10 Strengthening Institutional Safety Nets in South Africa: Sharing Operation Hunger's Insights and Experiences

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Poverty and malnutrition are significant problems in South Africa. The vast majority of poor people in the country are black and live in rural areas (RDP 1995; SALDRU 1994). Unemployment in South Africa is extremely high, female-headed households and black children are particularly vulnerable, and basic services are inadequate.[1] The poorest segments of South African society are overwhelmingly dependent upon a mix of social pensions, remittances, low wages, piece jobs, and, to a small extent, agricultural production. The nutritional situation in South Africa is as alarming. Estimates vary, but it is generally recognized that the levels of stunting among the poorest in South Africa are between 30 and 40 percent of children below the age of five years, while between 20 and 35 percent of children in the same age range are considered underweight (RDP 1995, 23; Breslin 1994a).[2]

To make matters worse, institutionalized safety nets in South Africa are weak and fragmented and do not necessarily help vulnerable South Africans overcome their poverty. In fact, the dominant model for institutional safety nets may rescue vulnerable people from outright destitution only to enmesh them in a web of persistent poverty. This model often aims to deliver

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1. The poverty rate for black South African children is more than 70 percent, the unemployment rate among the poorest quintile is 53 percent, and more than 80 percent of the most vulnerable people in the country do not have access to electricity, piped water, or modern sanitation (RDP 1995, 13–14, 27).

2. These figures refer to the number of children who fall below the third centile height-for-age (stunted) and weight-for-age (underweight). Although not all of these children are necessarily stunted or underweight, the disproportionately high numbers of children in these categories indicate widespread nutritional problems.

the greatest quantity of goods and services to the greatest number of people at the lowest possible cost. The impact of these programs on recipients' capacity to overcome poverty is the topic of this chapter.

The chapter draws on Operation Hunger's considerable experience with poverty alleviation programs and provides insights into current attempts to strengthen weak safety nets and build more productive supports. The conclusions are taken from internal and independent evaluations of Operation Hunger's development work, 16 years of field experience, emerging results from the organization's Integrated Development Pilot Programme, and the organization's contribution to the South African Participatory Poverty Assessment (SA-PPA) (Breslin and Delius 1996).[3]

The arguments contained in this article draw heavily on research conducted using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods. PRA has been defined as "a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act" (Absalom et. al. 1995). The methodology emerged and gained popularity in the late 1980s as an alternative to the "blueprint" approach of top-down agricultural development employed by extension agents, international agencies, and research institutions. In short, PRA uses techniques and tools borrowed from farming systems research, agroecosystems analysis, and rapid rural appraisal but combines these with a positivist strategy designed to use the information generated as part of a broader process of local-level change and empowerment.

PRA has significant strengths and weaknesses as a methodological tool but, if facilitated in an open-ended manner, allows important insights into how people view their world to emerge. PRA can also be useful in expanding our understanding of local processes of change and often challenges basic assumptions made by policymakers and development workers, as will be shown.[4]

This chapter outlines some of the complex dynamics of rural and peri-urban life in South Africa that shape development interventions and highlights the difficulties of current income transfer schemes. It gives an overview of three development strategies employed by the South African government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to strengthen or support vulnerable households in the country: food support, public works, and agricultural programs. These sections draw on Operation Hunger's direct and indirect experiences with the implementation of such schemes in South Africa. The chapter concludes by considering issues of targeting, monitoring, and evaluation, and NGO capacity to test innovative approaches to poverty alleviation.

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3. The SA-PPA was commissioned by the South African Reconstruction and Development Office to add a qualitative perspective to a World Bank–funded quantitative poverty assessment (SALDRU 1994). Operation Hunger was one of 14 South African organizations that conducted research for the SA-PPA.

4. For a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) as a research and planning methodology, as well as the ways in which Operation Hunger has tried to overcome some of the weaknesses of the methodology, see Breslin and Delius 1996, 3–11.

Poverty and Pensions

The Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (PSLSD) provides a quantitative picture of poverty in South Africa (SALDRU 1994; RDP 1995). Although these data offer important information on the nature and scope of poverty throughout the country, they do not provide deep insights into the processes and dynamics that shape poverty at a local level. Such insights are vital to development practitioners who work in poor communities throughout the country.

Operation Hunger's own research in its pilot development areas and SA-PPA sites suggests that access to income from employment, remittances, and pensions defines the difference between better-off and vulnerable households (Breslin and Delius 1996). Access to piece jobs of various kinds is also increasingly important as other sources of income become less reliable and sustainable.[5] How people manage these different sources of income at the household and broader village level appears to be critical.

High levels of conflict and competition, shaped by both gender and generational dynamics and by struggles over scarce resources, are common in marginalized South African villages (Breslin and Delius 1996; Delius 1996a). Women tell of verbal and even physical battles for control of their husband's remittances. These struggles can be with older sons or sisters-in-law who claim that their right to their father's or brother's income supersedes that of his spouse. Husbands and wives fight over the allocation and control of scarce resources within the household. Many participants in SA-PPA sessions single out pensioners as a significant source of regular income, and some tell of witchcraft accusations leveled against others in the village who have more resources. These conflicts are often violent and, at times, fatal.

Operation Hunger's research also suggests that, although many vulnerable South Africans are involved in and dependent on extended networks of kinship and residence, these networks also contain significant disadvantages. The support they afford goes hand in hand with high levels of conflict and suspicion. In many instances, the range of family, neighbors, and friends to which individuals or households can appeal for support is steadily shrinking. This is especially true in the case of individuals or households unable to meet

5. Time trends consistently demonstrate that household reliance on piece jobs has increased over time while access to long-term employment, remittances, and income from agriculture has declined (Breslin and Delius 1996). Also reported is a decline in pensions, although this perception is not consistent with formal data, which demonstrates that the scope of pensions has increased over time. Although this discrepancy between the formal data and local perceptions of declining pensions needs to be studied further, the authors suggest that the perceptions of participants at PRA sessions may be influenced by the growing pressure on income from pensions as other sources of income decline. The perception of declining pensions could also be linked to the pervasive and strongly held view that pension officials are corrupt and that many people who are eligible for pensions do not receive them.

the reciprocal obligations that asking for help implies. It is striking that, at all the development sites in which Operation Hunger is working except Ophansi (KwaZulu/Natal), the "proper household" that participants describe is composed only of a nuclear family.[6] This appears to be because such households are materially and socially self-contained and thus freed from heavy dependence and wider networks.

These realities should give pause to those who argue that redistributive networks within communities will or can take care of targeting considerations. Additionally, the notion that income is effectively transferred from employed workers to unemployed households obscures the conflicts that surround these transactions.

Operation Hunger's experiences also suggest a much wider variety of household forms and dynamics than generally recognized in policy pronouncements. For example, the emphasis placed on "female-headed households" is a welcome genuflection to gender, but this category (or target group) lumps together a wide variety of actual households that face differing opportunities and constraints. Participatory rural appraisal sessions conducted by Operation Hunger graphically illustrate this point.[7] Participants in different development sites consistently perceive single women with children and no support network as the most vulnerable category of household within their villages.[8] Female-headed households with a pensioner, with older children who can either care for the younger children while the mother works or bring income to the household themselves, a husband or relative who remits money, or a mother who generates income are consistently seen by local participants as having more opportunities than female-headed households without such support.[9] These dynamics contextualize and sharpen quantitative understanding of poverty in South Africa and raise some important points to be considered in this chapter.

To begin, the struggles around material resources, which emerge both within and between households, emphasize the need for caution and care when considering income and resource transfers. Old-age pensions, for example, can

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6. See Breslin and Delius (1996, 31–32) on the development and application of "proper household" inquiries.

7. See Breslin and Delius 1996, 33–34, 47, 50, 53, 57–59, 75–76, and 79.

8. Quantitative surveys conducted by Operation Hunger strongly suggest that a common characteristic of malnourished children is that they come from households in which the mother is single (and often still in school) and has limited access to resources from relatives, neighbors, or the father of the children (Madrid and Breslin 1996, 12).

9. Our understanding of categories like "female-headed households" has significantly broadened as a result of "proper household" PRA sessions (for an overview of a "proper household," see Breslin and Delius 1997). This again highlights the potential of PRA to unpack, and at times challenge, commonly held notions and generalizations upon which much development work and policy are based.

highlight why income transfer schemes, designed to assist vulnerable household members, can be particularly problematic in practice.

The South African government introduced pension payments for Africans in 1943 and extended them to rural Africans in 1965 as part of a strategy to discourage urbanization. Pensions were also increasingly seen as a means of poverty alleviation. The elderly are especially vulnerable because of their advanced age and their declining capacity to earn a living wage, and pensions are critical safety nets for them. Pensions can enhance their position and authority within the household and broader community. The policy of transferring income to the elderly therefore makes sense in many respects and is, again, extremely beneficial at a number of levels. Unfortunately, the pension system has a variety of negative consequences that need to be considered when designing future income transfer schemes.

As SA-PPA participants revealed, pensioners are a clearly identifiable group who are regular recipients of income in the village. People in a village know who receives a pension, how much that person receives, and when that person receives it. Pension payouts are in cash or are rapidly converted into cash, and the income is too small to be used for meaningful economic upliftment. This dependable income also contributes to the emergence of "granny households." These households include large numbers of grandchildren and great-grandchildren and can be quite fragile, often dissolving when a pensioner dies. Moreover, the elderly most often permanently reside in their villages so they are unable to easily distance themselves, or protect their pensions, from the demands of others. All these characteristics, which are common with income transfer schemes, make pensioners vulnerable to the demands and pressures of relatives and neighbors. Secrecy over sources and levels of income, often the most important form of protection vulnerable people have against the claims of others, is therefore betrayed by pension programs in South Africa.

If poorly planned and implemented, future income transfer schemes could further exacerbate local conflict. Experience from South Africa suggests that income transfer schemes, targeted at those individuals who are least able to defend themselves from the pressures of neighbors and relatives, may provide much-needed short-term support but also carry significant costs to the recipient. The costs associated with increased social conflict are rarely considered when income transfer policies are designed.

These observations relate to the broader point emphasized in Operation Hunger's contribution to the SA-PPA, which is that communities are far from homogeneous. Despite general awareness of this reality, development practitioners often persist in implementing programs or consulting communities as if this were not the case. Needs, development opportunities, and constraints vary both within and between households. This is not to suggest that there is no possibility for compromise or consensus on some issues at the local level. But

it does suggest that the idea that coherent communities lie waiting to be resurrected by "development" is a misleading starting point. And it also poses the problem of whether even broadly representative community leaders can effectively articulate the wide range of perceptions and interests of their diverse constituencies. This diversity within (and between) communities makes providing development support extremely complex. While Operation Hunger has no blueprint for success, this chapter argues for greater decentralization and participatory planning. Experience suggests that development practitioners who are intimately familiar with and involved in a community are far more likely to recognize and respond effectively to the opportunities and pitfalls presented by community heterogeneity.

Food Support as a Safety Net?

> If food aid is a major resource at our disposal, we should seek ways of using it toward development of communities and betterment of the human condition, not just another part of our medicine chest.
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> —George Beaton (ACC/SCN 1992, 52)

Operation Hunger was founded in 1980 in response to a crippling drought that threatened the food security of households in the former homeland of KwaNdebele. The organization responded to this emerging crisis by providing food aid to families in the homeland. By 1993, Operation Hunger had expanded its operations and was providing R32 million worth of food support to hundreds of thousands of vulnerable households throughout the country each year. The underlying logic of the program was that large numbers of South Africans were unable to feed themselves and that food aid was therefore required to resolve this crisis. The food itself was inexpensive (less than R0.20 per meal), and limited targeting was done. Limiting targeting reduced the amount of time field staff had to spend in any particular village and contributed to Operation Hunger's ability to serve hundreds of communities.

Eventually, Operation Hunger initiated development projects that were designed to strengthen the capacity of vulnerable households to feed themselves. Development projects were in theory flexible and responsive to local needs and opportunities, but in practice took the form of small-scale gardening, dryland farming, craft production and marketing initiatives, and microenterprise ventures like sewing projects, brick-making schemes, and fence-making programs.

In 1994, Operation Hunger reconsidered its relief and development programs for several reasons. First, the dramatic political transformation that occurred in the country during the 1990s meant that NGOs who played a constructive (and often political) role during the apartheid era would have to

reorient their strategies to play a more supportive role to the emergent democratic government. NGOs had to determine what role they could play in a democratic South Africa and clarify how their capacity could be most effectively used in cooperation with other players to address the development challenges facing the country.

Linked to this was a change in donor-NGO relations. Foreign donors began shifting financial resources to the democratically elected government. This change reflected an understandable normalizing of relations between foreign governments and a legitimate South African state. At the same time, many government officials and South African trusts decided that NGOs were messy intermediaries in the development process. A new model was initiated in which communities were approached directly by government and trusts instead of through NGOs. Financial resources to the NGO sector have therefore diminished.

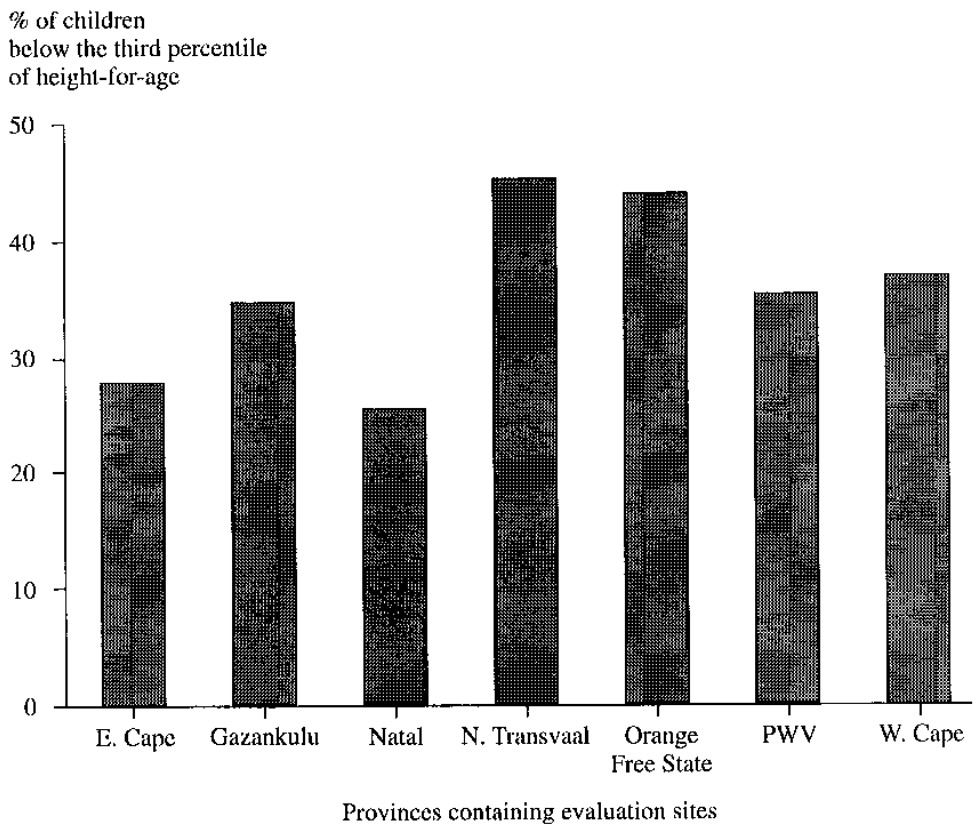
At the same time, a series of internal and independent evaluations raised important questions about the development impact of Operation Hunger's work in the field (Lund 1993; Breslin 1994a; Bosman and Schirmer 1993; and Bennett, Fowler, and Martin 1991). These evaluations concluded that Operation Hunger's relief and development programs had not provided a real foundation for further development in the villages in which the organization operated, despite some significant successes in the areas of community mobilization and advocacy.

Crucially, the provision of food aid had not improved the nutritional status of recipients. Anthropometric data from villages in which Operation Hunger had provided ongoing relief support for a number of years showed that significant percentages of children remained stunted and underweight (Figure 10.1). This suggested that food aid was not, by itself or linked to relatively standardized development projects like gardens or sewing schemes, addressing these nutritional challenges. It became clear that Operation Hunger had overemphasized the scope of starvation in the country yet neglected critical issues effecting nutritional well-being like water supply, environmental sanitation, diets, weaning practices, micronutrient supplementation, health care, and income.

Operation Hunger's food support was also directed at a wide but loosely defined constituency and was not linked to resolving the particular problems faced by these different constituencies.[10] Instead, food aid was initiated during times of difficulty without clear measures to indicate whether the time of difficulty had passed for the household. A consequence of this particular model, employed by Operation Hunger and other relief institutions, is that the

10. Recipients of Operation Hunger food support included the unemployed, the elderly, tuberculosis patients, refugees, single mothers with many children, school children, preschool children, households with malnourished children, and sick people.

FIGURE 10.1 Share of stunted children ages 0–6 at Operation Hunger evaluation sites, 1993



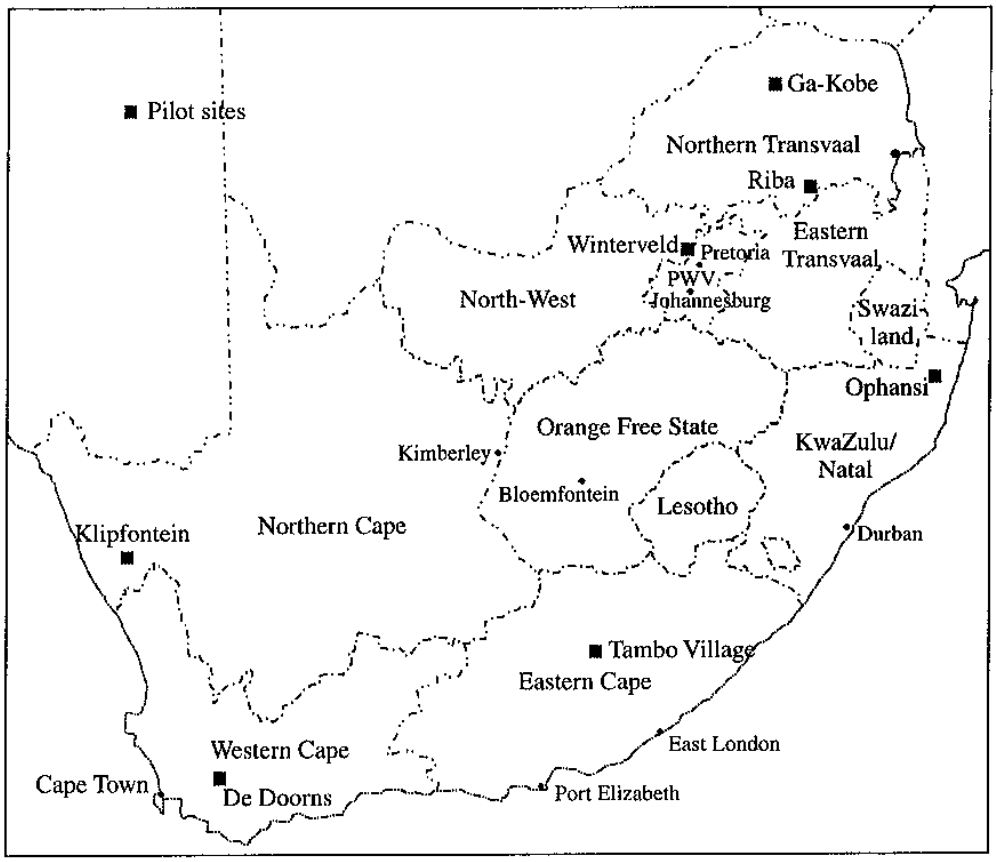
SOURCE: Breslin 1994a.

feeding lists expanded with no systematic method for determining when an individual or household should be removed from them.

The impact of Operation Hunger food aid on the nutritional well-being of children in South Africa was therefore limited. This realization raised a series of important questions. Was relief aid appropriate in South Africa? If not, could food support be used as part of a wider development strategy? If so, how could it be used in a way that had an impact on the nutritional well-being of children while serving as a vehicle for more beneficial social and economic development in the areas in which Operation Hunger works?

Operation Hunger had first to recognize that vulnerable South Africans are not starving en masse. Particular households, however, do experience periods of food scarcity, and it would be important to test whether food aid could be used as a short-term measure to alleviate this problem. The initial challenge was to find appropriate ways to identify households experiencing periods of stress and to design an intervention package that was within Operation Hunger's capacity and would start to address the causes of this insecurity.

FIGURE 10.2 Operation Hunger Integrated Development Pilot Programme



SOURCE: Operation Hunger.

It was suggested that food support could have a greater impact on nutritional vulnerability if it was more meaningfully linked to local capacity-building efforts, health education and awareness campaigns, and development interventions like water supply and environmental sanitation programs. Operation Hunger initiated the Integrated Development Pilot Programme in 1995 (see Figure 10.2) to test whether this strategy could work and to see whether food support could be used as a development, as opposed to a relief, intervention. What has emerged from the pilot program is that food support programs can contribute to child growth if they are well targeted, development oriented, monitored for impact, and short term.

Operation Hunger uses growth-monitoring programs to target households experiencing periods of stress (Madrid and Breslin 1996). Children between the ages of 0 and 6 years are weighed monthly by Operation Hunger staff and locally trained community nutrition workers (CNWs). The anthropometric data highlight a possible problem within the household when:

- children show two consecutive flat (no weight change) or declining growth intervals;
- children of less than a year show a growth path dropping toward one of the Road-to-Health card's preprinted growth curves;[11] or
- children of less than 3 years fall below the third percentile of weight for age (for girls).

Households whose child meets at least one of these criteria receive an immediate visit from Operation Hunger field staff and CNWs. Household surveys are conducted to provide insights into the household composition, the growth and health history of the child, feeding practices, and income sources within the household. Operation Hunger field staff and CNWs then decide upon an appropriate response to the situation faced by that household. Initial interventions range from nutrition education to short-term feeding or even hospitalization. Another possible intervention is linking household members with emergent employment opportunities in the area.

At the community level, feeding begins only when there is a clear indication of how food support contributes to a larger development program and a mechanism is in place for measuring its impact. Household food support is authorized for short periods and after the entry and exit criteria for feeding have been established and publicized.[12] Growth-monitoring results, which are easy to record and analyze at the local level, are reported back to the village each month.[13] Operation Hunger, CNWs, and the broader community monitor the impact of these interventions on the health and future growth of children who are underweight or faltering in the village.

Operation Hunger's decisions are seen as legitimate and transparent within the village, at least in part because of the extensive community-based planning process that precedes implementation of the program. Weighing, in

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11. The Road-to-Health card is an 8- by 10-inch card issued to mothers on the birth of their children. Health care providers use the card to record basic health data (birth weight, immunizations, illnesses) and to provide a visual record of the child's growth by plotting monthly weight gains on a preprinted grid.

12. Food support is provided to households for three months. If, after this time, the child's growth path has not been reestablished, further household surveys are conducted and new intervention options considered. In the Northern Province, intensive feeding for a six-month period is considered in cases where children under 3 years old are below the third centile weight for age (for girls). The intention of this program is to see whether this intensive support will help the child "bounce back" above the third centile weight for age (for girls). The cost of food at Operation Hunger sites varies due to regional differences in food packages. At present, the cost per meal ranges from R0.54 (US$0.12) in soup kitchens to R0.96 (US$0.21) at family feeding points.

13. Report-back mechanisms vary across villages where Operation Hunger works. Billboards are used in some villages to graphically illustrate the results for community members, while "master cards" are used in other areas to convey anthropometric results to the community. See Madrid and Breslin 1996 for further details on these different models, as well as some of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach that have become apparent following implementation.

this context, has been increasingly useful in demonstrating to villagers the higher levels of malnutrition in some segments of their community or among certain types of households. This has, in turn, legitimated targeted transfers (such as food aid) or even jobs that necessarily exclude some individuals.

While the programs are still relatively new, the evidence from Operation Hunger development sites suggests that the linkage of growth monitoring, short-term feeding, and development is yielding positive results. In May 1996, 75 percent of the children who received food support in Riba (Northern Province) demonstrated positive weight gain the following month. In Klipfontein (Namaqualand), 70 percent of the children who have received food support have sustained their growth trajectories following the discontinuation of food aid. Evidence suggests that this is at least partially because women in the household of a faltering child have been given priority access to emergent employment opportunities like Project Hotel[14] and a soil erosion initiative sponsored by Operation Hunger in the area. Households from Winterveldt (North West Province) whose children demonstrate evidence of growth faltering will receive priority access to employment opportunities from an environmental sanitation initiative in the village. The goal of the program is to provide affordable sanitation options to residents of the village, address a range of hygiene-related problems in the area, and, in the process, improve the nutritional status of faltering children through the infusion of additional income into the household.

A wide range of challenges still face Operation Hunger as these programs continue to evolve.[15] Residents in development sites still see growth monitoring primarily as a tool for making decisions about food allocations. Furthermore, retaining CNWs who have been trained by Operation Hunger is becoming increasingly problematic. Attrition has already begun in some villages, partially because trainees expected to be paid for their work, but also because CNWs were selected without considering whether they were likely to remain in the community in the long run. The prospect of payment or other reward attracted forceful, relatively well-qualified trainees with the influence to ensure that they would be selected. Unfortunately, these were often the people with the best options outside the community. As it has become clear that CNW positions are really volunteer posts, some of these individuals have pursued more lucrative options.

Concerns are also growing about the long-term sustainability of these programs. Operation Hunger's capacity to provide endless support to growth-

14. Project Hotel was developed in Klipfontein to exploit the expanding tourist market in the area. Operation Hunger staff, other development practitioners, and tourists stay at Project Hotel instead of staying at expensive hotels in the area. Jobs are created, and money flows into the village.

15. See Madrid and Breslin 1996 for a more detailed discussion of these challenges.

monitoring initiatives linked to targeted food support and development will decrease as similar programs are implemented in more villages. Anthropometric data also suggest that interventions are having a far greater impact on children over 13 months than on the more nutritionally insecure children under 12 months. This result is probably due to the fact that the nutritional status of infants is closely related to issues of breastfeeding, hygiene, and weaning practices. These challenges are not easily resolved by food aid, and educational programs take time to have an impact on infant health and household behavior.

Nevertheless, important insights have been gleaned from these pilot programs. First, Operation Hunger is demonstrating that food support can have a development impact.[16] Second, the difficulties with targeting scarce resources in villages where conflicts over material and financial resources are evident can be overcome if the programs are properly planned and monitored at the local level. Third, Operation Hunger has a growing body of evidence that suggests that food support can have a positive impact and improve the nutritional status of children if these resources are well targeted. Fourth, Operation Hunger now believes that targeted feeding can be used to support households experiencing periods of short-term stress. Finally, Operation Hunger has been able to experiment and change direction as appropriate because the program was piloted. Efforts to scale up the program can be done in a manner that is within the organization's capacity and retains its experimental and flexible nature.

The government's current feeding programs have many of the same problems characteristic of feeding schemes throughout the world. Opponents of food aid argue that these programs create dependence, are prone to high levels of leakage because they are poorly targeted, and do not effectively address the underlying causes of chronic malnutrition. Like Operation Hunger, the government is trying to restructure its feeding programs to have a greater impact on household health. Operation Hunger's efforts to address its feeding program's limitations may therefore have considerable and broader contemporary relevance, although the government faces additional challenges that may make the required transition more difficult.

While Operation Hunger has been able to show communities that its resources are limited and that a more narrowly focused target group is therefore justified, the South African government is having more difficulty making the same argument at the local level. Part of this is because expectations are high and the democratically elected government had, at least initially, responded to pressures to deliver by implementing large-scale feeding programs or expanding inherited feeding schemes. The government's Primary School Nutrition

16. Long-term benefits are likely to include improved educational performance, greater productivity, and fewer health problems. Operation Hunger has also tried to provide short-term development benefits by incorporating feeding in community programs through food-for-work schemes.

Programme (PSNP), designed to provide a healthy meal to all primary school children throughout the country and to serve as an incentive to attend school, provides useful insights into the problems with this approach. The program was not piloted and has proven to be more expensive in terms of both cost and administrative requirements than originally expected. Meals, originally provided to all primary school children on each school day, were scaled down at the end of 1995 to only once or twice a week. Scaling back the PSNP led to conflict at the local level because angry parents held principals and primary school teaching staff responsible for the smaller program.

Most important, the impact of the PSNP on the nutritional well-being of primary school children and attendance at schools is unclear. Operation Hunger had historically provided food support to schools throughout the country, but it concluded that the school feeding programs did not have a noticeable impact on the nutritional status of children because the intervention was too late and not effectively linked to other development initiatives (such as safe water, environmental sanitation, and adequate health care) within the broader community that contributed to chronic malnutrition. Operation Hunger was also unable to verify whether attendance increased as a result of school feeding. The government has yet to publish data that would suggest that the PSNP has had a noticeable impact on these two issues.

As a result of the difficulties and costs associated with this program, the government is considering ways to transfer financial and management responsibility for the PSNP to local communities within the next two years. This is unrealistic given the high costs of the program and the limited capacity of poorer communities to actually fund, and at times manage, such an initiative.

The National Nutrition and Social Development Programme (NNSDP), is another of the government's food aid programs, with a budget of more than R400 million.[17] The NNSDP began on a large scale and has had difficulty scaling back its program or demonstrating improvements in the nutritional status of recipients. While there is recognition within the NNSDP that development projects must be linked to the feeding scheme, these development strategies closely resemble the model employed by Operation Hunger during the 1980s. Gardens, brick-making schemes, and other income-generating activities are to be linked to future NNSDP programs, but, as Operation Hunger's experience demonstrates, standardized development projects will not dramatically improve the nutritional status of future recipients. Like Operation Hunger, the NNSDP will need to clarify the problem to be addressed, identify appropriate strategies that can be applied to address these problems, and determine what role food aid can play in this process.

17. The NNSDP was established in the early 1990s to cushion the impact of the value-added tax on poorer households. The current government inherited this program from the previous government.

Debates within government about the long-term viability of the NNSDP and PSNP are increasingly driven by cost considerations rather than clear ideas about how food support could be more effectively used as a development intervention. This is unfortunate because the government will have to play a strong role in sustaining a food support strategy given the limited resources of NGOs and the erosion of foreign financial support for feeding programs.

The Potential of Public Works Programs to Meet Short-Term Needs

Job creation was a central challenge posed by Operation Hunger's contribution to the SA-PPA (Breslin and Delius 1996). The government's Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy also clearly identifies employment creation as the most significant challenge facing South Africa. Few would disagree that the long-term prospects of the country hinge on the expansion of the economy and the reduction of unemployment.

Comparative and local experience suggests that public works programs are one option available to the government and large funding trusts to address the problem of massive unemployment.[18] It is widely recognized in South Africa that public works programs do have the potential to infuse a significant amount of income into poor areas of the country with high levels of unemployment.[19] If properly planned, public works programs can also create usable, productive assets (such as roads, clinics, and water systems) that can generate further development. If properly targeted, public works programs can be a powerful tool for helping households whose capacity to sustain themselves is most threatened.[20]

There are however sharp differences within South Africa on how public works programs should be structured. The labor movement believes that public works can provide a strong impetus to economic growth if used to support the massive delivery of infrastructure and housing. Labor also contends that wages should be closely related to industrially negotiated wage rates and, after three months of employment, include benefits available to those employed in the formal economy. Business counters that this would be unviable. They have proposed a far more modest labor-intensive public works model with lower wages as a cornerstone of the program (see Delius 1996b for a more detailed overview of this debate).

The South African National Public Works Programme (NPWP) has two main components. One component is designed to reorient state expenditure to

18. For a comparative overview of the strengths and weaknesses of public works programs in the developing world, see von Braun 1995.

19. Public works programs can be income based or payment can be in kind (such as food for work). Most programs in South Africa are income based.

20. Targeting of the poorest members of society is most often done by using low wages.

TABLE 10.1 Rate of disbursement of project funds for public works, by province

Province	Amount allocated to province for fiscal 1996	Amount committed, January 29, 1996	Amount disbursed, January 29, 1996
		(million rand)	
KwaZulu/Natal	36.3	0	0
Eastern Cape	32.1	18.8	7.0
Northern Province	29.55	29.55	13.697
Gauteng	16.05	16.05	0.3
North West	12.45	7.939	0.122
Mpumalanga	8.4	7.1	0
Free State	7.05	1.25	0
Western Cape	6.3	6.0	0.35
Northern Cape	1.8	1.8	0.16
Total	150	87.689	21.629
Percentage of amount allocated	100	58	14

SOURCE: Mthombeni 1996, 20.
NOTE: Figures are as of January 29, 1996.

increase the labor content of publicly funded projects. The second component of the NPWP is the community-based public works program designed "to provide rapid and visible delivery in the short-term" (Delius 1996b). The community-based public works program has been implemented by provincial Departments of Public Works (R150 million) and by NGOs and community-based organizations (R100 million).[21] This section of the chapter will concentrate on the community-based public works program.

Initial indications from the community-based public works program indicate that it has not been effective at creating jobs or productive assets in South Africa. Part of the problem facing South Africa is related to the slow disbursement of funds from the provincial Departments of Public Works (Table 10.1). At the core of this problem is the weak institutional base to assess, plan, and manage public works applications and programs at the provincial and national level. As a consequence, the initial goal of rapid, short-term delivery from the government has not been realized.

The Departments of Public Works may not, in the end, be given additional resources given their poor record of delivery and disbursement to date. This

21. The allocation of public works money to NGOs and CBOs has not been transparent. The bulk of the disbursement went to the Independent Development Trust, with smaller allocations being given to institutions like the Sikhaya Sugar Community Association and the Youth Services Initiative. No proper tendering procedures were followed in the process.

TABLE 10.2 Labor spending as a percent of spending on public works projects

Public works projects	Current spending (1994)	Potential spending
	(percent)	
Low-cost housing	25–35	30–40
Social buildings (community halls)	20–30	25–35
Water reticulation	5–15	25–35
Stormwater	5–15	40–50
Sanitation	5–15	25–35
Roads	5–15	30–80[a]
Dams	10–20	20–30
Railways	5–15	20–30
Forestry	25–35	35–45
Electrification	10–15	12–17
Small-scale agricultural infrastructure	40–80	40–80

SOURCE: NEF 1994, 37.

[a]The large gap in maximum spending comes from the different types of roads (gravel, earth, and surface).

threat is leading to increased pressure to spend money rapidly, but care is warranted. If the pressure to spend money rapidly is not managed properly, unviable projects will be approved that have a limited impact on the development constraints faced by people at the local level.

An important reason why this program has experienced difficulties is that there has been no powerful interest group fighting for it. Business and labor have been at best cautiously supportive, and NGOs and CBOs have very limited leverage on the state. This difficulty has been compounded by the shifting orientation of government economic policy, which has led to greater caution in relation to state-driven programs.

Significant problems have also become apparent in the allocation of public works within government. The responsibility for labor-intensive public works programs lies in a government department that has historically managed state buildings. At the outset, the capacity of the National Public Works Department to manage labor-intensive infrastructure programs was decidedly limited. The capacity problems at the provincial and local levels are even greater.

Linked to the government's inability to disburse public works money in a timely manner is the limited number of jobs actually created by public works programs in the country. The National Economic Forum's Technical Committee on a Public Works Programme (NEF 1994, 35–41) suggests that the full potential for employment creation has not been realized by public works projects (Table 10.2). An evaluation of the Department of Transport's labor-intensive road projects concluded that only 7.8 percent of the projects were "spent on truly labour-intensive construction projects" and that "it is clear that

the programme did not contribute significantly to the alleviation of (short-term) unemployment during this period, despite its magnitude in monetary terms" (Greyling 1994, 205–209). The initial pilot public works program in the Northern Province was capital, rather than labor, intensive. The total amount of the budget allocated to labor was a minuscule 9 percent. Equally alarming is that project proposals with such low proportions of the budget allocated to labor are accepted by the tender boards as labor intensive. This practice suggests that a great deal of capacity-building remains to be done. The result is that fewer jobs are being created than is feasible, even with the currently low levels of disbursement, and the potential direct and indirect impact that increased levels of income could have had at the local level is not being realized.

Moreover, observers are beginning to ask important questions about the productive value of the social and material assets created and the impact these programs have had on recipients of short-term employment opportunities. *The Sowetan* (April 19, 1996) reported that 30 clinics built as part of a national trust's labor-intensive program lie abandoned and unused in the Northern Province. The clinics were not constructed in coordination with the Department of Health, so they do not have the necessary staff, medical supplies, or support services to be effective. A labor-intensive water program in Tambo Village, Eastern Cape, created local jobs, but the water system has been unreliable since its installation over a year ago because its capacity is too small to meet local demand and local residents were not trained to maintain and manage the sophisticated system. Breakdowns, which are regular, require technical teams from other parts of the Eastern Cape to rectify.

Some programs, like the current Department of Water Affairs and Forestry's Water Conservation Programme, are both promising and creative.[22] Operation Hunger has also had some initial success in linking households with faltering children to emergent employment opportunities in a project area. This has, as argued earlier, had a positive impact on the previously faltering child's growth after the discontinuation of food support. These emergent successes will only be replicated if South Africa can learn about the successes and difficulties of labor-intensive programs. Detailed monitoring programs that measure impact are therefore required. Unfortunately, present public works monitoring programs concentrate on the disbursement of funds and the numbers of jobs or assets created without exploring what impact increased levels of income have on recipients of short-term jobs, the productive value of the assets created and the realized potential from these assets, or the long-term employment prospects that could be a spin-off of previous public works programs. More creative ways to measure the impact of the training component of public works programs are also necessary.

22. The Water Conservation Programme creates jobs through the eradication of alien vegetation that consumes disproportionate amounts of groundwater.

A thorough evaluation of current public works programs is needed. Previous evaluations, such as those of the Independent Development Trust's Relief Development Programme (Loots and Roux 1993) and Capital Subsidy Scheme (Robinson, Sullivan, and Lund 1994), have largely concentrated on management issues and the rates at which funds have been disbursed. Future evaluations need to explore questions of impact.[23] South African policymakers require a clearer picture of the impact of public works programs in order to decide whether a targeted public works program can successfully play a development-oriented role.

Agricultural Production for Poverty Alleviation

Agricultural production and land are extremely sensitive issues in South Africa. Black South Africans have been dispossessed of much of the land and, in the process, have been deeply integrated into a monetarized economy. Small-scale agriculture, which characterizes much of the rest of the continent, is a shadow of what it once was in South Africa, and rural households have long since become dependent on other forms of income, such as remittances, pensions, and piece jobs. The expansion of the small-scale agriculture sector is constrained by history, by uneven access to productive land, and by the limited amount of arable land and low and erratic rainfall that is characteristic of vast parts of the country.

Insights from Operation Hunger's experiences with agricultural programs and its understanding of the importance rural households place on agricultural production are offered here. Once again, it is Operation Hunger's failures as much as its successes that are instructive.

As already stated, Operation Hunger's relief interventions were most often followed by agricultural projects designed to strengthen household food security. It was believed that food aid would no longer be needed if households could produce enough crops to at least augment their diets. Technical, ploughing, and agricultural input support for dryland farming, community gardens, and household gardens were the most common remedies to household food security employed by Operation Hunger during the 1980s and early 1990s.

Field visits and internal and external evaluations began to raise important questions about the impact these programs were having in practice. While there were some positive stories, the overwhelming conclusions were that the agricultural programs supported by Operation Hunger had little impact on household food security. Home gardens were too small and often poorly

23. The Community Agency for Social Enquiry and the International Labour Organisation have just completed an evaluation of the Independent Development Trust's Community Employment Programme (Everatt et al. 1996). This evaluation needs to be looked at in light of these comments.

maintained, dryland farming in most parts of the country is unreliable because of low and erratic rains and poor land, and community gardens were rarely maintained and unviable. Moreover, many women's groups had little interest in gardening but knew that Operation Hunger would provide them with a safe and reliable water source if they formed a community garden.

Operation Hunger's initial response to these problems was to hire staff with more appropriate agricultural skills and to increase the organization's contributions of seed, fertilizer, agricultural equipment, and marketing. Participants enthusiastically welcomed these increases, but the agricultural programs did not noticeably improve. Moreover, dropout rates remained high, and, surprisingly at first, crops were planted but not harvested in some areas.[24] This is partly because land is also valued for nonagricultural purposes that must be considered when drafting policy. For instance, arable land in Winterveldt has been subdivided and rented for residential purposes, because the income generated from renting the land is more reliable than agricultural production.

Research conducted during the SA-PPA has shed further light on some of the reasons why these programs failed. Although participants were eloquent about the importance of jobs as a solution to the problems they face, their relative silence on the issues of agriculture and stock keeping conveyed an important message. This omission must raise significant questions about generalized strategies that imagine that the creation or re-creation of production on the land coincides with popular priorities in the countryside.

The material in the SA-PPA also posed important questions about who within rural communities favors an emphasis on support for agriculture. The evidence presented suggested that while some older men, or men who believe their wives should work the land, place considerable weight on agriculture, many women and younger people are far more skeptical about agriculture's importance and are fearful of the implications of agricultural initiatives for their own positions and prospects in society. Elders often bemoaned the limited value that youth place on agriculture while many young people claimed they would resort to agriculture only when absolutely destitute and would leave the land at the first opportunity.

The hard conclusion is that large segments of rural South Africa do not perceive agricultural production as a viable development option. Furthermore, the recent notion that "a widely prevalent extended family system and subsistence farming in many rural communities has helped keep the wolf from the door of millions of financially disadvantaged South Africans" is not only misleading but borders on fantasy (*Star Editorial,* June 10, 1996).

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24. These insights do not necessarily apply to areas like KwaZulu/Natal, where agriculture is still highly valued.

Before proceeding, it must be stressed that these insights are by no means uniform. Both agricultural production and livestock emerged as vital issues at Ophansi (KwaZulu/Natal) and to a lesser extent at Klipfontein (Namaqualand). But it was far from being at the top of people's own priorities for action in the SA-PPA sites, including Klipfontein.[25] Moreover, small-scale agricultural production and income generated from agricultural piece jobs can be a vital survival strategy for some of the poorest households in marginalized communities throughout the country. Yet the social, economic, environmental, and political constraints faced by these households are significant, and the financial and technical resources necessary to strengthen the foundations of this weak subsistence agricultural economy would be immense. And even if these resources could be generated, government and other players might find that the skepticism that many people have about the viability of agricultural production would be an added barrier to success.

These conclusions are not meant to suggest that there is no role for agriculture in South Africa, or that there are no black farmers who could not benefit from government-supported land reform or agricultural initiatives. In fact, it is argued that the government should find creative ways to identify historically marginalized South Africans who do perceive agricultural production as a powerful vehicle for development. This was, in the end, a defining feature of successful Operation Hunger–funded agricultural schemes. It may also be that some of these farmers do not see small-scale, household-based agriculture as viable but instead place greater emphasis on larger-scale commercialized agriculture. Strategies to support this constituency would be fundamentally different from strategies to strengthen subsistence agriculture in the countryside and could yield more significant agricultural results.

Consequently, targeting the most destitute households for land redistribution may not be the best use of limited resources and scarce capacity.[26] Destitute women, for instance, are specifically targeted for priority consideration by the Department of Land Affairs, but, again, women face different opportunities and constraints that must be considered when implementing development programs. Some women may see agriculture as a viable development alternative while others, even those who are presently engaged in some form of agricultural production, may not. Difficult targeting choices are again required, even if priority is given to groups like women, the unemployed, or even farm workers.

This argument does, of course, lead to counterclaims of elitism. For instance, Weiner and Levin (1995, 46) argue that "if the transition process tilts

25. What was particularly instructive about the SA-PPA sessions that explored these issues is that Operation Hunger often conducted these sessions with participants who were engaged in some form of agricultural production. Agriculture was, in many cases, the defining feature of the groups.

26. This argument does not apply to marginalized South Africans seeking to reclaim land taken from them in the past.

increasingly towards an elite pact, then a broad based redistribution of rural resources will be very difficult to achieve." One wonders, however, whether land redistribution and agricultural support is the best means for attaining the important objective of redistributing rural resources. Serious questions need to be asked about whether land reform and agricultural support will significantly help the most marginalized people in South Africa. Additional questions might be asked about the consequences such programs may have for relationships of gender and generation that have already become flash points in many areas. Is small-scale agriculture the most appropriate vehicle to help the most needy, or should scarce agricultural resources be targeted at those who have been historically marginalized yet have demonstrated the capacity and willingness not only to farm but also to generate income and jobs for others?

Finally, while broad policies are always needed, Operation Hunger's experience suggests that a flexible, locally sensitive approach is essential when it comes to agricultural interventions. Agriculture was central to many of the "proper household" sessions held in Ophansi, KwaZulu/Natal. But it was noticeably absent from people's priorities in other PPA sites, or it was mentioned only as an occupation that some other family member should be responsible for, like a daughter or a wife. Agricultural planning and implementation needs therefore to be further regionalized and decentralized, and guided by people with clear understandings of complex local gender and generational dynamics. Only regionally based planning can take into consideration local variations in ecology, economics, and aspirations and anticipate the potential benefits and pitfalls of smallholder agriculture.

Conclusions

Perhaps the largest challenges posed by this chapter relate to the importance of targeting, monitoring and evaluation, and piloting development programs.

As indicated, growth monitoring has been a useful tool used by Operation Hunger to make local level targeting decisions, but additional strategies and methods need to be explored and modeled to identify, for instance, possible recipients of agricultural and land reform support who see agriculture as a significant development option. Other targeting methods are required that strengthen our understanding of the seasonal nature of insecurity in diverse communities throughout the country and how future income transfer schemes can be directed at individuals, households, or stronger institutions like child care cooperatives that can use them for more productive purposes.

It also seems clear that South Africa has a unique opportunity at this stage of its transformation to learn from successful and unsuccessful development programs and to reshape future programs based on these experiences. This opportunity will be lost unless monitoring systems are implemented that are manageable and provide policymakers, practitioners, and local communities

with information that sheds greater light on development impact. Operation Hunger is constantly sharpening its programs because its monitoring system asks difficult impact questions and because a culture has been developed that recognizes that better programs often come from an understanding of why past initiatives failed or current strategies are not working as well as hoped.

This changing and challenging context and the myriad difficulties confronting both state structures and community-based organizations provide a powerful warning against marginalising the NGO sector. NGOs are uniquely positioned to respond to the crucial social complexities and regional variability already described. And while weaknesses clearly exist, their small size, community contacts, and grassroots orientation foster flexible, locally specific approaches.

Operation Hunger's experience suggests that part of what is required is a strengthened NGO sector demonstrating real capacity to pilot innovative strategies, monitor these programs closely, and reorient their programs accordingly. It also suggests that support is required to help NGOs document their activities and to disseminate their findings so that lessons learned on a small scale can be used to improve regional and national development planning.

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Comment

CATHERINE SIANDWAZI

Instead of discussing the chapters by Lawrence Haddad and Manfred Zeller and by Edward D. Breslin, Peter Delius, and Carlos Madrid at length, I will highlight the issues I consider most important for Southern Africa.

A number of nutrition projects in this region have been highly successful in controlling malnutrition and promoting health, while other programs have failed. I want to mention three successful projects in particular. The first is the drought-relief program in Botswana, which has employed a number of short- and long-term strategies in a comprehensive manner. Second, I want to mention the supplemental feeding and food production program in Zimbabwe, which started as a drought-relief program but became more development oriented by addressing communities' food production issues. The third is the Iringa Project in Tanzania. Although costs were prohibitively high, there is still much to learn from this project.

The first issue I want to address is the need for assistance programs to include capacity-building components. Haddad and Zeller mention this need in their chapter, but it is also important to look at the costs involved in linking drought-relief assistance with capacity building. If these programs are to be sustained, both the human and institutional framework under which these programs are implemented must be strengthened. How do we undertake this capacity building? It is important to draw from experiences of other countries where the emphasis has been building upon existing structures rather than developing new ones. In my own country (Zambia) the World Food Programme introduced a food relief project, linking it to a project fighting malnutrition. Instead of strengthening an existing institution such as the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC), they created a new institution, pulling well-trained staff from the existing one (NFNC). It had taken the government a long time to train this group of staff, and it is now struggling to fill the gaps. Failures like these offer lessons.

Both chapters tackle the issue of indicators. There is confusion about what indicators to use when attempting to improve household food security. Nutri-

tionists tend to use indicators related to household food security, which may not be applicable to national-level food security and vice versa. This issue requires further attention to help those operating at the national level (mostly economists) and at the household level (nutritionists) understand the dynamics of food security programs.

The other issue concerns programs to address poverty alleviation. Poverty alleviation will require considerably more resources and careful participatory planning. More important, perhaps, it requires national policies. Poverty alleviation should be discussed under the umbrella of existing national policies.

It is essential to include participation of the communities in setting the agenda. From my experience, where there is a participatory process, communities have a greater sense of ownership of the programs, enhanced commitment to and responsibility for the programs, and greater political commitment because they subscribe to mutually agreed-upon priorities. More information is required on poverty reduction. What are the causes? What are the characteristics of the poor? Do they just sit and wait for assistance? What are the coping mechanisms? The chapter on Operation Hunger specifically looked at the causes of local conflict and disintegration of family structures. These issues have many implications and deserve serious consideration.

While the chapter by Breslin, Delius, and Madrid mentioned NGOs and the role they play, it did not address the fact that NGOs are supposed to respond to country needs. These NGOs must be more carefully coordinated, so their programs do not overlap and thus spread their resources more thinly than necessary.

On the issue of income-generating activities, Operation Hunger is taking important steps in its efforts to move away from the stereotyped income-generating activities like sewing, which in the long run do not bring benefits to women.

Linking food aid to development is another important issue mentioned here. There is a need to analyze why nutritional status has improved in the Operation Hunger program beyond the effort from direct feeding. How are development projects that are linked to feeding actually improving nutrition? It would be interesting to understand some of those factors.

Comment

STANLEY KHAILA

Lawrence Haddad and Manfred Zeller raise many pertinent questions about social security design and public versus private safety nets. They also provide a framework for continued research in this area, specifically for private social security mechanisms. I do not have much to add to the list of questions raised, but I would like to make additional comments on or give examples of the sources of costs and benefits of safety net designs. The issue of budgetary allocation versus disbursement is important in this regard. In Malawi the health care system has always been self-targeting and basically free. In any public hospital there is a private ward, which is a paying ward, and a public one, which is free. Haddad and Zeller note that the budgetary allocation to the public health system in Malawi was less than favorable under the previous regime but that the new government has increased it to about 40 percent or more. Unfortunately, with the increased allocation of funds for public health, services deterioriated. Budgetary allocation or policy issues must be linked to implementation, because it is implementation that determines outcome. The same is true of free primary school education in Malawi. The previous government initiated free primary school education. When the new government came to power, grades 1 through 4 were already free. The new government decided to fund free primary education up to grade 8, but the results show it cannot provide this quantity of services. These examples show the costs that a social program can create.

It is important to distinguish safety nets from relief programs. For Malawi, this distinction is crucial. Designers of safety nets assume that most of the population is basically safe and that anyone who falls through will be caught by the safety net and will not get hurt. But in a country like Malawi, most of the people have already fallen through the net. These people require not safety nets but relief, which targets those who have already fallen through the net. In Malawi, a supplementary feeding program began in 1972 with the assistance of the World Food Programme. But the numbers of malnourished children in the

country have not changed. Clearly, what should have been put in place was a relief program, not a social safety net.

Finally, the institutional design of safety nets raises some dangers. For example, when a safety net has too many components, the potential for conflict is high. The Social Action Fund in Malawi clearly shows that when a public works program is simultaneous with a food-for-work program, people ask, why should we work for food when other people are getting money? Then the whole attempt falters because of political pressures, deterioration in self-help spirit, and other such factors.

PART VI

The Effective Development of Rural Infrastructure