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Zimbabwe, Factor 17: Good Governance

Zimbabwe's Food Crisis: How we can restore the former breadbasket of Africa

Since its independence from England in 1980, Zimbabwe has become increasingly desperate regarding food security and agriculture. The southeastern African nation, once known as the “breadbasket of Africa”, saw the advent of a declining economy when detrimental land reforms were put into place beginning in the early 1990s. These reforms ultimately led to the degradation of overall agricultural productivity, soil quality and ultimately, food security. Now, the world knows Zimbabwe as a poor African country plagued by a crippled economy and serious food shortages. How did Zimbabwe's flourishing agricultural presence shift to a national food crisis? Some of the reasons include erratic rain patterns, ineffective agricultural practices, weak diplomatic relations and poor governance.

The population of Zimbabwe today stands at 14.5 million, with 66 percent of population involved in agricultural occupations as their primary source of both food and income (*The World Factbook*). That being said, quite a large portion of Zimbabweans are raising their families on farms. Many rely on subsistence farming to put food on the table and to provide for their daily needs. Subsistence farming is a self-sufficiency agricultural method in which the farmers grow enough crops for the primary purpose of feeding their families: there is little to no intent for the crops to be used for surplus trade (“Subsistence Agriculture”). According to Patience Samhutsa, a seasoned professional who has studied the effects of Zimbabwe's agricultural practices for over a decade, subsistence farmers face a variety of challenges when they have surplus crops to sell. Many are unable to sell their crops due to poor infrastructure and limited marketing necessities (Samhutsa). The government sets the prices and there are typically no guarantees that the farmers will receive payment for the crops they sell to the government controlled Grain Marketing Board. This widely accepted unethical practice is a clear indication of how poor governance has contributed to food insecurity in Zimbabwe as farmers are often reluctant to sell their much needed grain.

While the greater farming community faces many challenges in Zimbabwe, women subsistence farmers in Zimbabwe are especially at a disadvantage. The prevailing attitudes about women and their supposed place in society exacerbate this issue. Veneranda Langa of “News Day interviewed a rural woman farmer and discovered the challenges they face. Benenia Jeche is a 39 year old single female living in the rural areas of Chiendambuya. Benenia's story illustrates how real people try to make it under the current conditions. Subsistence farming is her only source of income (Langa). In an interview with Langa, Jeche shares, “I am stuck because as a rural woman farmer I do not have the resources to do bigger farming projects and make more money” (Langa). Jeche also went into detail on the environmental factors that play into her tough situation. She continued, “My income is too little because it depends on seasons” (Langa). Like many other African countries, Zimbabwe's dry season wreaks havoc on farmers' crops. The issues for rural dwellers like Jeche go far beyond environmental unpredictability. The Grain Marketing Board (GMB) is a parastatal, grain trade and marketing company. They purchase grain and other crops from both commercial and subsistence farmers in Zimbabwe (Satumba). Jeche also states in her interview that in 2014 she sold four tons of maize to the Grain Marketing Board, but they still hadn't paid her for the maize over a year later (Langa). From Jeche's interview, it is clear that farmers cannot

continue to produce crops without receiving compensation. The government has the responsibility to support its people and to treat them fairly.

It is important to note that unnecessary federal spending has exacerbated some of the infrastructure issues. In 1998, President Robert Mugabe made the controversial decision to intervene in the Democratic Republic of Congo's civil war (Bradley and Ingham). "This action wreaked havoc on the economy; it caused the country to spend hundreds of millions of dollars, money that the poor country could not afford to spend." In addition, Zimbabwe also lost a significant amount of much needed international aid that had sustained the country for many years. (Bradley and Ingham). From these facts, we can conclude that poor governance is at the core of Zimbabwe's food crisis. In order for Zimbabwe to position itself for international aid, diplomatic relations with the international community have to improve. While international aid is not in itself a panacea, it can be part of a comprehensive suite of potential solutions.

Another pressing issue in Zimbabwe is the lack of advanced farming equipment and machinery. In an interview with Gertrude Satumba, a Zimbabwean immigrant whose family was involved in subsistence farming, Gertrude shares her experiences growing up on a farm in Zimbabwe. She says, "A typical subsistence farm family has less than 5 acres of land in a rural area. Generally they grow maize, tomatoes, legumes, greens, and various other crops. On our farm, we raised chickens, goats, and cattle. We used simple tools for harvesting, which included sickles and cow-drawn plows" (Satumba). Satumba provided strong examples of Zimbabwe's primitive agricultural techniques. When I asked how these technologies affected harvesting productivity, her response was: "Everything was hard and slow because everything was manual. The entire family would chip in to plow and weed, but we couldn't cover much ground" (Satumba). The inefficiency in Zimbabwe's agricultural system is due to a lack of innovative farming practices and equipment. Because the government has not invested adequate money in educating farmers and introducing new technologies, many Zimbabwean subsistence farmers continue to struggle. They are simply not able to be very productive given the lack of education and technology to enhance efficiencies. In my discussion with Grace Chimbetete, a permanent resident of Zimbabwe, we discussed the current status of Zimbabwean subsistence farmers. Chimbetete says, "Subsistence farmers are among the poorest citizens in Zimbabwe. They are unsupported and the government continues to ignore them" (Chimbetete). Grace Chimbetete's description of Zimbabwe's agricultural status today emphasizes how the government's negligence has played a key role in this cycle of poverty. The government could enhance farmers' productivity by providing small loans to purchase tractors and other machinery. Alternatively, the government could train farmers on how to collectively purchase tractors and share them. This model would work well in a culture where cooperative ownership is commonplace.

Environmental challenges pose a serious threat to Zimbabwe's subsistence farmers, major improvements in government operations could be key in helping Zimbabwe get back on her feet. The government needs to become more involved in finding economic and environmental solutions. They should first invest in cutting edge research to determine the best crops to grow under the current conditions. It is clear that rain patterns have changed, and that the crops that thrived fifty years ago would not be ideal at this point. Individual subsistence farmers are just not sophisticated enough to figure this out. The government would need to invest in the research and education of farmers. This type of investment could pay major dividends, as farmers would become more productive. As farmers become more efficient, they free up more time to invest in taking courses to improve their farming practices. With a dry season lasting 6 months and extended droughts, Zimbabwe's government should also invest in irrigation technologies as well. Many farmers lose an entire season's crop to drought. Without irrigation systems, these farmers are

at the mercy of the weather, which is erratic at best. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, a sprinkling system called “micro-irrigation” or “drip system” is a very effective device for watering crops. This is because they “deliver low volumes of water directly to plants' roots, minimizing losses to wind, runoff, evaporation, or overspray. Drip irrigations systems use 20 to 50 percent less water than conventional pop-up sprinkler systems and can save up to 30,000 gallons per year” (Water-Saving Technologies”). Drip systems would work well in Zimbabwe because of their ability to have the water sent straight to the roots. With the 6-month-long dry season, Zimbabwe faces issues with evaporation of water as the sun beats down on the fields. Given that the average farmer makes a few dollars a month, this type of system can only be purchased with the help of a loan from the government or donations from the international community.

The government should also invest in education. Many of Zimbabwe’s farmers work with little to no formal education about agriculture. They are unaware of the effects of erratic rains, climate change, and other weather-related factors that are affecting crop productivity. Many farmers do not even understand how to rotate crops to maximize yields. According to the National Curriculum Workshop on Agriculture and Education, there is an urgent need to mainstream climate change education, climate-smart agriculture, and other issues, into Zimbabwe’s agricultural colleges. Although Zimbabwe has made efforts to educate some farmers, current curricula fail to include methods of combating unpredictable weather (“Developing a Climate-Smart Manual”). Furthermore this education is not widely available to rural subsistence farmers. The government of Zimbabwe should therefore make agricultural education widely available to all farmers and ensure that climate change and its effects on crop yield are thoroughly addressed as a key issue. According to the Climate Technology Centre and Network, knowledge and awareness of climate’s effect of agriculture increases agricultural productivity and incomes (“Developing a Climate-Smart Manual”). If Zimbabwean farmers are knowledgeable of the impact of the environment, they will be better equipped for cultivating the land with the changing climate and erratic rains. In the same vein, it would be highly beneficial for farmers to be trained as small business owners. This is important because they would be trained to understand inputs, costs and revenues. They would learn to work toward a profit by increasing revenues and reducing costs. This would help to increase family incomes and lift communities out of poverty.

In addition to making investments in the agriculture sector, promoting ethics in the government system will also help to directly address the food security issues in Zimbabwe. The government of Zimbabwe is known as one of the most corrupt in the world. It is not uncommon for aid intended for the poorest citizens to be diverted for personal use by government officials. This has contributed to the dwindling international aid. The self-serving culture of greed on the highest levels creates conditions that are difficult for both domestic and foreign investment. In the past, there have been seed and fertilizer donations that never reached the intended recipients. The entire system is fraught with corruption. As stated earlier, subsistence farmers sell their occasional leftover crop to a parastatal organization called the Grain Marketing Board. Gertrude Satumba says that when buying from farmers, the GMB “dictates prices, does not allow farmers to negotiate prices, and delays payment to the farmers. “Sometimes they never receive their money” (Satumba). Basically, the subsistence farmer families may work for an entire growing season in the fields and sometimes the government decides not to pay them. It is a form of modern day slavery” The government needs to promote ethics and integrity in this trading system. Zimbabwe’s core issue concerning ethics in governance is the absence of the rule of law. “It is so corrupt,” says Satumba, “that the government officials are above the law”.

In the upcoming decades, there will be more people living in the rural areas due to a continuous decrease in urban migration. This means that most of the population growth is taking place in rural Zimbabwe.

According to Statista, the urban population of Zimbabwe decreases steadily- from 34.1% in 2005 to 32.4% in 2015 (“Zimbabwe- Urbanization”). In contrast, the rural population of Zimbabwe is gradually increasing. According to Index Mundi, Zimbabwe’s rural population jumped from 8.5 million in 2005 to 10.5 million in 2015. With this trend of increasing rural populations the government will have more of a burden on their shoulders to combat the challenges in the fields. As the rural population continues to grow, so will the pressure on the land. In the 1980s, Zimbabwe experienced a wave of urban migration as the new government regime brought a lot of hope for an increase in job opportunities in the urban areas. As unemployment has surpassed 90%, many find that subsistence farming is their only source for survival. With this increase in demand for rural land, local chiefs now find themselves resolving land related disputes. As the population increases, there is now an urgent need to address the increased farming demands. If Zimbabwe’s government does not take the rapid population growth into account, the next ten years will bring a lot of uncertainty for many farmers. It is not only an economic issue, but a political issue that could create a lot of unrest if not addressed appropriately and in a timely manner. The government needs to have clear policies on land distribution -policies that are fair and that will promote healthy productive communities.

International organizations, in collaboration with the Zimbabwe government, have a critical role to play in restoring Zimbabwe to self-sufficiency. According to the United Nations, the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) is currently combating food crises in Malawi, Zambia, and Vietnam by promoting climate-smart agriculture. Climate-smart agriculture is defined as, “an approach that seeks to make changes in farming systems that achieve multiple goals: such as fighting social issues like hunger and poverty, and environmental issues such as reducing emissions (“Climate- Smart Agriculture”). The FAO has started a plan that aims to strengthen the technical, policy, and investment capacities of these three countries, which will enable sustainable increases in agricultural productivity (“Climate-Smart Agriculture”). The three countries have reaped great benefits from this project. The tasks of FAO’s climate-smart agriculture plan include: 1) Promoting integration of national climate change and agricultural strategies to support the implementation of climate-smart agriculture and 2) Identifying innovative mechanisms for linking climate finance with climate-smart agriculture investments. The UN and FAO could easily incorporate Zimbabwe into this project. Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are all in the same geographical vicinity, so add Zimbabwe would be seamless. This innovative plan could be very effective in improving food security in Zimbabwe. If the UN could include Zimbabwe in this plan, it could mean an agricultural milestone for the country.

In conclusion, promoting good governance is the key to improving food security in Zimbabwe. The country as a whole must transform and become solution-oriented in order to combat the hunger and poverty faced by subsistence farmers and rural families. The government must become more involved in order for change to occur. Governance cannot be considered good unless the government is investing in solutions to a country’s problems. Federal spending should go towards new tools that will aid the farmers in yielding more crops. Government funds should also go to education: the farmers of Zimbabwe are currently not educated on the effects of environmental factors such as climate change on their fields. Books and various other resources should be distributed to the farmers so that they can develop knowledge about how the world around them affects their crops; and how they can act accordingly. Ethics should be promoted in the government in order to ensure that trading between the farmers and parastatals is done with integrity. The Grain Marketing Board should not be permitted to dictate the prices of the crops they purchase from the farmers, and the farmers should be paid always and on time. Organizations such as the United Nations and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN should incorporate Zimbabwe into their food-crisis plans. These organizations have been strategically creating ways to combat hunger for decades. Unfortunately, because of Zimbabwe’s political climate, and the international community’s disdain for their policies, Zimbabwe has been cast into obscurity. Again, this is why

Zimbabwe's government itself is critical for any future international collaboration. Zimbabwe will not see change if her leaders are unwilling to abandon their ineffective governing system: and adopt policies by receiving influence from first world countries. In order for the recovery plan to include international collaboration, there must be multiple nations working together. It is the global community's obligation to overlook Zimbabwe's offenses in the interest of achieving a greater good for its people. And finally, the people of Zimbabwe must stand up for the food-producers of their nation and represent themselves in the political processes. Both the rural and the urban populations will need to fight for democracy. They must fight the corruption and stand for good, ethical, inclusive governance that will benefit the country as a whole. Zimbabwe cannot perform this feat on her own. She needs the support of international organizations to be included in projects that will lead to her repair. If the government of Zimbabwe can invest in innovative technologies and education, emulate the success of other countries that strive to be ethical, and have the rural families advocate for themselves, then Zimbabwe will be well on her way to gaining back her old title: the Breadbasket of Africa.

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