



Averting 'New Variant Famine'

Briefing Notes No 4

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Food security in Lesotho

The 2001-'3 crisis

In April 2002 Lesotho was the first of six southern African countries to declare a food emergency. By November 2002 it was estimated that 42% of the population would require food aid. The causes of the crisis are complex and somewhat contested, but the devaluation of the Rand (to which Lesotho's Loti is tied) played a significant role. Most of the food consumed in Lesotho



Threshing maize

is imported, and with devaluation maize prices increased. The price of mealie meal rose from M1.3/kg in 2000 to M3.6/kg in 2002, causing many consumers to make a 50kg bag last 5-6 weeks rather than a month. Weather was also problematic, with hailstorms, localised flooding and untimely rains, and concern about the situation in Zimbabwe heightened anxiety about the regional food supply. More broadly, the crisis reflects a longer term trend of poverty and growing vulnerability, particularly among the poorest in Lesotho. Over the past decade there has

been little change in the proportion of undernourished people.

Food availability

Levels of domestic production are highly contested and the long-term trend is somewhat unclear, but there is consensus that per capita production is falling. In the mid- to late 1970s Lesotho provided 50-60% of its requirements; by 1984 it was only producing 40%. Now, in a normal year, Lesotho only produces a third of the food it requires. Most of the rest comes from private sector importers, with a small proportion delivered as food aid.

Key Points:

- Lesotho experienced a severe food crisis in 2001-'3, related to devaluation of the Rand and growing vulnerability
- Two-thirds of Lesotho's food is imported, even in a normal year
- Agriculture suffers a number of problems in Lesotho, and the poor resort to coping strategies
- The cash economy is crucial to food security, but incomes have been falling and food prices rising
- Policy responses have sought both to increase production and enable the poor to purchase food

Livelihoods in Lesotho

Producing food

Much of Lesotho's population engages in food production, through crop and vegetable growing and livestock rearing. However, agriculture in Lesotho faces a number of problems:

- Unpredictable policy responses eg erratic subsidies that result in late planting
- Declining investment in inputs, as migrant labour

income diminishes

- Growing landlessness and falling holding size among poorer households
- Declining soil fertility
- Diminished income from livestock due to stock theft and productivity decline
- Limited access to credit and crop insurance, discouraging investment
- Inadequate local markets
- Declining labour productivity due to AIDS

95% of the households that engage in agriculture fail to produce enough food to meet their own requirements. The poorest households struggle most: many own no land beyond a vegetable garden, and those with fields may lack labour, implements, inputs or draught animals. Yields of poor households are often poor, and few own cattle. Many poor households engage in sharecropping

and other coping strategies including beer brewing; reliance on less popular or wild foods; reducing food consumption; or reliance on gifts from others. There are geographical differences: in the mountains there is little arable land, few employment opportunities and limited access to urban services and markets. The mountains also have more households with chronically ill members.



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Accessing food

Agriculture is less important as a source of livelihood in Lesotho compared to most southern African countries. Most food consumed is purchased, making the cash economy crucial for accessing to food. Access to food has been affected by both falling incomes and rising prices. For over a century Basotho men migrated to work in South African mines. Their remittances were the main

source of income for most rural households and enabled investment in agriculture. Retrenchment of miners over the past decade has led many to move to the urban areas in search of employment. South Africa has also reduced opportunities for Basotho to migrate for agricultural and domestic work. Lesotho's garment industry has found jobs for around 50,000 women, but unemployment remains almost 30%. Many poor

households have become poorer in the past decade, and the poorest and most vulnerable are headed by children, the sick, disabled and elderly. As the poor are most dependent on purchasing food, household food shortages are closely correlated with income poverty. At the same time as the incomes of the poor have fallen, subsidy cuts on basic foods, inflation and currency movements have increased food prices.

Policy responses

The prospects for agriculture to contribute to food security are disputed, but Lesotho's relationship with South Africa is significant. The cost of importing grain is less than for many other southern African countries, as membership of SACU reduces transaction costs. This reduces the importance of self-sufficiency in food production at household and national level. Input subsidies are nonetheless employed, although these may be captured by elites and trad-

ers, including those from South Africa. Furthermore, late delivery of inputs has sometimes led farmers to plant late or not at all.



Vegetable gardening

Consumer subsidies are used to reduce the cost of food. These can be problematic because subsidised

goods find their way across the border. However, ending consumer subsidies in 2002, brought drastic price rises. Currently there is a 20% subsidy on unsifted maize. Food aid is widely distributed but, if anticipated, may reduce the incentive to plant.

Poverty and lack of purchasing power is arguably more important to address than food availability. Social protection measures recently introduced include old age pensions.

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Project website: www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sse/chg/projects/nvf

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