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# Famine and Drought: The Question of Food Security in Zimbabwe

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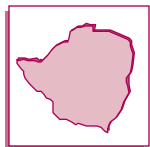
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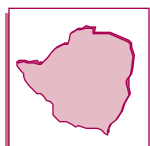
# Famine and Drought:

## *The Question of Food Security in Zimbabwe*



### **Introduction**

From the time that the London Missionary Society first took Zimbabwean rainfall records at Hope Fountain in 1888, the worst droughts on record are the consecutive dry spells from 1911 to 1914, the 1946–47 drought, the 1960 drought, and the 1972–73 rainy season, which was the driest period of colonial Zimbabwe. The country also had serious food shortages in 1903, 1916, 1922, 1933, and 1942. Although the people of pre-colonial Zimbabwe experienced recurrent droughts, they generally had well-developed coping mechanisms that prevented high death tolls (Iliffe, 1990).

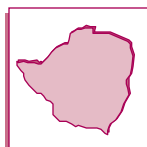


### **The Good Neighbor**

Zimbabwe's rainfall pattern has always been one of greater precipitation in the northern parts of the country, with gradually diminishing rains from north to south. This has meant that in any given year there is never a "total" rainfall failure and therefore a "total" crop failure. Scarcity in most cases has been localized, and local food shortages in pre-colonial Zimbabwe therefore rarely degenerated into famines that killed.

The tradition of sharing among the peoples of pre-colonial Zimbabwe was one of the pillars of famine prevention strategies that had its roots in the ethics of the peoples' culture. No one was allowed to die when someone else had a surplus of food. There was a well-established barter trade system, in the form of either in-kind or exchange of food for labor. Only those who were unable to exchange either of the two resorted to begging. Even in this

begging, the beggar provided some form of service (for example, entertainment) in exchange for food.



### **Agriculture and Food Gathering**

Major settlements in pre-colonial Zimbabwe were centered on the high rainfall belt in the highveld at the center of modern Zimbabwe. This region is known for its agriculturally rich soils and abundant natural resources, including game and other wild sources of food. The people had relatively well-developed agricultural skills. They grew drought-resistant crops, mainly finger millet and bulrush millet.

During times of plenty, some of the surplus was stored in secluded natural silos (often caves), as a strategic reserve during wartime. These reserves could also be used during a famine. In addition, traditional leaders like the king and at times the chief always kept strategic reserves for their people in case of famine. This is best captured by Shona praise poetry at the accession of a chief:

You are the chief of everyone,  
Father of orphans and of those who suffer.  
Your senior wife,  
Your second wife,  
Your third wife,  
They are to cook for the hungry, serve those  
who wait for food.  
(Hodza and Fortune, 1979)

Perhaps the greatest asset that the people had was the overabundance of wild foods. Early Euro-

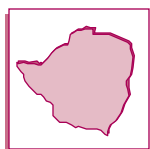
pean explorers who came noted that “starvation was impossible in the Zambezi Valley” (Scudder, 1971).



### Colonial Invasion

The establishment of colonial rule in the 1890s coincided with severe food shortages. The causes of the shortages included drought, locust invasions, and the animal disease rinderpest, which decimated cattle herds, especially in Matabeleland. The situation was made worse by the civil conflict that followed the invasion of Matabeleland by Europeans. Spiritual leaders had warned of the impending famine if the “whites were not driven off.” Food shortages were quite acute in 1896, when people died from famine because of the combination of natural phenomena and the rebellion against colonial domination.

To create dependency and ensure the acceptance of their rule, the invading Europeans destroyed most of the grain the people had stored. The period 1895–97 was disastrous. The combined effects of the Shona and Ndebele rebellions of 1896 and 1897, the plunder and destruction of grain by European troops, and the invasion of locusts and rinderpest disease all hurt food security. The British South African Company (BSAP) reported widespread starvation throughout the country during the peak of the rebellion in 1897.



### Food Handouts Introduced

Indeed, the people succumbed to the power of the Europeans and, in October 1896, the first-ever food distribution center was set up in Bulawayo by the BSAP. This center distributed food to some 3,000 people every day.

The establishment of the Bulawayo Food Distribution Centre became a turning point in the history of food production in the country. By 1903, the colonial administration had set up 16 “Native Reserves” in Matabeleland and 80 “Native Reserves” in Mashonaland. Africans who still occupied what was now “European land” were forced to pay taxes by colonial authorities who wanted to force them

into the reserves. However, despite having their land usurped, African farmers produced more grain than the Europeans. The *Rhodesia Herald* of September 19, 1903, commented, “It is hardly a bright reflection on the state of (European) agriculture to note that so soon as the Kafir trade in this commodity fails, customers have to take the imported article.”

Another famine occurred in 1903. The colonial authorities’ famine policy then rested on two principles. One was to rely wherever possible on private trade. The second principle was that men should earn money to buy food by migrating to wage employment on white farms and in urban areas.

The call to wage labor was received with little enthusiasm, especially in Mashonaland and the Zambezi Valley, as most men shunned the mines and labor camps. This response surprised the Europeans. It also illustrates the fact that famine survival during the 1903 drought owed little to government aid or the European economy. The people survived the famine by traditional means, especially by exploiting wild food. As long as wild food was available, men would stay at home, eat forest products, and sustain their families. This traditional practice was so strong that many communities had no idea that there was a government relief operation.

This resistance to food handouts was also evident during the 1912 famine, when people in the Masvingo District “refused absolutely to accept any advance of grain or meal either from private individuals or from the government,” as Native Commissioner Bazeley reported in May 1912.

Furthermore, the authorities’ fear of African pauperization clashed with African expectations of reciprocity. The starving Africans got the famine relief food at famine prices, yet they had to repay the food during normal times. The authorities of Southern Rhodesia had no famine disaster code at that time but had a “tradition of expecting starving Africans to work, encouraging private trade, giving some help with transport, and confining direct relief to the incapacitated” (Peires, 1982). This thinking was to be the “official policy” adopted by Southern Rhodesia administrator Sir William Henry Milton during the 1912 famine.

This policy persisted even up to the 1916 famine. There were a number of problems with the policy. First, the already overstretched Africans had neither the resources nor the willingness to pay for the grain. Second, the Africans felt that since they were paying tax (hut tax) to the government, the government had an obligation to feed them since they did not see any reason for paying the tax in the first place.

In 1922, the country experienced another famine, the impact of which was far different from all the previous famines. There were country-wide food shortages, yet the country had enough grain stocks to feed the entire nation—and even to export. This was the first sign of the impact of the alien economic system introduced by the Europeans. Cattle prices had gone down, weakening the purchasing power of the African population. Worse still, the traditional famine-coping mechanisms of the Africans had been weakened because much of their traditional land had been usurped. Even where wild food was still obtainable, the practice of wage labor contrasted with the traditional hunting and foraging strategies that for years Africans had found most dependable.

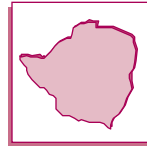


### **Policy Shift**

Famine policy shifted in 1922, when the colonial government for the first time introduced public works where those employed were paid in food. This policy was introduced partly because private employers could no longer provide employment to all those who needed it and partly because the need for public infrastructure like roads in the rural areas became more apparent during that time.

The 1930s saw a major shift in African average food production levels since the 1890s, with the rate of increase in average yearly production falling from the previous decade's 3.8% to 2.06%. For the first time, African food production declined steadily. Food scarcity became permanent for the poor while the wealthy always had food. This scenario was particularly disastrous given that the African population was growing fast and at the same time was

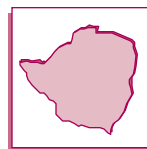
being driven to more arid regions of the country. The Africans now heavily depended on grain from the grain marketing boards because many could not produce enough for themselves.



### **The Country's Segmentation and Land Pressure**

By 1943, according to R.W.M. Johnson (Johnson, 1964), 13.2 million hectares (ha) had been settled by whites, 6.4 million ha were set aside for future white occupation, 0.4 million ha were forest reserves, and 7.2 million ha had not been allocated to either race. This arrangement left Africans with a mere 11.7 million ha. The pressure on the African reserves was particularly acute after World War II as the colonial authority began a deliberate and systematic removal of “unwanted Africans” from white land.

Before 1980, the country had two systems of agriculture: commercial, which was highly sophisticated and mainly the domain of the white community, and peasant, which was largely neglected and totally black. The peasant sector, which was then called the Tribal Trust Lands, constituted 41.8% of the total land mass of the country. The commercial sector amounted to 42.7%, and the state held the balance in the form of game parks, forests, and so on. The commercial sector occupied the best agriculturally productive parts of the country, while the peasant sector languished in generally poor agricultural land.



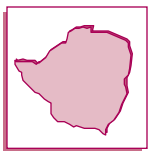
### **Maize and Cotton Revolution**

Despite the condition of agricultural land in the communal sector, grain production experienced a phenomenal growth after independence in 1980. This was mainly due to favorable agricultural policies adopted by the new government, which provided incentives for the development of communal agriculture. The communal farmers increased their maize production level by marketed output by more than 50% compared to the pre-colonial period. In 1985, for the first time

since the early 1900s, communal farmers marketed more maize and cotton than their commercial counterparts.

Despite the growth in communal food production in the communal areas, the problems of food security and malnutrition persist. The droughts of the 1980s and the famous one of 1992 found many ill-prepared (if at all) for the inevitable food shortages, despite the mini-agricultural revolution of the previous years. Many communal farmers found themselves literally government “dependents,” queuing for the miserly handouts distributed through the various government drought relief programs

The question of food security has generated a lot of debate and discussion, not only in Zimbabwe but in southern Africa as a whole. The Zimbabwean government, faced with another drought in 1995, sought ways of feeding needy people without necessarily bearing the costs alone.



### **Disaster Declared**

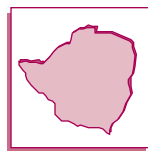
Zimbabwe’s president, Robert Mugabe, declared a state of disaster as a result of the severe drought affecting most parts of the country. In an announcement published in the *Government Gazette* of July 7, 1995, the president said, “And whereas it appears to me that the said disaster is of such a nature and extent that extraordinary measures are necessary to assist and protect the people of Zimbabwe residing in communal, resettlement and small scale farming areas which are affected, or the circumstances are likely to arise making such measures necessary; now therefore, I hereby declare that, with effect from the 28th July 1995, a state of disaster exists in the communal, resettlement and small-scale farming areas of Zimbabwe.”

The declaration of a disaster obligates the government to provide relief services to people in need. The Zimbabwean government announced three forms of disaster relief: the Grain Loan Scheme (GLS), which is estimated to benefit some 5.05 million Zimbabweans; the Free Food Programme (FFP), which is estimated to benefit about 733,000

people; and the Supplementary Feeding Programme (SFP), which is estimated to benefit more than 800,000 children.

Under the GLS, the government will loan grain to those in need. This scheme is designed for the able-bodied. The grain would be paid for in the form of cash or grain after the next harvest. The biggest impediment to the success of this program is that it assumes the next harvest will be normal. The FFP, which caters to the incapacitated, was in existence even during colonial times. The SFP, which is being run by the Ministry of Health, provides food to targeted children under five years, but now feeds even older school children when there is need.

Although these schemes are noble, the question of sustainability still remains, as the government of Zimbabwe, like most governments in southern Africa, does not have the material and financial resources to implement these programs. Food insecurity will still be a problem if the fundamental questions of poverty, agricultural and land policies, drought preparedness, and the whole area of disaster management are not fully addressed. This is particularly so because communal people, or the poor in general, are always affected by drought despite bumper harvests in previous years.



### **Information**

For years, the Southern African region has been hit by droughts of varying magnitudes and durations. A lot has been written about these droughts. Information on droughts is stored in government archives, humanitarian organizations’ offices and libraries, and research institutions. The circulation of such information has hitherto been limited to a “select” group of persons or organizations. There have been few (if any) regional information sharing mechanisms through which documentation on drought and drought management could be channeled. Even at the national level, people in drought management, though many in number, often operated individually, without sharing their experiences.

It was not until March 1995 that the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, along with the Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC), launched the Disaster Management Information Project (DMIP). The Project's primary purpose is to improve the availability, accessibility, and dissemination of drought-related information, as well as information on other disasters. The Project focuses on the 12 Southern African Development Community states.

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