

Human Vulnerability and Food Insecurity: Policy Implications

Questions for the e-Discussion

We suggest that discussion on vulnerability is structured according to a number of broad headings. There is necessarily some overlap between these, and with issues addressed under other themes. Under each heading we suggest questions to consider, but these are intended to be more illustrative than exhaustive with respect to that topic. The headings enable the discussion to converge towards a synthesis at the end of the period for discussion, as well as providing useful break-points for summary and feedback.

1. Defining vulnerability in the southern African context

Discussion: 12 & 13 June 2003

The paper begins by setting out a definition of vulnerability as ‘exposure and sensitivity to livelihood shocks’ (from Devereux, 2002) or ‘living on the edge’. The purpose of these questions is to explore vulnerability concepts especially with respect to the livelihood circumstances of vulnerable people in rural and urban southern Africa:

- 1.1 how useful is the idea of ‘living on the edge’ for understanding vulnerability?
- 1.2 it is usually thought that vulnerability itself is not measurable; only indirect indicators and trends can indicate rising vulnerability. Are there specific indicators that in your view capture the idea of vulnerability better than others?
- 1.3 much of the discussion on vulnerability in southern Africa has focused on rural vulnerability. How serious do you think vulnerability is in urban areas, and what are the main indications that urban populations may be vulnerable to acute failures to secure enough food?
- 1.4 are there specific urban populations in particular countries that you consider to be highly vulnerable?

2. Balance of factors contributing to rising vulnerability in the region

Discussion: 14-15 June 2003 (summary on Mon 16 June)

The paper suggests four principal broad scale causes of rising vulnerability in the southern African region:

- a. growth failures, rising poverty and declining migration options
 - b. market failures in the context of market liberalisation
 - c. the high incidence and continuing spread of HIV/AIDS
 - d. politics and governance factors, at regional, national and local levels
- 2.1 do you think these four between them cover most of the long term factors causing rising vulnerability, or are there other factors (or groups of factors) that are not adequately covered in this list?

- 2.2 amongst those four factors, what is your ranking as to the most important ones in rural areas, and why?
- 2.3 and which are the most important ones in urban areas, and why?
- 2.4 political and governance factors causing rising vulnerability are particularly difficult to bring out into the open. Are there ways you can think of to make these factors (a) more specific, and (b) open for policy discussion in government circles, or between donors and governments?

3. Contribution of emerging policy frameworks for reducing vulnerability

Discussion: 16-17 June 2003

An emerging policy framework that binds donors and governments is provided by Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Donors are also very keen on democratic decentralisation of government, which they often build into PRSP funding priorities. This section concerns your views on the adequacy (or otherwise) of this new policy framework for reversing rising vulnerability in the region.

- 3.1 for any PRSP with which you are familiar, do you consider that its main objectives and spending priorities are likely to make a great deal of difference to patterns and trends of vulnerability in particular countries?
- 3.2 to what extent do you think PRSPs grasp the cross-sectoral nature of both rural and urban livelihoods, and do they contain provisions or priorities that facilitate economic mobility?
- 3.3 for any country (or group of countries) with which you are familiar how far has the government got in considering or implementing decentralisation policies? is this something that governments want to do, or are they being pressured by donors to do it?
- 3.4 give your preliminary view on decentralisation as a means to promote decreasing vulnerability for any country or rural area or urban area with which you are familiar?
- 3.5 overall, what are your thoughts about the PRSP-decentralisation policy framework and its prospects for bringing about radical change in the economic and political fortunes of southern African countries? and specifically, for reversing currently adverse vulnerability trends?

4. Role and scope of vulnerability assessments in 2001-03 and beyond

Discussion: 18-19 June 2003

The southern African countries have an apparently workable famine early warning system (FEWS). Vulnerability assessment methods (CVAs and VAMs) are increasingly utilised both in support of that system, or as standalone exercises designed to gauge short and long term trends in vulnerability, esp. in rural populations.

- 4.1 what were the defects in your view of the vulnerability information available at the time that a crisis began to unfold for some rural populations in 2001?

- 4.2 how much was data availability at fault as the crisis developed in 2001-2002, and how much of the subsequent substantial food gap arose due to unhelpful behaviours by governments or donors or both?
- 4.3 are there improvements in vulnerability assessment methods, or in the integration of different types of information that would prove valuable for avoiding future crises of this kind?
- 4.4 are you happy with the institutional and organisational structures within which food security information systems are embedded, or could these be improved?
- 4.5 how can vulnerability assessment methods be expanded to take into account some of the long term contextual factors that are discussed in Section 2 above?

5. Levers for reducing vulnerability in the future

Discussion and feedback: 19-20 June 2003

The e-discussion should end with a synthesis of contributors' ideas about ways of reducing vulnerability in the future. These ways may be short term responsive levers, or long term policy changes that could help to reduce vulnerability.

Please make a list of 3-5 things that occur to you that could help to reduce vulnerability in a particular country or in southern Africa in general.

E-discussion closes afternoon 20 June 2003