IMF/World Bank policies pave way for continuing famine in Africa

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The World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that more than 38 million people in over 25 countries across the African continent are in need of food assistance.

Following two, three or four consecutive years of drought and erratic weather, the situation for 2003 looks bleak. Most agencies expect this year to be as bad as the famines of the 1980s and 1990s, or worse. The situation is compounded by the huge growth in HIV/AIDS, but also, as the United Nations/Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) reports, it is due to the policies of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

The famine is largely ravaging the east coast of Africa from the Horn of Africa down through the Great Lakes to Southern Africa. Famine is also to be found in the less high-profile Western Sahel, of which the worst affected country is Mauritania where 420,000 people are facing famine—about one sixth of the population. A further one million farmers and herders are described as "food insecure", with around two thirds of all communes described as "extremely" or "highly" food insecure.

In normal circumstances Mauritania, a very poor rural economy, can meet only 25 percent of its food need through its own production. Commercial imports cover up to an additional five months of need, with the remaining seven months described as the "lean period" when farmers eat their reserves and wild foods where available, and resort to selling fuel wood and charcoal to earn income. But freak storms a year ago killed 20 people and 120,000 cattle, sheep and goats, and destroyed one quarter of all harvested crops and six metric tonnes (MT) of rice. It also rotted the already dry pasturelands, and destroyed around 6,000 homes, schools and other buildings.

In addition, 2002 saw the worst drought in over two decades, in a country which has had 30 years of climatic degradation, drought and desertification, causing the major agricultural zone to shrink to a 200km-wide strip running east/west. The crucial June rains came late and erratically, which delayed or even postponed the planting of dieri (or rain-fed) crops. The high-water period, on which the walo (or flood recession) crops rely, lasted only 12 days rather than the usual three to four months.

The storms and following drought severely affected the traditional "survival strategies" for the lean period, as herders rely on killing some of their livestock at this time of year, and also there was less wild food than usual due to the drought.

Consequently, the government estimates that it is short at least 160,000 MT of grain, and international donor response has been poor, in part because of more high-profile famine crises in the east and south of Africa.

Signs of malnutrition are on the increase, especially among children and adolescents. These include exhaustion, weight loss, night blindness, dehydration, diarrhoea and hunger-related deaths. Epidemics such as measles are also expected, and only the improved water situation is currently holding off major famine. Desperate farmers have resorted to cutting down immature crops, and eating next year's seed reserves to survive. There has been a sharp rise in deaths from eating toxic wild berries. Donkeys, which are used for carrying water, have been dying in droves.

Many communities are reliant on unreliable weekly car services from urban areas with remittances from relatives. The situation in urban areas is increasingly desperate as large numbers of migrants, including whole families, arrive from the countryside. There is also severe degradation of pasturelands as huge herd migrations from the north to the Senegal River area take their toll.

After Mauritania, Cape Verde, Senegal, Gambia and Mali are most at risk in the Western Sahel, with over 160,000 needing food aid. Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Burkina Faso and Niger are also at risk. The latter two countries, like Mali, are landlocked and rely on the coastal states for their supply channels. The situation is compounded by war in Ivory Coast that further disrupts traditional supply routes.

Famine is still a major concern in the Horn of Africa, with Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan the worst affected. In Ethiopia, over 14 million people face "severe" or "significant" food shortage, according to *FEWS.Net*. This represents around one quarter of the population. According to one report cereal and pulse production is forecast at 9.27 million MT, down 25 percent on last year, with the drought-prone east expected to be 81 percent down on its production from last year. FEWS reports a 2.29 million MT "cereal import requirement" of which 328,000 MT will be imported commercially, and 140,000 MT are confirmed food-aid commitments, which are "in the pipeline". This leaves a gap of 1.83 million MT and the government and the UN have appealed for 1.44 million MT of food aid plus $75 million of non-food aid.

Comparisons are being made with the severe famines in Ethiopia of the early 1980s. However, this current famine is expected to be worse, with 11 million people already affected compared to 8 million in 1984/85. In addition, per capita income was $190 per year in 1981 but only $108 in 2001, whilst the HIV/AIDS epidemic has increased the numbers of dependents per household, and in many cases left child-led households. The epidemic has also left many farmers too weak to plant or harvest, and also has forced the healthy to spend precious time looking after the ill.

Eritrea has had three years of drought and the rainfall in 2002 was the worst in 15 years. It has appealed for 477,000 MT of grain with 2.3 million (68 percent) of its population affected by the drought. Border closures with Sudan and Ethiopia and the ongoing war have exacerbated the situation.

Sudan has itself requested 78,000 MT of food aid for the south of the country until September 2003 and 117,000 households also need 1,800 MT of seeds. Sudan has seen a steady increase in food aid required since 1999. Refugees and migrant herds from Ethiopia are arriving in Somalia, worsening the situation there.

In the Great Lakes region the situation is not as desperate, though 77,000 will have food shortage in Tanzania, and up to 86,000 in Rwanda. In Burundi, 7,500 people are in receipt of World Food Programme food aid, in a situation exacerbated by guerrilla war, and Uganda has lost 40-50 percent of its maize production and faces shortages.

In southern Africa, the main countries affected by famine are Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi, though Mozambique, Madagascar, Lesotho and Swaziland have all suffered some degree of food crisis.

In Zambia, over three million people need food aid at least up to March or April. Only 13 percent of the total relief-aid requested has been met. This is the third consecutive year of food crisis and erratic weather and “survival strategies” are all but used up.

In Zimbabwe, however, where 8 million people (66 percent) require food aid, the “formal economy” has been allowed to collapse, and the country is slipping towards a “barter economy”, notes *Stratfor.com*. Inflation currently stands at 198 percent and the IMF believes it will reach 500 percent in 2003. Food prices account for 60 percent of this rise, though President Mugabe has announced a salary freeze to curb inflation, partially in an attempt to please the IMF. Zimbabwe needs 300,000 MT of food aid by April, of which two thirds has been met.

Malawi, even in “normal” conditions, can meet only 10 percent of its food requirement, but following heavy rains, floods and the recent Cyclone Delfina it is in a dire situation. Delfina damaged 23,500 hectares of crops and affected 57,000 households. There is also a cholera epidemic brought on by the floods. President Muluzi has declared a state of disaster, and has appealed for food and non-food aid.

Elsewhere in Southern Africa, Mozambique is also suffering the effects of Cyclone Delfina, which has put the growing season at risk. Cases of malnutrition are rising, and there is an increasing need for food assistance with the number at risk recently rising dramatically from 600,000 to 1.4 million. Lesotho’s relief efforts have been hampered by heavy snow in mountainous regions, which make up a large part of the country. The continuing El Niño effect is still affecting weather throughout Africa and further drought is expected throughout 2003.

This widespread and growing famine is becoming a continent-wide famine in which millions across Africa face death either directly from malnutrition or from illness brought on by hunger. Extreme weather conditions are nothing new in Africa and are not in themselves the cause of the famine. As IRIN observes, “The failure of rains over two consecutive seasons should not have precipitated a crisis as deep as the region has now experienced.”

The collapse into famine follows a more protracted economic decline. A recent UNICEF report showed that 59 percent of children under the age of five were already malnourished in Zambia in 2000. In Malawi it was 49 percent; in Lesotho, 44 percent; and Zimbabwe, 27 percent.

IRIN also questions what it calls the “Washington consensus” on market reforms promoted by the IMF and the World Bank, which “frown on government intervention, and look at short-term financial considerations rather than medium-term food security”.

Under IMF structural adjustment programmes, the state is no longer “food security guarantor”. Commodity boards that fixed producer prices and collected farmers’ produce are abolished, and the task handed over to the private sector. In addition, the social services on which the poor depend and as well subsidies to small farmers are being curtailed.

In most of Africa small farmers are the main food producers. If they are given access to credit, subsidised seed and fertilisers they are capable of feeding the population if strategic reserves are maintained for times of drought or flooding. But the IMF’s policy of ending subsidies, breaking up state marketing boards and opening up African agriculture to the “free market” has resulted in the present famine.

World Bank lending for agriculture slumped from 31 percent of total lending in 1979-81, to 10 percent in 1999-2000. The IMF’s own evaluation is that the liberalisation of state marketing in Zambia in the 1991-94 period led to a 30 percent increase in rural poverty.

What is more, all the countries suffering from famine are heavily indebted. This is in large part due to previous IMF and World Bank policies that encouraged poor countries to take out loans. As a result of their debt repayments many of them are incapable of buying food on the world market and are reliant on donor assistance. Malawi alone pays out 39 cents of every dollar that it receives in aid to its international creditors.