Dear Friends:

In the United States the small farmer is a vanishing species, but not in Southern Africa. Most people in the region depend on farming and keeping animals for their livelihood. For governments, agriculture is a prize source of foreign exchange. In Zimbabwe, for example, exports of cotton, tea, coffee, sugar, maize and tobacco earn as much or more than chrome, nickel and other minerals. Without these earnings, Zimbabwe could not import the rubber, chemicals, spare parts and other things it needs to keep its industries going.

But agriculture in Southern Africa, as elsewhere on the continent, is in deep trouble. Production of food is just not keeping up with population growth. Every country except Swaziland has seen production per person going down in the last twenty years. Mozambique and Angola, hard hit by South African aggression, have seen their production shrink by 2% and 1.4% per year respectively in the years from 1966 to 1981. Lesotho, a mountainous country with little durable land for crops, is increasingly dependent on South Africa, a country whose racist policy it despises. It has lost 1.7% a year in food produced per head.

Part of the problem is the climate. Seventy-five percent of the area that includes the SADCC countries is semi-arid or arid. In Botswana and many other areas, less than 600 millimeters of rainfall in the usual year. The last three years have seen the worst drought in living memory devastate the region. In some areas land is being used with little regard to its future. People desperate for crops cut down trees indiscriminately. Soil drains away, silting up the water of rivers and dams needed for irrigation. Some areas which once supported crops and cattle now have become deserts. Drought diverts people and resources to relief and away from long-term solutions.
Given the crisis, many donor countries and international organizations are keen to see reforms in the SADCC* countries. The World Bank, the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) and the Nordic countries have each proposed solutions. Generally they urge emphasis on improving the productivity of the small farmer, improving the way in which the farmer gets fertilizer, advice and the way in which his or her food gets to market. They argue that the farmer must be guaranteed a good price. They say that means that food subsidies for the urban consumer must be eliminated. USAID is particularly adamant that food must be returned to the free market system.

These solutions seem over simple to policymakers in the SADCC countries. Yes, the small farmer is important but large farmers, who can produce big yields, cannot be neglected. Certainly, food prices have to be high enough to make it worthwhile for the farmer to produce. But does this mean that the real cost of living in the cities will rise so high that there will be riots and strikes as there have been in Brazil and Tunisia and the Dominican Republic where IMF dictated changes in price policy? Each country in SADCC is very cautious about what political price it is prepared to pay for such a price reform. Furthermore, it's not just SADCC that needs to improve its price policy. The international commodity system needs a change. When developed countries adopt protectionist attitudes and policies to guard their depressed industries, the effect in Africa can be disastrous. When Europe or America, for example, subsidizes its own sugar industry with quotas and tariffs, prices for African producers plunge to a point where costs can't be met.

What is SADCC prepared to do? Clearly, the present trend with population growing faster than food can be produced is unacceptable. A massive injection of money and human resources is out of the question. But a gradual approach with a mobilization of knowledge and solutions geared to the specific needs of the region and of each country is needed. The SADCC countries are clear about what they want:

- Every person, no matter rich or poor, must have his or her basic needs for food met.
- Every country must become self-sufficient in food.
- The periodic crises in food must be eliminated.

What then is being done to meet these goals? The goal that has the most obvious regional implication is the prevention of food crises. SADCC aims to create an early warning system so that the region will know in advance what crops are being produced, in what numbers and where shortages are likely to arise. Another project aims at collecting regional information, making a data bank and an inventory of agricultural resources, things that seem simple and fundamental but which have never been done before. Another SADCC study is geared toward discovering what should be done to create a food reserve. Where should these reserves be put, how big should they be? Would it be better to buy insurance against another drought and so have money to buy food from Europe or America? Another study looks at reducing post-harvest losses. How can food produced, particularly food from remote rural areas, best be preserved from animals and disease? How should it be processed and brought to market?

* (SADCC - Southern Africa Development Coordinating Conference is an organization of the nine states in Southern Africa which was founded in 1980 to lessen their dependence on South Africa.)
Under Zimbabwe's leadership, these studies are already under way. Most of them have received at least partial funding.

Another area of concern for SADCC is animal disease. Botswana, a traditional cattle country, has the responsibility for coordinating work in that area. Diseases like rinderpest, if allowed to spread, could destroy a major source of protein in the region. An outbreak has already occurred in Tanzania among wildlife. An emergency vaccination program, funded by the European Economic Community, is now underway but funds are needed to maintain the vaccination program and spread it to Malawi and Zambia. Another vaccination program is underway to eliminate foot and mouth disease in Botswana and Zimbabwe.

One of the most interesting and important set of projects which SADCC has initiated is in the field of agricultural research. The United States is very much involved in one of the four projects, a regional sorghum and millet program to be located in Matopos/Bulawayo. Sorghum and millet are traditional foods that are especially important in Southern Africa because they grow well in dry conditions. The project aims to improve the seed varieties available to farmers and to train national research staff from the different SADCC countries so that sorghum and millet production goes up. The project will also have a look at grinding and milling these grains, which are far harder to process into usable form than maize, the customary staple but which is not drought-resistant. The USAID is putting up 14.8 million but an additional 2.6 million is needed to fund participation by Mozambique, Angola and Tanzania. Another project to improve peanuts, cowpeas and field beans will probably be based in Malawi and perhaps Mozambique as well. These foods are rich in protein, yet have been rather low in yields for the region, making them decreasingly popular.

Beyond these regional projects, there are, of course, a lot of projects which are really national but which can have an impact in solving the problem of the region. Mozambique, for example, is constructing storage facilities for food with the help of Netherlands, West Germany, Japan and Denmark. The United States and Norway have greatly increased the grain storage capacity of Zimbabwe by assisting with silos and warehouses. And Zimbabwe also has over $100 million in irrigation projects under negotiation with Canada and Italy.

Much remains to be done. It is not enough simply to have a grand strategy. SADCC partners are quite aware that they need to understand better what incentives really work at the farm level; they need to study how the market works at the micro-level and to develop institutions and administrations that reduce the high cost of middlemen. Parastatal marketing bodies, for instance, once thought to be the answer to the gouging that private traders used to engage in have turned out to bring new problems of high cost, inefficiency, favoritism and corruption. In Tanzania the cooperative movement is being revived to take over the marketing of food. In many countries the role of government is being rethought. Should private enterprise play a larger role?

A key factor is the lack of trained African manpower. With short-term expatriates furnishing technical skills, staff turnover is high and erratic and projects lack continuity. Most irrigation schemes for example, are designed, built and run by short-term expatriates. While the region as a whole is well-endowed with able, highly motivated agricultural scientists, they tend to cluster in those countries like Zimbabwe that are already better endowed with financial and other resources while other countries experience a shortage. Dedicated, skilled and experienced managers are a priority for regional manpower training but such a pool of skill will not be built quickly.
For Americans it is hard to imagine the plight of African countries who cannot feed themselves. And yet to some degree, the crisis in Africa is a reflection of foreign aid policies which foster continuing dependencies: imported food, imported personnel, imported knowledge and imported sophisticated machinery. It is also clear, though, that through organizations like SADCC a strategy is emerging which expresses the needs of the African countries for independent strength through the creation of African knowledge, skill and productive capacity in that area of life which is vital to existence itself. No one lives by bread alone but without bread there is no life at all.

Ted Lockwood

NOTE: This Newsletter was originally printed as an article in Maryknoll Magazine.