

**ASSURING FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN AFRICA BY 2020:  
Prioritizing Action, Strengthening Actors, and Facilitating Partnerships**  
April 1–3, 2004, Kampala, Uganda

**SUMMARY NOTE**

**Parallel Session:**     **Priorities for Action: Perspectives from Southern Africa**

**Panelist:**            *Johann Frederick Kirsten*, Professor and Head, Department of Agricultural Economics, Extension, and Rural Development, University of Pretoria, South Africa

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Agriculture, industry and trade have experienced a serious crisis in Africa since 1980. This crisis can be traced back to the three pillars of the Washington Consensus, namely, fiscal austerity, privatization and market liberalization as well as the related debt crisis in Africa. In Southern Africa climatic shocks such as recent floods in Mozambique and the 2002 drought in most countries in southern Africa added an additional reality contributing to short-term food security crises.

The February 2004 SADC Food Security Update summaries the Southern African food security as follows: *“The combined effect of poor rains and reduced area planted to main crops is likely to result in a crop harvest that is lower than last season’s output of 22.93 million tons. The SADC region will therefore not be able to cover its cereal requirement for the 2004/2005 marketing year. The current food security situation remains poor in most Member States with the number of households running out of food continuing to increase as the region enters its lean period before the next main harvest”*.

This clearly indicates that urgent action is required. In trying to list “priorities for action” I am, however, weary of falling in the trap of just listing items that we all know and which often appear at the end of a presentation or in the conclusion chapter of a thesis or research publication, i.e. good governance, funding for agricultural research and extension, investment in infrastructure, access to credit, input and output markets, etc. It is very easy to fall in such a trap as Steve Omamo has recently shown in his 2003 paper (Omamo, 2003). He argued that agricultural policy advice in Africa has generally provided these stereotype solutions without understanding reality and without determining why markets and systems are imperfect and not functioning. Before one therefore identify priorities for action there is thus a much greater need and thus a much greater priority to rather focus more on the ‘how’ and ‘at what cost’ questions related to policy design and identifying priorities. Case studies and networking analysis can very effectively be utilized to highlight the institutional architecture of sub sectors by also showing how different actors behave or make decisions. These aspects are often very critical in identifying the most appropriate actions for achieving food and nutrition security.

It is in this line that I argue that “politics”, at community level, within local and national government, in parliament, and within business, is often responsible for markets to be imperfect and for the non-delivery of key elements for the functioning of systems, institutions, markets and the creation of business opportunities. Much of the challenges of food security and nutrition can be met if all role players and stakeholders are committed to a common vision and a strategy to achieve these goals of food security. Ensuring that all stakeholders (government departments, politicians, farmers unions and their leaders, traders, agribusiness, community leaders) are committed to achieving the vision of a continent free of hunger and food secure would be one of the first priorities for action. Having the political will and commitment are sometimes necessary for the interventions that would be mentioned here at this conference would bear any fruit. The internalisation by all stakeholders of the same vision and same strategic plans would go a long way in assuring food and nutrition security in Africa by 2020.

In an endeavor to highlight specific priorities for action it is true to say that increasing domestic agricultural production remains indeed the main vehicle to reduce food insecurity in countries — including several in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) — in which agriculture is still one of the leading contributors to gross domestic product (GDP). In our effort to design policies and programs for this objective it will be a priority to first establish and understand why domestic agricultural production is failing. What are the factors inhibiting commercial production should be probably understood and quite often it goes beyond the obvious and relate more to institutional, sociological, human behavior, political and other ‘softer’ issues which policy analysts usually ignore in their assessments.

The needs of poorer and most destitute groups can effectively be addressed through vegetable and fruit gardens, which have a particularly important role in improving the flow and composition of nutrition. But, additional spending geared to this end should be carefully balanced against alternative approaches, such as boosting welfare grants or delivering more food parcels, both indispensable short-term measures. Investment in agriculture should yield sustained benefits in the long run, but it will take an equally sustained commitment on the part of the public sector to expenditure and institutional restructuring to achieve it. Reducing the constraints on food production faced by low-income households and convincing them of the returns to be had from devoting more of their own resources to agriculture is not a short-term task. Various support systems and information is necessary to create a conducive framework from which productive agricultural activities will flow spontaneously.

Beyond measures to raise income and agricultural output, there is a need for systems, both proactive and reactive, to address acute food insecurity brought on by disasters such as drought, floods and political instability. Accessibility is a critical consideration. Though vulnerability assessment, advance warning and emergency distribution systems are all now being developed, they are still in their infancy. As clearly identifiable public goods — or services — with obvious positive externalities, these should be high priorities for public spending to accelerate their development. But the challenge posed by this group of needs extends well beyond the allocation of additional fiscal resources: more than money, it requires closer communication, coordination and collaboration between government at all levels and between government, NGOs and the private sector.

It is well known that low-income households are particularly vulnerable to price increases, especially the kinds of sudden — and often quite sustained — increase that are not compensated for to some degree by a rise in nominal income. The incidence of such increases has grown markedly over the past decade with the deregulation of agricultural markets and the exceptional volatility of the South African currency affecting food markets in the whole region. It is therefore a priority to consider the merits of a regional grain exchange or a strategic grain reserve to counter sharp increases and fluctuations in the prices of staple commodities. Whether grain reserves is the best way in achieving this remains a hotly contested debate.

In conclusion it can be argued that in a region — such as Southern Africa where development issues are a high priority it would make sense to try and twin disaster management and development wherever possible. Some shorter-term actions, including relief efforts and preparedness can be suggested as priority actions. These are essential, particularly when food stress is heightened by events such as floods and drought conditions. In the medium-term, however, such actions need to be complemented with a longer-term, risk-reduction approach. This will require serious investments in developing the capacity of public institutions, government and the public (the interfaces between these), research support, appropriate data collection and use (in many cases these data are collected but are not effectively shared by various groups); and enhancing analytical capacity for strategy development (e.g., vulnerability assessments, a livelihoods information system, etc.).

Finally, it should be added that efficiently functioning transport networks are important to any competitive economy, and are the key to a successful food security strategy. The gradual movement to road transport of most grains because of poor efficiency (slow turn around time, limited number of trucks) of the rail network in the region has contributed to increased costs of raw material at the mill door or factory gate. The high costs of road transport especially between South Africa and its neighbors also affect food security in the region on a more macro scale. Improving the logistical aspects related to rail and road transport in southern Africa should therefore also be an important priority for action.

#### References:

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Omamo, S. W. 2003. Policy research on African agriculture: Trends, gaps and challenges. ISNAR Research Report 21. The Hague: ISNAR.

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