

CASE STUDY: AFRICA

COPING WITH DROUGHT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA.

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SUMMARY

In 1991/92, countries in Southern Africa faced potential catastrophe from the effects of severe widespread drought which decimated crops, particularly maize and contributed to great losses of cattle due to disease and stress sales. Countries in the region had to import grain to hitherto unprecedented levels to meet the shortfalls for both market demand and relief requirements. Against the background of widespread poverty; high levels of child malnutrition; implementation of stringent structural adjustment programmes and a largely underdeveloped and dilapidated rural infrastructure in the areas where need was greatest; Southern Africa with partners managed to prevent widespread starvation except for relatively small areas within conflict zones of Angola and Mozambique. Infact, in countries that were not at war it would be difficult to attribute any of the deaths during this time to the direct effects of the drought. Most of the region avoided outright free distribution of available relief resources and emerged from the experience with valuable lessons for the way forward in reducing vulnerability and coping with future disasters.

INTRODUCTION

The drought that hit the southern African region was the worst this century and affected approximately 20 million people in the ten countries that make up the southern African Development Community (SADC). Within each of these countries, the physical extent of the drought varied. But, the immediate and long term implications were most serious for rural agricultural communities whose main source of food and income is closely linked to agricultural production. Over the years, environmental degradation such as deforestation, overgrazing, inappropriate agricultural practices, lack of water conservation measures have served to make the effects of subsequent droughts increasingly severe (Frankenberger 1992).

Drought, though localized as an ecological phenomenon has far reaching implications beyond the immediate areas affected. Rural areas and small scale farmers in particular, supply the bulk of urban food requirements usually at very low cost, sometimes on credit. Other dangers during severe drought are posed by low water tables leading to difficulties in accessing sufficient water for domestic use and for electricity generation. A classic case was the city of Bulawayo during the drought where at some time even mass evacuation of residents was considered due to severe water shortages. Outbreaks of Cholera and dysentery were rampant in shanty compounds bordering the urban areas of Zambia during the drought (Mukupo, 1993).

But by far the rural population was the worst affected in that most of their immediate food supplies, their means of producing it (draught power) and their income sources to acquire it were all adversely affected at a stroke. In the SADC region, the majority of livelihoods are agricultural dependent. In four member states, Malawi, Tanzania, Swaziland and Mozambique