Beware the Hand That Feeds You
U.S. Aid In Southern Africa

by Carol B. Thompson

Cracked earth where the Limpopo River used to flow at Chokwe in Gaza province, Mozambique

The clasped hand-shake logo showed prominently on the bag of donated corn as it rolled off the conveyor from the docked ship into the waiting truck. The United States' (U.S.) hand of friendship was once again extended to offer famine relief to Southern Africa. The countries of Southern Africa have been among the largest recipients of U.S. famine relief and thousands of lives have been saved by this aid. Yet this symbol of American generosity hides another reality: the use of aid for policy intervention, perhaps better illustrated by a clenched fist. Policies promoted by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in Southern Africa have often added to the burden of natural disasters.
“Worst Drought in this Century”

The 1992 drought has scorched fields and dried up great rivers in several countries of Southern Africa, especially Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Namibia and also, South Africa. Over 18 million people are seriously affected by the drought, requiring importation of 12 million tons of grain, compared with 2 million tons in normal years.

In Inhambane province in Mozambique, women are walking all day to fetch water. Arriving late, they stay all night before returning with the buckets on their heads to the village. Yet even this tortuous human effort will not suffice. The water is too little for cooking and washing for the family. Thirst prevails. Cholera spreads.

Zimbabwe will spend the equivalent of 10 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on famine mitigation in 1992. Grain stocks were run down to about 15 days supply and the drought reduced marketed corn to 6 percent of normal levels. By mid-year, about one-half of its 10 million population had applied for drought relief.

This severe scarcity of water and food, destroying family and government resources alike, is not simply the result of drought, but also of policy. We live in a food surplus world where no one needs to starve. Government neglect or ignorance of the best technologies may cause hardship, but starvation is often the result of overt policies and long-range planning which is not directed toward food security.

The Impact of War

The level of destitution in Mozambique results from over a decade of war financed by apartheid South Africa. The women walking for water are fortunate if they return alive to the village. Before the tenuous ceasefire in October 1992, in many parts of Mozambique, South African-backed RENAMO rebels (Mozambique National Resistance) would often attack innocent women for food or water and then abduct them as porters and sexual objects. For most of 1992, RENAMO has systematically prevented the government from opening “food corridors” to bring famine relief to those starving, yet no international outcry has condemned this policy.

Because of the destabilization in Mozambique, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated in June 1992 that 60 percent of the food aid needed armed convoys for delivery, yet also confirmed that “sufficient logistical capacity within Mozambique does exist if there is peace.” Hungry Mozambican soldiers stole food, especially on the rail line from Maputo to Zimbabwe. Yet the U.S., in contrast to other donors, refused funds for security expenditures or to feed the army.

The Impact of Economics

For several years, the U.S. has urged the Zimbabwe government to encourage farmers to diversify production to crops that can generate export earnings; rather than grow corn, they argued, high grade tobacco could be exported to purchase cheap corn. Following the logic of a policy recommended by USAID, Zimbabwe lowered prices to farmers for corn. Producer prices were allowed to plummet to the 1970 price in real terms.

In 1992 the head of the Zimbabwe Grain Producers Association remarked that over the last several years while costs rose 120 percent, the producer price of corn only rose 25 percent. “We stopped planting [corn]—from 895,000 acres to only 245,000 this year.” However, irrigated corn, not roses or tobacco, could feed people. Because of the drought, the price of corn on the international market has increased, consuming the foreign exchange earned by the cash crops.

The irony is that Zimbabwe did have a surplus of corn over several years. But the storage of surplus corn was subsidized by the government-owned Grain Marketing Board (GMB) producing a deficit in that parastatal company. Because the International Monetary Fund demanded it be run on a ‘commercial’ basis to make a profit, the marketing board exported corn to lower the high cost of storage. The failure of the rains has exposed the failure of this policy: the Grain Marketing Board will have the highest deficit ever in its history. The price of imported grain is over 200 percent of domestically grown corn. Strategic reserves of grain not only feed people in a crisis, but provide food security against inflated international prices.

The Zimbabwe government had sought more imaginative solutions to cut the expense of storing grain in a surplus year. In 1986 it proposed a triangular trade/aid package. Zimbabwe would pay for wheat it imported from the U.S. with exports of white Zimbabwean corn to Mozambique. The Zimbabwean corn would become American food aid to Mozambique. In 1987, Zimbabwe had a corn surplus of two million tons, but the U.S. agreed to Zimbabwe transferring only 7000 tons of corn to Mozambique in exchange for...
American wheat. The fact that Mozambicans prefer Zimbabwean white corn was not important, for according to a USAID official, "they will acquire a taste for yellow corn," eventually creating a market for American corn.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture resisted triangular transfers because a central aim of U.S. food aid is to reduce surplus American corn. In order to maintain high levels of production in the U.S., the government spends about $1.2 billion each year purchasing corn from American farmers and then shipping the surplus overseas as food aid. If the price of corn had not been lowered on the international market by subsidies ('dumping'), Zimbabwean corn could have earned about $25 million over three seasons.

U.S. aid policy has sought to shape not only what is produced, but by whom. After 12 years of not confiscating one acre from commercial farmers, in 1992 the Zimbabwean government passed a land reform bill allowing the government to designate land for purchase. Yet following warnings from the U.S. about lower food production by marginal farmers, the government was quick to announce that land would be allocated to those with "proven skills," making the reform not a redistribution but a consolidation of land. The 'master farmer,' not the peasant, will be able to reap the harvest. Consolidating land under larger holders pushes people off the land, and they are not finding jobs in town. Unemployment is at crisis levels (30% and higher) in much of Southern Africa. The gender bias will also be clear, as female farmers, the major food producers, lose land to title deeds given to the men. Despite decades of projects for women in development, USAID policy still fails to notice such gender bias.

**Famine Relief as Counter-Development**

American media coverage of famine relief often headlines corruption or inefficiency of local deliveries. Certainly, many make a profit during a famine; inequity increases. Corruption does divert precious grain, including special deliveries to a political party's stronghold.

But if the demand for accountability and transparency is required in distributing food, what about similar standards for the donors? USAID manages food aid as a policy with at least two agendas: an agenda to feed the hungry in Africa and an agenda to advance U.S. foreign policy goals.

For example, over the years, the U.S. has come to control millions in "counterpart funds" in Mozambique. The U.S. provides food to be sold in the local market and the recipient government deposits the money from the sales in a special account that can only be spent with U.S. agreement. During the extended crisis in Mozambique, these funds have grown to massive proportions, almost equal to the country's entire tax revenue in 1989, and they give the U.S. considerable leverage over policy.

In Mozambique the funds were used to pay the budgets of the Ministries of Agriculture and of Health. In return, the U.S. demanded changes in agricultural and health policies and has had a permanent working group in the Ministry of Agriculture. In particular, it favors the private, master farmers with trucks and other subsidies, ignoring women in the green zone cooperatives who have fed the cities throughout the war.

Drought aid is also delivered by USAID in ways which undermine existing structures in the recipient countries. The U.S. Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) sent an emergency team which replicated much of the data collected by the regional early warning system of the 10 countries of SADC (Southern African Development Community). What SADC needs instead are funds to increase its own capacity to monitor regional food security.

According to the Mozambican Finance Minister Magid Osman, 3000 foreign technicians earned $180 million in 1991, which is three times the wage bill of the entire Mozambican civil service of 100,000, including teachers and health workers. How many more could be employed if foreign aid were used to increase their skills, rather than displacing them?

One of the demands of many donors has been that recipient countries reduce the size of their civil services, to reduce government expenditures. Perhaps the donors could help by first cutting back the numbers in their own bureaucracies. USAID now has over 11,000 employees and contract staff in over 80 countries worldwide. And USAID programs appear to have their share of waste. A blue ribbon commission, appointed by President Bush, recently reported defects in accountability and management: "There is a widespread perception...that USAID programs are riddled with waste, fraud and abuse." It recommended that USAID needs "stronger internal management controls."

A central problem in USAID programs is the conflicting goals of providing famine relief and meeting the demands of members of Congress and U.S. domestic constituencies. A congressional study found 33 objectives listed for the foreign aid program. Some members of Congress recently criticized the USAID program in Mozambique for pur-
chasing more than $55 million in equipment from countries such as Japan and Germany. Congress is considering legislation to require that all aid be used only to buy U.S. goods and services. Such a policy may help non-competitive U.S. manufacturers, but is it the most efficient way to fight famine?

Feeding Apartheid?

A major tenet of U.S. foreign policy for over a decade has been 'constructive engagement' with apartheid to encourage reform, not transformation. In this drought the U.S. is now using the famine response to legitimize the DeKlerk regime. First, it tried to set up a logistical center in Johannesburg, to coordinate the massive delivery of over 12 million tons of grain to the region. The 10 members of SADC refused this apartheid control over their vital food imports, and the Logistical Advisory Center is now under the SADC Food Security Unit in Harare, Zimbabwe. The lessons the region learns from this drought will increase expertise to respond to the next natural disaster.

The donors have also been using South African ports, instead of the refurbished ports and rails of Mozambique and Tanzania. Through July 1992 over 50 percent of the grain had come via South Africa. SADC admonished the donors to use the cheaper and shorter routes from Beira and Maputo, Mozambique and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The ports have proven their efficiency and can handle millions of tons over the year. The World Food Program has agreed to send more ships to the SADC ports. It remains to be seen whether the U.S., the major food donor, complies.

As the neighbors coordinated their appeal for international aid, Malawi and Zimbabwe included the needs of over 1.5 million Mozambican refugees in their countries. They are welcome guests even in the midst of a drought. In contrast, the response of the apartheid government has been to turn the electric fence along the border with Mozambique back on to 'low voltage,' so it 'only' burns and scars. Over the last decade higher voltage has murdered more than 900 people, more than those who died at the notorious Berlin Wall. The apartheid government does not provide Mozambicans with legal refugee status, a clear abrogation of international law. As a result, many abuses occur. For instance, journalists inside South Africa report that destitute Mozambican women are being sold as slaves to South Africans, for about $50.

Conclusion

At the UN/SADC Geneva donor conference in June 1992, every penny the U.S. gave to the region was "tied" to American goods and expertise. In contrast, the Scandinavians gave with no strings attached. The binding strings of USAID require political, as well as food, supplication. Like missionaries a century ago who created 'rice Christians' in Asia by offering food to the starving who converted, the U.S. is trying to buy 'yellow corn allies.'

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