

Key food and nutrition security policy process issues in Southern Africa

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Introduction

With growing issues of food and nutrition security, civil society organizations (CSOs) in southern Africa have taken the initiative to provide voice for otherwise marginalized interests by providing evidence. CSOs are not just essential in mobilizing public support for the achievement of food security but are further being challenged to engage the entire food and nutrition security policy process. There is an increasing realization that the food security issue in southern Africa requires both short and long term interventions as well as inputs from a multiplicity of sectors through balancing the region’s present and future interests and needs (Devereux and Maxwell, 2000; Clover, 2003; Wiggins, 2003; Young and Court, 2003). This is reflected in the types of agencies and sectors represented in this field, ranging from humanitarian to development in nature.

The attention on contemporary problems of vulnerability to food insecurity, poverty and HIV/Aids in southern Africa, with the household and local communities as the key levels of analysis, to a large extent calls for an active participation of civil society organizations in food security and nutrition policy. This is primarily because by their nature most CSOs work with local communities and are better positioned to provide “on the ground information, experiences” and analysis. We argue here that, CSOs in southern Africa have provided useful food security and nutrition data for varied purposes and that these could play an even more effective role in affecting policy especially in identifying effective adaptation options. We further argue that CSOs need to perceive themselves as full participants in the region’s entire food security policy system. The paper therefore seeks to critically look at the policy/research nexus in trying to better understand the context, evidence and links in the region’s food and nutrition security policy process.

We pose two main questions to frame this discussion of CSOs and the food and nutrition security policy process in southern Africa:

- How can CSOs’ evidence be effectively integrated into the entire food security process?
- How can the region harness institutional linkages involving CSOs in addressing the food and nutrition security policy imperative in southern Africa?

The need for collaborative engagement

Many of the problems regarding food security in the region are not a result of a lack of knowledge about what policies to adopt or the absence of information to use in decision-support. Arguably, it is partly a result of failing policy processes or policy gaps (Young and Court, 2003; World Bank, 2003) within the system. In order to have effective policy processes all the stages in the policy cycle from agenda setting to evaluation are equally important and so is the participation and contribution of governments, international organizations and civil society organizations in the entire cycle. The way that these actors and institutions are linked in the policy cycle determines the quality of information produced, how it is translated and eventually used. Clearly, civil society organizations have a key role to play not in just advocating for change but in participating in this policy process, that is, in eventually influencing the actions of governments. CSOs' evidence has the potential to act as a catalyst for change in the food sector. This implies that CSOs in the region have a challenge to create constituencies for information by creating a demand for evidence that is relevant, reliable and usable.

Much of the scientific or research-based knowledge on food and nutrition security, vulnerability, mitigation and adaptation has traditionally been regarded as belonging to the “scientific” arena. Once produced and processed it is then later transferred for use in policy making. Such traditional dichotomies have provided barriers in the uptake of the “scientific research” information. In order to identify the policy gaps, we examine in this paper the science research-policy interface in food security. We treat the food security policy arena as a policy-subsystem. The CSOs are in this case actors in the policy subsystem dealing with a particular public issue of food security. Such an argument requires an exploration of the concept of institutions as a significant determinant in shaping the nature of food security policy decision-support. In order to be effective such systems are required to succeed in building sustained and adaptive networked relationships between science and decision-making and across levels (Cash, 2003). A system such as this would support long-term and meaningful interactions between scientists, decision makers and various stakeholders. The nature of the configuration would determine how the different knowledge communities (science research and policy) work together and for what purposes.

The pertinent issue to explore would be how to integrate users and producers of knowledge in the process of producing and translating information for use in food and nutrition policy decision-support. The CSOs would need to participate in agenda setting that is, influencing the kind of information that is sought as well as participating in the translation of the information. This requires a process that is inclusive of all stakeholders and actors, thus, an integrated process that is capable of producing “legitimate, salient and credible information” (Cash, 2003). The information can only have these qualities if the whole food security subsystem owns the process through organizing dispersed interests and conceptualizing the relevant issues and methodologies. This way there is no need to then “transfer” knowledge from the science arena to the policy arena. The process of inclusion facilitates the production of integrated research-based evidence that is viewed as readily usable, relevant to local needs and that naturally flows as part of the

policy cycle. It becomes a process that is naturally iterative where innovation and experimentation is regarded as safe and legitimate (World Bank, 2003). Such a process by nature facilitates the creation of an integrated institutional structure necessitating the formation of integrated networks and communities structured along the lines of the policy issue and cycle. By CSOs listening as part of an integrated policy cycle at the grassroots level and testing ideas against reality, they can promote creativity; relevant policies and workable solutions that help national governments govern better (World Bank, 2003).

Institutional formation for food security in southern Africa

But how can CSOs' evidence be effectively integrated into the food security policy process? We now attempt to answer the "how" question by drawing on three practical case experiences from the region. We try to illustrate how the policy-science research interface can be integrated and made more inclusive for better-informed food and nutrition security policy decision-support. We argue that concrete conceptualization and location of food and nutrition security issues that take into account the humanitarian and developmental nature of the challenges involved could produce more relevant policy outcomes.

The changing dimensions of the food and nutrition security issue in southern Africa with increasing vulnerability to HIV/Aids, poverty, undemocratic governance and economic decline have meant that the demands that societies place on their institutions have also changed. A number of initiatives have taken place with varying degrees of innovativeness in response to the southern African crisis. It goes without saying that southern Africa has to move towards adapting and not just mitigating the effects of vulnerability to various local and global challenges. The region should also seize opportunities that have arisen from the crisis to move towards a form of development that has "adaptation" as the ultimate agenda.

All the three cases outlined here illustrate the point that institutional reorganization and improvement can occur when the actors in any policy subsystem capitalize on opportunities for change.

SADC Rolling Assessments

The food crisis that started in 2001 inspired and accelerated the creation of multi-sectoral coordination in developing effective food security monitoring systems and assessments in the region. The crisis saw the RVAC coordinating a number of vulnerability assessments through a partnership with DFID, FEWSNet, WFP and other technical collaborative partners and national governments. It has been argued that the initial conceptualization and use of vulnerability assessments in many countries in southern Africa was largely influenced by donor and relief organizations. But despite that criticism, we argue here that the crisis provided the SADC RVAC with an opportunity to bring together various actors and stakeholders along multiple levels towards developing an information system

that supported the decisions of various agencies. Evident was an increasing realization that the assessments could have much value for use in medium and longer term policy planning rather than in emergency situations only (Marsland, 2004). An evolution in the conceptualization and utilization of the assessment took place, thus increasing the value of the assessment tool. The interaction among issues of livelihoods and related multiple stressors such as poverty, HIV/Aids and a complex macro economic environment culminating in a severe food crisis became clearer. Such a departure from the initial notions of the assessment saw an evolution towards using information for longer-term planning and decision-making (Marsland, 2004). Consequently, there has been a growing consensus to have vulnerability assessment information better linked with longer-term livelihood programmes that address related issues of poverty in resource poor agricultural sectors. This kind of conceptualization alone takes cognizance of the need for institutional coordination in policy planning and creates space for innovativeness.

Of importance is that, the process posed many challenges and created space for bringing together divergent interests, methodologies and perceptions. The assessment became a focal point (boundary object) and this in many ways linked the various collaborative partners' efforts. Ultimately, the crisis provided the region's different agencies and actors with an opportunity to collaborate and produce "integrated assessments". There was also an important development in terms of conceptualization. There was a gradual shift from merely focusing on vulnerability assessments to vulnerability analysis with a perceived utility in policy development. Issues of institutionalizing the information system at national and regional levels have dominated the dialogues, thus providing a necessary foundation for integrating the research and policy knowledge systems in food and nutrition security.

In concluding this case, we cautionary point out that improved multi-agency collaboration around crisis and relief does not automatically imply the creation of sustained food security and nutrition policies. The short-term interventions while appreciated should form part of a longer-term food systems sustainability plan, where the interaction of science research and policy is clearly conceptualized and contextualized. Lessons learned from such a relief-oriented planning situation could be successfully applied in conceptualizing and implementing more sustainable food and nutrition security policy initiatives in the region.

The following two cases highlight the value of local innovativeness. The cases involve an innovative use of the SADC regional vulnerability structures and an attempt to broaden the initial ideas in addressing local vulnerability and sustainability concerns.

Swaziland Demographic Survey, 2003

An important example of a research process that integrated users and producers of knowledge in producing and translating information for use in food policy decision support is that of a demographic survey conducted by the Swaziland VAC in 2003. A

range of users participated in the agenda setting, influencing the kind of information that was sought as well as participated in the translation of the information.

The VAC attempted to integrate the issue of HIV/AIDS centrally into their assessment in order to disentangle the multiple impacts of the pandemic from other underlying causes of the ongoing food/livelihood crisis. The challenge for analysts, policy makers, and donors is to understand with greater precision how the rural socio-economy is being affected by the disease, and consequently how rural development policy should be modified to better achieve national agricultural sector objectives. Despite the fact that the epidemic is now in its third decade in Africa, available analysis to date provides a very murky picture as to how HIV/AIDS is affecting the agricultural sector – its structure, cropping systems, relative costs of inputs and factors of production, technological and institutional changes, and levels of production and marketed surplus. Much of the current “knowledge” on HIV/AIDS and food security is based upon a few empirical studies and a range of material that embodies “anecdotal recycling”. A greater number of empirical datasets and quantitative impact studies are necessary to have a clearer and more accurate understanding of what is going on in different countries.

Recognizing the major issue of HIV/AIDS in Swaziland, the prevalence rate amongst pregnant women attending antenatal clinics being 38.6 percent, the Swazi VAC embarked upon a complementary study to the rolling assessments to better gauge the impact of the pandemic. In Swaziland, the VAC represents one of the few fora that channels national technical guidance for UN agencies, NGOs and Government Ministries to ensure that necessary humanitarian and livelihood support is directed to the most vulnerable people at the correct time. Having an accurate and nuanced understanding of HIV/AIDS was recognized as a crucial component of this.

With support and guidance from SADC FANR Regional VAC, the Committee carried out a nationwide survey of rural areas in Swaziland to analyze the linkages between HIV/AIDS, the demographic trends of the country and how livelihoods and food security status may be changing as a result. The study was explicitly intended to facilitate a more accurate understanding of the impact of HIV/AIDS on mortality and morbidity around the country to support policy decision-making and programmatic interventions (including targeting) at a period when high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates indicate that normal demographic trends could not be assumed.

The Swaziland VAC is currently chaired by the Agriculture and Extension Department within the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MoAC). The Secretariat of the Swazi VAC includes three public sector offices, the National Early Warning and Marketing Advisory Units (MoAC), and the Central Statistical Office (CSO) of the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development (MEPD), who work with the National Emergency Response Council on HIV/AIDS (NERCHA), representatives of the UN system including the World Food Programme, the Food and Agricultural Organization and UNAIDS, and also a range of key NGOs including the Save the Children Swaziland and the Coordinating Assembly for NGOs (CANGO). The “agenda” for the demographic study was “set” by the secretariat with major inputs emanating from SC-UK and

CANGO, particularly as technical assistance from SC-UK provided core co-ordination for the study. Thus from the outset the study was positioned as a collaborative venture within the research/policy nexus.

The process included data collection, data capture, cleaning, analysis and report writing during the period June 2003 to May 2004. The survey findings were guided and supported by the SADC FANR Regional VAC and consultants contracted by UNAIDS¹, as well as in-country technical support provided by the Swazi VAC Livelihoods Advisor, seconded from SC-UK). The study represented collaboration between CSO, UNAIDS/HSRC, FEWSNET, WFP/VAM (with Mozambique personnel), SC-UK Swaziland VAC Livelihoods Advisor, the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives, and NERCHA. When the results emerged in the form of a report and a number of “briefs”, these organizations were able collectively in the form of the VAC but also individually in their own right to utilize the findings and the data to inform responses to the food emergency.

The “outcomes” of the research were disseminated in a number of ways to maximize the impact and possible uptake of information. A number of workshops were held to present the findings to diverse stakeholders within Swaziland, including those with political imperatives to take issues further. Presentations were also held in Johannesburg at the United Nations’ Regional Inter-Agency Coordinating Support Office. Media sources such as the main daily newspapers in Swaziland were also utilized, as were two major development websites, namely those of SARPN and SAFIMS, for wider regional dissemination.

It was intended that the personal informal networks of those attending these events would take the issues further. Informal networks or connections with decision-makers often provide opportunities to influence policy rather than through formal processes that may, for example, require protocols to be followed. This may be extended to members of parliament (MPs) who have political constituencies that provide pressure points that might be harnessed. Different stakeholders require different kinds of information packaged in a variety of ways ranging from policy briefs to fully developed reports. A variety of channels such as through the media need to be evaluated for different information users.

SETSAN

Mozambique provides an illustration of institutional coordination that can be put in place to provide information through the government’s Unit for the Coordination of Information Systems of Technical Secretariat for Food Security and Nutrition (SETSAN) located within Ministry of Agriculture. It is a multi-sectoral body with a mandate to ensure the implementation of the Food Security and Nutrition Strategy and support the

¹ From the HSRC (Human Sciences Research Council), Pretoria, South Africa

formulation of policies and programmes in the Food Security and Nutrition Strategy providing coordination for government and CSO interventions.

The SETSAN network, formally established in 1998 with an action plan developed in 2001, has been built up from active and committed groups. It is a technical, inter-ministerial (broadened to include NGOs, donors, and others) Secretariat that provides a coordinating structure. An important lesson is that it is not a new or duplicating body but rather an ‘umbrella network’. The overall head of the Technical Committee rotates on a monthly basis thus diluting issues around political agendas of particular organizations coming to the fore. SETSAN’s coordination functions range across all levels in the country and bring together information and analyses from all relevant agencies.

Although access to secondary data sets remains a great challenge for SETSAN, the “space” provided through the institutional arrangements means that different organizations, including CSOs, could participate centrally in the “creation” of new data and knowledge. Not only does SETSAN represent a place where representatives of different organizations sit alongside each other to conduct an inter-agency approach to their work, but also a place that is respected by line-departments and other agencies as a provider of “integrated” knowledge. The common premises help coordination of the SETSAN work, which houses many of the major partners. This has allowed the establishment of a common LAN supporting data sharing; it is convenient; has helped to build trust and camaraderie; reduced duplication, led to cost savings while increasing quality and generated new resources.

The VAC is situated within SETSAN as a “working group” mandated to focus on food security issues and to conduct the recent rolling surveys that essentially became the dominant focus of SETSAN for their duration. Among other things the NVAC is tasked with facilitating capacity building among technical staff and collaborative partners at all levels in food security and nutrition assessment. Other working groups are charged with developing policy for national use that draws on the combined, multi-agency research processes undertaken within SETSAN. The characteristics of a successful working group are shared needs and objectives, agreed goals and outputs, labour saving in terms of recognizing that members have full time jobs, access to resources and a good working environment.

Conclusion

The paper has raised some critical questions on “multi-linked networks and their multiple nodes and entry points” and such systems’ ability to incorporate a varied stakeholder involvement in assessing and managing activities (Cash, 2000). It also emphasizes the importance of CSOs as part of the food security policy subsystem. Policy subsystems can effectively provide forums such as this inaugural meeting, where actors discuss policy issues through dialogue with other network actors according to their interests in food and nutrition security. This kind of interaction involves various institutional arrangements

surrounding the policy process and affects how actors eventually perceive and pursue their interests and ideas (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995).

Particular lessons can be drawn from this analysis of the different cases dealing with issues of food and nutrition security policy in the SADC region. An important lesson from these cases is that issues such as institutional formations as they relate to the research-policy interface, as part of food security and adaptation are equally critical as they form the foundation for influencing policy options. In order for such systems to be effective CSOs together with all the other actors need to assist in “building sustained and adaptive networked relationships” between research-based and decision-making arenas, within and across levels and sectors.

A reconfiguration and transformation of the institutional formation in a manner that reflects the evolving conceptual understanding of food and nutrition security risks could lead towards better adaptation and policy responses in the region. It is only through sufficient and collaborative inquiry that a locally owned “science” that is research-based can be created (Holloway, 2003) and that some natural formation of linkages within science and policy can effectively take place in producing and translating knowledge as inputs into the policy cycle. Essentially, the nature of the institutional formation that produces this information, when efficient and integrated, lends value and weight to the information and ensures that CSOs’ evidence is adopted and acted on in the development of sustainable food and nutrition systems.

Ultimately, CSOs have to rise up to the challenge of creating a new social contract with society that reflects the complexity and diversity of the food and nutrition security imperative in southern Africa.

Request for comments

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