture. It also primarily focussed on revamping the social services sector, especially health and education, to widen its people's welfare, skills and literacy base which colonialism shattered (Government of Zimbabwe, 1981). The people of Marange as well as those in other communal or resettlement areas were not empowered with relevant skills, farming equipment and other necessities to the extent that food insecurity continued to loom well after independence due to vestiges of white encroachment. Apparently, there were little or no serious efforts to put agriculture on a sound footing even by as late as 2010. During the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, farm implements, seed varieties and fertiliser requirements had not been addressed with urgency. In a bid to lure the electorate following the formation, in 1999, of the rival MDC party, these resources were dished out only too late by the ZANU-PF party to its perceived supporters, some of whom only directed them to other unrelated uses such as for sale. This disjointed and haphazard approach to agriculture not only slid the entire country into huge food deficits, but also promoted demand for food aid from donor communities. In light of agriculture's importance, there is clear evidence of a deficiency of planning in fighting food insecurity.

De Waal (1997) also adds his voice on problems affecting food provision in Zimbabwe. He notes how agricultural reforms that followed after liberation had a spectacular effect on communal farming which saw overall grain supply more than trebling. For instance, structural inequalities in the agricultural marketing system, such as the opening up of the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) to African farmers, were removed. This was labelled the 'Zimbabwean Miracle' at the time. His argument touches on the fact that: The surfeit of food made the government complacent, so that the persistent problem of rural under-nutrition was neglected. National food surpluses did not solve the problem of hunger among those too poor to buy, and forty per cent of communal farmers were in the chronic deficit. The GMB, which was oriented to buying rurally and selling in urban areas, did not sell food at controlled prices in rural areas; its national-level success concealed a systematic failure to overcome rural poverty (De Waal, 1997:60). Nevertheless, these challenges still had their roots in colonialism, affecting not only Zimbabwe, but also the rest of the African continent. In his introductory note, Vaughan (1987) presents an analysis of famine and food supply in comparative perspective, though a great deal of his work concentrated on Malawi. It is his observation that, in the course of the colonial period, 'African farmers were encouraged or coerced either to grow export crops themselves to the detriment of their food production, or work on with the same results'. This economic pattern was seen to have been continued into the post-colonial period, and was arguably held responsible for the occurrence of food insecurity in modern Africa.

Probably surpassing all these factors, nonetheless, is the issue of persistent droughts affecting Zimbabwe. While strategies for achieving high yields are constantly explored by peasants, the natural factor, that is, prolonged dry spells, perpetually hits hard on crops at their various stages of growth.

The 1984/85 and 1991/92 agricultural seasons were notable for their total crop failure. Hunger, malnutrition and unemployment were on the increase following these incessant droughts. For Marange, the impact was strongly felt particularly in those wards such as Chiadzwa which are named 'red zones' by the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Committee (ZIMVAC) and Agricultural Extension Services (AREX). This was coupled with the introduction of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) which directly and indirectly resulted in upward food price adjustments.

Hopkins (1993:43) notes that, 'among the first to lose are the poor who find themselves priced out of the food markets at the same time that their employment and incomes have yet to rise.' This situation does not severely affect rural households only, but urban dwellers as well, due to declining real wages, stagnant formal sector employment levels and reduced investment in health and education. Sen (1981) also draws the relationship between food insecurity and personal entitlements, arguing that starvation need not be related directly to food supply. For him; 'Food is heavily commoditised and an individual's command over food may depend on the assets he or she possesses, or labour power which can be converted into food [which he calls entitlements]. Famines occur when exchange entitlements collapse, leaving some individuals or groups without any command over food' (1981:48). Plan International seriously considers what entitlements a potential beneficiary owns as part of its screening tool. The Zimbabwe Human Development Report (1998) highlights difficulties that can be encountered by people if their entitlements are affected in one way or the other, giving the example of structural changes in the economy. It stresses that, 'between 1990 and 1997, average real wages fell by a third, despite rising productivity. Output per worker, at constant 1990 prices, increased ten per cent over the period, underlining the economy-wide shift in income distribution from wages to profit' (The Zimbabwe Human Development Report, 1998:27).

The severity of food insecurity and vulnerability can be seen in the absence of alternatives for both rural and urban populations. In the event of shocks like drought, various coping strategies are used. The need for food aid cannot be overemphasised in the face of structural adjustment-induced mass starvation and acute malnutrition. As hinted above, people suffered during ESAP not only due to insufficient food but also because they could not afford it. In addition to these factors, the wider issue of poverty could be understood to have been central in causing high levels of vulnerability in rural households. In actual fact, Zimbabwe's food crisis was the most dramatic element of the poverty levels plaguing the country. While it could be argued that persistent food deficits in Marange arose from declining food production and increasing food imports at an affordable price, as happened in 2008, extreme poverty was the driving force behind perpetual food insecurity. In 1995, at the World Summit for Special Development, Zimbabwe declared its determination to eradicate poverty with the realisation that about 'thirty per cent of all children under five were malnourished' (The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP: 1998). The UNDP became increasingly involved in anti-poverty programmes, among which was guaranteed food security. To this end, it can be emphasised that food insecurity had one of its roots in poverty.

The United Nations' definition of poverty is itself multi-faceted, covering such aspects as human poverty, income poverty, extreme poverty, overall poverty, relative and absolute poverty. According to the UN; "Income poverty is the lack of minimally adequate income or expenditures; Extreme poverty is indigence or destitution, usually specified as the inability to satisfy even the minimum food needs; overall poverty is the inability to satisfy essential non-food as well as food needs; Relative poverty is defined by standards that can change over time; and, Absolute poverty is defined by a fixed standard". This paper is, however, more particularly concerned about human poverty which is 'the lack of essential human capabilities, such as being literate or adequately nourished' (UNDP: 1998:01). As far as WFP and Plan International were concerned, food aid should be used creatively to benefit the poor whose condition was exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic currently hitting Zimbabwe and other regions in sub-Saharan Africa. It is against this background that donors argued that if poor countries like Zimbabwe were to achieve major reductions in poverty, they required substantial food aid and external funding, which was also the entry point for WFP and Plan International. Moreover, it was against the realisation that women and children carried the burden of poverty that these organisations strove to address those difficulties.

6.0. Plan International's Ground Operations in Marange

It is critical to note that in its operations, Plan International, through WFP, undertook the Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme in strict adherence to WFP's implementation criteria. WFP prioritised assistance to most food-insecure districts while Plan focused on wards.

Registers for intended beneficiaries were done by community members at ward or village level in each district in consultation with local authorities, such as village heads, ward councillors, headmen, chiefs and the District Administrator (Plan International, 2008). All these efforts were supposed to be reflected in a Memorandum of Understanding Summary Flow Chart which mapped out distribution and targeting criteria. One Food Monitor at Plan International's Mutare Office highlighted that this flow chart was critical as a defence mechanism when there was confrontation between Government of Zimbabwe's high offices of the Administrator/Councillors, and the Co-operating Partner/WFP. To this end, emphasis was placed on the need by every humanitarian worker to understand it in order to appreciate each one's obligation.

Having been established in 1986 as the first in the country ahead of six other subsequent programme units, Plan International-Mutare sponsored children in Zimunya and Marange areas of the district. In Zimunya, the following wards were covered: Chishakwe, Dora, Muradzikwa, Munyoro, Gombakomba, Gandai, Chitora and Munyarari. For Marange, the coverage included Chiadzwa, Mukwada, Buwerimwe, Mafararikwa, Takarwa, Nyachityu, Mukuni, Chimoio, Mutupo, Nhamburiko, Ngomasha, Mutsago, Mudzimundiringe, Kugarisana and Chindunduma wards (Plan International, 2002). Generally, each of these wards had at least two FDPs and identification numbers. The setting up in 2002 of the Plan International-Mutare's Food Aid Department under the management of Mafemba, resulted directly from the findings of food security surveys carried out in the district. These assessments determined levels of vulnerability of food-insecure households. Since Plan International was already operating in Zimunya and Marange on projects unrelated to food aid, there was a renewed impetus, as a humanitarian organisation, to embrace WFP's initiative to feed households identified as most food-insecure, using WFP's targeting and distribution guidelines.

Stanley Dawa, Programme Unit Manager for Mutasa District, argues that Marange shared a similar history of incessant drought and poor land fertility with the Honde Valley and Dry Land areas under his jurisdiction. It is his conviction that this scenario tended to expose the affected communities to a dependence on food aid from WFP. For the greater part of the 1990s, most farmers who depended on rain-fed agriculture failed to produce substantial amounts of food crops for their subsistence. Naturally, these areas fell in the 'red zone' category according to AREX, responsible for mapping out district geographical regions in the country. The AREX crop assessment survey for the 2002/2003 agricultural season indicated that Marange's Mafararikwa, Buwerimwe, Chirasika and Chiadzwa wards were 'popularly known as 'red zones', falling under Regions IV and V because of their dryness (Plan International, 2003:04). The 'yellow zones' were those that received substantial harvests lasting up to August, while the 'green zones' enjoyed relatively good amounts of rainfall to guarantee sufficient harvests throughout.

In its selection of wards in Marange, Plan International remained guided by reports from AREX assessments for the area. However, AREX also anchored its conclusions from findings made by ZIMVAC which frequently produced Interim Rural Food Security Assessment Reports on a national rather than district level. The AREX Report (2003), for instance, vividly captures the prevailing food security situation: 'Information obtained from beneficiaries revealed that the food security situation is fast deteriorating and in the months of August onwards, most households would be seriously affected. In wards such as Mafararikwa, Chiadzwa and Mukwada, the situation is quite deplorable and the need to register more beneficiaries is critical. The situation in Mutare remained unstable as the majority of farmers failed to get meaningful harvests from their fields. Twenty-one out of thirty-one wards in the district managed to get harvests that are going to last at most three months' (AREX:2003:15).

What is sad about the timing of this report is its coincidence with the annual closure of the VGF programme amid continuing calls for additional assistance? Regardless of such findings made by AREX or Plan International on the indicators of extreme desperation, the WFP's VGF scheme closes its cycle, leaving people looking to it for food stranded. Plan International also finds itself unable to offer any extended assistance rather than encourage people to wait until the next cycle came round. The situation of beneficiaries who are 'dumped' at the closure of each VGF scheme is one of desperation. Most of them are confronted with the stark reality of having to seek new ways of survival until the WFP/VGF cycle booms back to life. Households have themselves no control over this feeding programme on policy issues except being involved once again as beneficiaries when the programme is brought back to them. But caution should be taken not to misconstrue the pertinent role played by both WFP and Plan International in halting rapid deterioration of the food supply situation affecting vulnerable communities across the country.

In addition, AREX, ZIMVAC, WFP and other crop assessment organisations play a vital role in providing Government with important information on the vulnerability levels of rural communities. Their findings are at least instrumental in re-awakening Government to its overriding role of guaranteeing food security to its people.

7.0. Conclusion

With all the potential it has to benefit recipient communities in long-term development efforts, food aid extended to Marange by WFP/Plan International since 2002 has its own shortfalls and limitations. But there is no denying the fact that this aid goes a long way in addressing the plight of the food vulnerable people in the area, including the chronically ill, the undernourished and disabled. For many high risk households, aid is immeasurably helpful in alleviating the burden of chronic food insecurity arising from wide ranging situations. Since food security is a key requirement for rural and urban development, Plan International endeavours to avail food to Marange through its partnership with WFP in order to sustain human life. In the absence of such intervention, all other activities pale into insignificance.

Inadvertently, Plan International's food aid programme for Marange is somewhat at cross-purposes with sustainable development objectives as it presumably stifles the area's potential to benefit from concerted Government efforts at instituting durable solutions to inherent food problems. Apparently, Government is getting cosy in the comfort of Plan International's annual intervention rather than being vigilant in organising efforts to permanently halt food insecurity. It is also worrying to note that, despite references to the need to involve local people in the planning and implementation stages of food aid targeting and distribution, a reading of the project documents and the researcher's own experience suggests that ordinary community members have little control over the programme. There are many negative reports of 'abandoned' villagers reeling under extreme food vulnerability when the Vulnerable Group Feeding programme's exit period approaches. But these operational complexities are supposed to be contextualised in order not to obscure the life-saving role of Plan International in Marange.

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