
HOUSEHOLD AND NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA



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OFFICIAL OPENING

FAMILY HEALTH AND FOOD SECURITY

Professor Walter J. Kamba¹

INTRODUCTION

It is with great pleasure that I come here this morning to open the University of Zimbabwe *Fourth Annual Conference on Food Security Research in Southern Africa*. I am pleased to report again this year that the conference agenda has been prepared in close cooperation with SADCC member states in cooperation with Zimbabwe's Ministry of Agriculture--the coordinator of SADCC's food security programme.

SADCC member states have a critical role to play in food security planning and research because of the diversity and complexity of the agro-ecologies and the political priorities in our region. This diversity and complexity requires grass roots and national-level participation in food security debates. These national efforts should fulfill national goals as well as contribute to regional cooperation and solidarity.

There is convincing evidence that there are multiple paths to achieving food security. In practice, this means we must move beyond simple slogans such as "food self-sufficiency" and "food self-reliance" and address the overall policy question:

What is the most cost-effective mix of domestic food production, storage, trade, and/or food aid to meet national and regional food security objectives in both the short- and long-run?

To generate the knowledge base to answer this overarching policy question, each SADCC state must develop its own in-house food security policy analysis capability in government ministries and local universities. This annual conference serves as a mechanism to ensure that national research findings are reviewed by SADCC's food security teams.

Let me comment on the role of tradition that lies behind this annual food security conference. The purpose of this annual conference is to bring together social and technical scientists and SADCC civil servants to generate a climate of debate on research findings, policy approaches, and new research themes that should be pursued.

The fourth conference builds on the tradition of the first three conferences--namely, that "building excellence in national research capacity comes through experience".

In practice, this means pursuing research day-after-day, year-after-year, and reporting the results in an open forum in order that researchers can benefit from the

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comparative experience of policy makers, scholars, and practitioners in other countries.

This exchange creates tension and intensity and helps explain why this conference is regarded as stimulating and productive.

IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY HEALTH

Last year, I spoke on the theme, "building research capacity and cooperation in SADCC universities." This year, I would like to address a related theme--"family health and food security."

In the first eight years of SADCC's action programme, food security has rightfully concentrated on food production, storage, and trade. It is now time, in my judgement, for researchers and policymakers assembled here to launch an ambitious and long-term action research programme on family health and food security. This research is needed, especially in dry areas where the majority of rural families reside.

In calling for an ambitious and long-term research programme on family health and food security, I am repeating the case that plant scientists have made for the last century--namely, that it takes about a decade to develop, test, and release a new maize variety. To address the question, why are 20 to 30 percent of the children in SADCC underweight for age, one cannot expect even the most gifted researchers to answer this question through a conventional three-year research grant from local sources or an international foundation.

Why should researchers pursue in-depth village level research on family food insecurity? The following facts speak for themselves.

- o Hunger and food insecurity in Africa are huge and intractable problems. In the long run--30 to 40 years--raising per capita incomes is a powerful means of solving the hunger and food insecurity problems. But what do we do in the next three, five, and ten years?
- o Africa's poverty is a central cause of malnutrition and family food insecurity. The poverty of Africa is illustrated by a simple statistic: in 1985 the total gross national product (GNP) of the 450 million people in the 45 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa was slightly less than the total GNP of Australia, a nation of some 16 million.
- o Since 70 percent of the people in Africa live in rural areas, it follows that raising the income of rural people across the board is a prerequisite for reducing malnutrition and food insecurity.
- o Family food insecurity is a problem throughout Africa and in the SADCC region. About a quarter of Africa's population--more than 100 million people--do not consume enough food for an active and normal life.
- o Family food insecurity has multiple causes ranging from poverty, drought, disease, and lack of land, resources, and jobs to produce food and/or income to purchase an adequate diet.
- o Family food insecurity problems are especially acute for female-headed households where traditional government services are lagging behind those serving male farmers. We in the SADCC region, as well as in other parts of

Africa, have been slow to grasp the need for research and action programmes to address women and food security.

- o Many rural families are net food buyers. Therefore, simply raising the farm-level price of maize may benefit larger farmers who are net maize sellers while imposing a hardship on many rural families who purchase maize.
- o Since family food insecurity has multiple causes, there is no single action programme that can solve these problems.

Without question, raising farm prices, introducing a new maize variety, setting up a nutrition clinic, or launching a measles vaccination programme will ultimately fail to end hunger because *each* intervention by itself is *limited!* It is obvious that a new research approach is needed to address family health and food security.

NEED FOR A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Mr. Chairman, I propose that food security researchers from agriculture, geography, economics, and nutrition gathered here this week join forces with medical researchers and lay out an action research programme on family health, nutrition, and family food security.

To help communicate with the public, I propose a simple title--"family health and food security". Nevertheless, behind this title lies the need for equal participation of academic staff from our faculties of medicine, agriculture, and social sciences in the SADCC region. But to tackle the broad and complex topic of family food insecurity, researchers must lay a careful foundation. Because of the complexity of this topic, field research must be preceded by an intensive effort to develop a basic understanding among members of different academic disciplines.

Some hard questions must be resolved in a research programme on family health and food security. These questions and puzzles include the following:

- o Who are the food insecure families? Are they consuming the food - e.g., sorghum and millet--that they produce or are they producing cash crops such as cotton?
- o Where are the food insecure located? Are they in the dry zones? What resources do they lack?
- o Because diarrheal infection and poor diets can cause malnutrition, what are cost-effective ways to improve water, health services, and basic nutrition education?
- o What are new sources of income in rural areas to allow families to find part-time work in slack periods?
- o What institutions need to be changed to allow female-headed farm households to gain access to credit, extension, and other resources?
- o How can resources be mobilized to generate new and permanent employment and income-generating activities within the rural areas?

Many of these puzzles are country-specific and require country-specific action research teams. No single team from SADCC's food security project can expect to unravel these puzzles. But working together, I am confident that researchers in this region can help solve some of these fundamental problems over the coming decade.

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Turning to this week's conference, I am pleased to note that nutritionists from Zambia and Zimbabwe are on the programme, but no medical researchers are with us this week? A challenge for the 1989 annual conference is to assemble the full range of applied and theoretical scientists that are necessary for multi-disciplinary research on family health and food security.

I also note that University of Botswana researchers will be reporting on Botswana's successful effort to break the famine cycle during the five-year drought from 1982 to 1987. While the drought was the longest continuous drought in the past 60 years, no one died of hunger or famine during this period.

I am pleased to note that increasing attention is being given to nutrition in the SADCC region. For example, the Third Africa Food and Nutrition Congress held here in Harare in September had its theme "Nutrition and Food Security". It brought together nutritionists, medical researchers and practitioners, agriculturalists, social scientists, and the policymakers. The dialogue has to continue.

AN EVOLVING FOOD SECURITY RESEARCH NETWORK

Last year, I noted that the third annual conference featured researchers from the University of Dar es Salaam, University of Malawi, University of Zambia, and Michigan State. This year I am pleased to report that academic staff from the above universities will be joined by researchers from the Sokoine University in Tanzania and the University of Swaziland.

I am also pleased to note that a follow-up to the third conference included a University of Zambia initiative to invite researchers from Tanzania to share their research findings with policymakers in Zambia.

In summary, I have stressed a simple but fundamental theme. It is time to bring nutritionists, food scientists, and medical researchers into food security research as equal partners with agriculturalists and social scientists.

I am confident that research on family health and food security can supplement and reinforce the excellent studies now under way on national food security policy options in the SADCC region.

It is my sincere hope that your deliberations in this conference will be even more fruitful than the three previous conferences.

It is on that note that I have the pleasure and honour to declare this conference officially open.



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