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Household Food Insecurity and Survival in Harare: 2008 and Beyond

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Abstract In 2008, Zimbabwe was in crisis, with an economy in ruins and a volatile political environment. The country's GDP had contracted by over 40 % since 2,000 level; the official unemployment rate was over 80 %; hyperinflation was running at over 200 million percent; and food production deficits of the staple crop, maize, hovered around 1,000,000 tons. Within this hyperinflationary environment, food shortages were acute, and over 80 % of households in the country survived on less than US$2 per day. While this deleterious environment affected the whole country, the vulnerability of the urban poor to the economic meltdown and food insecurity was especially severe given their heavy reliance on food purchases and increases in other urban expenses such as rent, electricity, and transport. This paper assesses the vulnerability of poor households to food insecurity in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, under the crisis conditions and beyond. It argues that while the ushering in of the Government of National Unity in 2009 stabilized the political and economic situation by bringing down inflation, introducing a multi-currency regime, and improving the food supply, the general livelihoods of the poor did not drastically improve. The food security challenges facing poor urban households in Harare did not immediately improve for reasons that are discussed in the paper. The analysis is based on a comparison of data from two household surveys conducted in Harare, the first at the height of the crisis in 2008 and the second in 2012.

Keywords Harare · Urban food security · Economic crisis · Poverty

Introduction

For more than a decade, Zimbabwe has faced severe political, economic, and social challenges, which have impacted negatively on people's livelihoods. Although the country was a net exporter of food in the 1980s and early 1990s, the period after 2000 saw it move from being the breadbasket of the region to becoming a net food

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importer and a major recipient of food aid. Up to 2008, the crisis, which affected the whole country, was characterized by a negative gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate, rising unemployment, increasing poverty, hyperinflation, and recurrent national food shortages. This tumultuous period saw the majority of households in the country struggling to meet their food needs and household food security becoming a major challenge. While both rural and urban households were subjected to this turbulent environment, the challenges for households in the city, particularly the poor, were enormous given the massive job losses resulting from economic decline and the increases in other urban costs such as housing, water, electricity, and transportation due to hyperinflation.

The formation of the Government of National Unity in 2009, following disputed elections, stabilized the situation somewhat by arresting the GDP decline, bringing down inflation, introducing a multi-currency regime, and improving food supply. However, the general livelihoods of the poor did not drastically improve. This is because in addition to the continuing problems of unemployment and low salaries, most households face new challenges: the debt burden resulting from the unilateral conversion of household water, electricity and other municipal charges to the US dollar, high tariffs charged by local authorities, the cost of food in relation to wages and salaries, and the high costs of health and education services and transportation, which leave residents with little money to purchase food. Against this background, this paper assesses the food security situation of households in Harare during the crisis period and its immediate aftermath and discusses the new food security challenges faced by poor households in the city.

Background to the 2008 Crisis

To understand the food security situation that confronted households in Harare during the 2008 crisis, one needs to appreciate the sociopolitical and economic developments that Zimbabwe has experienced since independence in 1980. These include the implementation of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, and Operation Murambatsvina (Operation Restore Order), all of which played a fundamental role in undermining urban livelihoods and increasing household food insecurity. ESAP was introduced in Zimbabwe in 1991 when the country's post-independence economic growth was slowing, foreign investment was declining, and the unemployment rate was starting to increase. ESAP was meant to revamp the economy, encourage investment, and reduce the country's domestic and international debt through a three-pronged strategy of trade liberalization, domestic deregulation and investment promotion, and fiscal and monetary policies to curtail state expenditure. In practice, these austerity measures led to the closure of many factories, massive retrenchment, declining real wages, skyrocketing consumer prices, and a decline in the formal economy (Carmody 1998; Chattopadhyay 2000; Potts 2011).

Although ESAP cannot be wholly blamed for the economic woes that have bedeviled Zimbabwe after 1990, it laid the foundation for the serious downward trajectory in the country's economy in the late 1990s and 2000s. Any progress made in the initial years of ESAP was wiped out by its negative impacts and its stated objectives were never realized. The urban population especially was made more vulnerable because of declining real wages in an environment where prices of basic commodities were skyrocketing. Thus, although there are other causes immediate to the 2008 crisis, the impact was much more pronounced that it compounded an already grave situation.

Another critical event linked to the crisis was the Zimbabwean government's fast-track land reform program. In 2000, the government launched a program to expropriate white-owned farms for redistribution to indigenous black farmers. By the end of 2002, only 600 of the original 4,500 white farmers were left in the country (Scoones et al. 2010). Although over 1.2 million black farmers benefited from the land reform program, agricultural production levels drastically declined as the new occupants lacked the financial resources, inputs, equipment, and expertise to produce on the same scale and with the same productivity. As a result, the country quickly changed from being a net exporter to a net importer of food. Maize production deficits averaged over 500,000 tons per annum after 2000. While production levels improved somewhat in the newly resettled areas after 2004 and success stories have been recorded in some provinces, they have not offset the losses incurred by the destruction of white commercial agriculture. From its inception, the program greatly increased food insecurity in the country. In urban areas, the impact was catastrophic as very little food filtered into towns and cities from the rural areas to feed those already reeling under the general macroeconomic meltdown.

In 2005, the government launched its assault on urban informality, Operation Murambatsvina. Under this program, the authorities destroyed urban backyard houses, vending stalls, flea markets, and informal businesses in cities (Potts 2006; Vambe 2008). The government argued that the operation was an attempt to restore order and ensure orderly urbanization in the country. Although the motives behind the campaign are disputed (some seeing it as a politically motivated attack on the opposition), there is no disputing that it caused massive disruption of livelihoods and destruction of urban housing. Many income-generating projects were destroyed and more than 700,000 urbanites lost their homes, jobs, and livelihoods. Operation Garikayi, launched in the aftermath of Operation Murambatsvina to construct houses for some of the affected families, came too little too late to mitigate the impacts, as the government had neither the capacity nor sufficient resources to ensure meaningful mitigation. Operation Murambatsvina rearranged Zimbabwe's urban landscape and worsened the plight of the urban poor, increasing their vulnerability to hunger and food insecurity.

Because of and in addition to these processes, Zimbabwe began a general and sustained economic decline after 2000. The country's GDP contracted by over 40 % between 2000 and 2006. Annual inflation increased from two-digit figures in 2000 to 231 million percent in July 2008 (Hanke and Kwok 2009), and the country's external debt ballooned to US$6 billion in 2008. Life expectancy, which had peaked at 61 years in 1990, fell to around 36 years in 2008. The country's Human Development Index dropped from 0.621 in 1985 to 0.468 in 2003, indicating a drastic decline in the welfare of the Zimbabwean people. Zimbabwe received US$490 million in humanitarian aid in 2008, while its foreign currency reserves that year stood at only US$6 million.

Further aggravating the crisis was the political uncertainty resulting from the 2008 disputed presidential elections. Harmonized elections for municipal, parliamentary, and presidential positions were held in March 2008, but disputes surrounding the outcome of the presidential election and the subsequent runoff poll that was boycotted by the opposition created a tense and volatile atmosphere in the country. Eight months passed from the election runoff to the inauguration of the Government of National Unity in February 2009. The political uncertainty in this period also impacted heavily on the availability of food, fuel, electricity, and other essential goods and services in the country.

Household Food Insecurity in Harare

The food security situation in Zimbabwe in 2008 was dire. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies estimated that about 5.1 million of the country's 11.6 people would have no access to food by the end of the year. Food production in the country was low and inadequate. The government was constrained from importing food due to inadequate funding and rampant inflation. From April to October 2008, both the government and humanitarian agencies managed to import a total of only 316,000 metric tons of cereals, leaving the cereal harvest deficit for 2008/2009 at 666,000 metric tons. Although the government indicated that it would import 600,000 tons of maize from South Africa, only 175,000 metric tons had been imported by the end of August 2008. For most of 2008 then, the market was characterized by constant staple food shortages. The formal food system had virtually collapsed, and most foodstuffs could only be accessed on the parallel market. The situation was particularly grave in urban areas where households had to purchase most of their food. The high levels of food insecurity among households in the city resulted from a number of factors, including poverty, unemployment, inadequate food supplies on the market, hyperinflation, skyrocketing food prices, and fast-rising costs of other basic services such as housing, electricity, water, and transport.

The 2008 African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) survey found very high levels of poverty in Harare, as measured by the Lived Poverty Index (LPI). The LPI is a self-reporting measure that calculates how often households go without basic necessities such as an income, food, water, electricity, and access to medical facilities. The LPI ranges in value from a minimum of 0.0 to a maximum of 4.0. The Harare average of 2.20 indicated high levels of lived poverty among the population. A survey carried out in another poor area of the city in early 2009 found an LPI of 2.80, with a median of 2.68 and a maximum of 3.88 (Tawodzera 2010). Urban food insecurity is clearly linked to poverty, which is closely associated with unemployment.

By 2008, most of the factories in Harare were closed. At the few that remained open, employees were working on a roster basis, some working only 1 day per week. The AFSUN survey found that only 40 % of the adult population in the surveyed areas was in full-time employment. Further, 14 % had casual or part-time employment. Only 14 % were unemployed and actively looking for work, while 29 % had given up looking (Tawodzera et al. 2012, p. 10). Only 55 % of the surveyed households derived income from full-time wage employment (with as many as 42 %) relying on the informal economy to generate income.

Along with the high-unemployment levels, the food insecurity situation in the city was exacerbated by unprecedented increases in the prices of foodstuffs. Zimbabwe's urban population was especially vulnerable as the country was meeting most of its food requirements through imports. Global food price increases wreaked havoc among urban populations in the developing world (with prices of wheat, soybean, corn, and rice rising by 146, 71, 41, and 29 %, respectively, between 2007 and 2008). In Zimbabwe, the impact was worsened by the country's hyperinflationary conditions that saw food prices rising more than once per day. In November 2008, FEWSNET reported that the price of maize had increased by 1,431 % that month, and by 306,232 % in the previous 3 months (FEWSNET/USAID 2008). As many as 97 % of the households surveyed by AFSUN in Harare in 2008 said they had been negatively affected by food price increases. Under such conditions, most households were unable to access basic food stuffs such as bread, milk, meat, and eggs.

To aggravate the situation further, the water supply in Harare was unstable for most of 2008, with frequent cutoffs as well as poor quality drinking water. The Harare municipality was unable to supply even a third of the city's requirements. Close to 40 % of the city's water was being lost through leakages caused by aging water pipes, some of them over 50 years old (Nhapi 2009). The water treatment plant, built in 1954 for a much smaller population, could not cope with the high demand. Residents were forced to resort to alternative water sources that were detrimental to their health. Households in Mabvuku, Tafara, Dzivarasekwa, Budiriro, and Glen View, for example, were getting their water from unprotected wells and ditches. Harare's wastewater treatment system was functioning at only 20–25 % of its capacity and burst sewer pipes exposed residents to raw effluent, leading to frequent disease outbreaks. The cholera epidemic that hit Harare during the last quarter of 2008 is evidence of the critical state of the water and sewerage systems in the city.

Residents of the city frequently found themselves without water to drink or for other necessary uses such as cooking, washing dishes, and flushing toilets. In addition, power supplies were not guaranteed. Although the country was importing around 600 MW of electricity from South Africa, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, demand still far outstripped supply. Power supply to households was erratic, heightening challenges related to food preparation and storage. Other factors that heightened household food insecurity were the difficulties in withdrawing cash from banks as well as the low withdrawal limits set by the Reserve Bank. As inflation increased and the value of the Zimbabwe dollar tumbled against major currencies, the government resorted to printing trillions of paper money to increase liquidity in the market (Hanke and Kwok 2009). The Zimbabwean $170 trillion in circulation in the country in January 2008 could not meet the demand because of the high cost of goods. Most banks limited cash withdrawals to Zimbabwean $50 million per day per person, a wholly inadequate amount given that a loaf of bread cost Zimbabwean $35 million at the time. The situation was so desperate that a section of the country's loyal army rioted, raiding black market dealers in frustration after having failed to withdraw their salaries at major banks in Harare. Most people were unable to use their savings or earnings to purchase food unless they had access to foreign currency.

The survey carried out by AFSUN in late 2008 found that household food insecurity was all pervasive in the poorer parts of the city (Tawodzera et al. 2012). Conducted in the low-income residential areas of Dzivarasekwa, Tafara, and Mabvuku, the survey found that 95 % of the households were food insecure, with 72 % being classified as being severely food insecure. The AFSUN study also measured the dietary diversity of households and found that two thirds had consumed food from only five or fewer out of a possible 12 food groups in the previous day. Most of this food consisted of cereals, vegetables, sugar, and foods made from fat or oil. In addition, 92 % of the households had experienced several months over the previous year when they did not have adequate food to feed their members (Tawodzera et al. 2012).

Beyond 2008

The economic crisis that gripped Zimbabwe in the aftermath of the disputed June 2008 presidential elections was catastrophic. All sectors of the economy ground to a virtual halt as the country ran out of food, fuel, electricity, water, and other basic commodities. The dire situation in the country forced political parties to the negotiating table and an agreement was reached and signed in September 2008. However, disagreements on the composition of the unity government and other modalities of implementation ensured that the new Government of National Unity (GNU) was not inaugurated until February 2009. The inauguration of the GNU heralded the beginning of a new era with significant implications for food security in the country. These developments included the implementation of a multi-currency regime, reduction of the rate of inflation, stabilization of the economy, and a general improvement in the supply of foodstuffs to shops in the country.

Although the GNU is credited with introducing the multi-currency regime, the dollarization process had already begun in the last quarter of 2008 when most of the trade in the country began to be conducted in foreign currency albeit informally (Noko 2011). The coalition government simply formalized an already operational system since the US dollar, the South African rand, the Botswana pula, and the UK pound had replaced the Zimbabwean dollar as the trading currency. On 29 January 2009, acting Finance Minister, Patrick Chinamasa, officially introduced the multi-currency regime and promised to pay civil servants US$100 per month to cushion them against inflation. By April 2009, the Zimbabwean dollar ceased to exist as legal tender.

The multi-currency regime brought relief to consumers in a number of areas. First, they no longer had to spend long hours in bank queues to withdraw money, a feature of the later Zimbabwean dollar era. Second, the use of hard currencies enabled retailers to import food from other countries, and third, the price of goods stabilized and consumers could afford to budget for their food and other expenses without the fear and inconvenience of constant price increases. Monthly inflation turned negative and was reported to be at −2.3 % in January, −3.1 % in February, −1.1 % in April, and −1.0 % in May 2009. By December 2009, year-on-year inflation was estimated to be −7.7 %. GDP, which had contracted by −14.4 % in 2008, grew by 5.7 % in 2009 and by 8.1 % in 2010. Several factories that had closed down during the crisis period reopened (Mutengezanwa et al. 2012). Industrial capacity utilization improved from about 10 % at the beginning of 2009 to between 35 and 60 % by December. Some employees were rehired and others began to work more regularly. In addition to the stable political environment, the economic environment was further improved by the implementation of the Short Term Emergency Recovery Programme, which was designed to remedy hyperinflation.

The net effect of these measures was a general improvement in the livelihoods of the population, especially in relation to food. According to FEWSNET/USAID (2009, p. 1), "since the adoption of the multiple currency system and introduction of the duty-free regulation on imported basic commodities, there has been a marked improvement in stocking levels in most shops, and prices have declined." The price of maize, which averaged about US$1.15 per kg in 2008, dropped to between US$ 0.23 and 0.34 per kg in 2009. Shops which had empty shelves during 2008 were fully stocked with food during 2009. The major determining factor of food security was now whether a household had enough money to purchase the food that was readily found in shops and supermarkets. Even the agricultural sector, which for close to a decade had been in a gradual decline, was showing signs of recovery.

A comparison of the 2008 and 2012 AFSUN survey findings shows that poor households were able to diversify their food sourcing strategies and to rely more on a resurrected formal food system. Table 1 compares the food shopping patterns of households at the two points in time. In 2008, only 12 % of households had shopped at supermarkets in the week prior to the survey. In 2012, this figure has increased to 61 %. Similarly, in another sign of the rejuvenation of the formal system, the proportion of households sourcing food from small retail outlets increased from 9 % in 2008 to 62 % in 2012. The informal food economy remained extremely important to most households although the absolute reliance on this source declined slightly (from 96 to 87 % of households). Other signs of change included a slight drop in the proportion of households sourcing food through informal social networks and, interestingly, in reliance on urban agriculture (from 39 to 25 % of households).

While food has clearly become more available to the residents of Harare, the fundamental question is whether it had become more accessible. A comparison of the food security indicators for 2008 and 2012 sheds considerable light on this critical issue. The average HFIAS score for the surveyed households fell from 14.7 in 2008 to 9.8 in 2012, indicating a general overall improvement in household food security. Dietary diversity had also improved with the average HDDS increasing from 4.8 to 6.1. However, a score of 6 (out of 12) still does not indicate great diversity. As Table 2 shows, there were also shifts in the HFIAP scores. The proportion of severely food insecure households fell from 72 to 63 % and the proportion of completely food secure households increased from 2 to 9 %. This indicates that despite the greater availability of food in 2012 and the fact that there had been some improvement since 2008, the majority of households remained in a food insecure state 4 years after the 2008 crisis.

Table 1 Food sources in Harare, 2008 and 2012

	2008 (% of households)	2012 (% of households)
Supermarket	12	61
Small shop/restaurant/take away	9	62
Informal market/street food	96	87
Grow it	39	25
Remittances of food	7	2
Shared meal with neighbors and/or other households	9	6
Food provided by neighbors and/or other households	9	9
Borrow food from others	22	19

Table 2 Levels of household food insecurity, 2008 and 2012

HFIAP categories	2008 (% of households)	2012 (% of households)
Food secure	2	9
Mildly food insecure	3	6
Moderately food insecure	24	22
Severely food insecure	72	63

Why should such high levels of food insecurity have persisted in Harare several years after the 2008 crisis? While a stable political situation and the resultant economic stabilization led to a marked improvement in the livelihoods of the population, the new political and economic regime was certainly not problem free. These difficulties were related to the dollarization of the economy and its impacts on banking, rents, rates, and other monetary activities. In addition, dollarization did not automatically entail the cessation of the underlying problems that had bedeviled the country for close to a decade (Mutengezanwa et al. 2012). These included a dilapidated industrial infrastructure and old factory machinery, a lack of direct investment, low remuneration for employees, persistent and unscheduled water and electricity cuts, and high food prices.

The situation has been exacerbated by resurgent inflation. The cost of living for an urban family of six, which was pegged at US$381.23 in January 2009, for example, had increased to US$546.34 by November 2011 and to US$565.34 in September 2012. Wages have not kept pace with inflation and remain low, particularly for the civil service which is the largest employer in the country. For the first half of 2009, the government only paid civil servants an allowance of US$100 and salary increments thereafter have been minimal. When the Public Service Minister announced a 5.3 % salary increment for the civil service in January 2013, that increment brought the average salary of the lowest paid civil servant to US$296 per month, well below the US$600 required for an average family of six to survive. The 2012 AFSUN survey found that the proportion of household members who were in full-time employment was actually lower in 2012 than in 2008 (24 versus 28 %) (Table 3). The unemployment rate was very similar at both points in time (around 60 %). The only employment category where there was a marked improvement in the proportion of those with part time or casual employment (up from 10 in 2008 to 16 % in 2012).

Table 3 Levels of employment and unemployment, 2008 and 2012

		2008 %	2012 %
Work status	Working full-time	28.1	24.0
	Working part time/casual	9.6	15.7
	Not working—looking	10.2	13.4
	Not working—not looking	52.1	46.9
Total		100.0	100.0

Although the dollarization process brought a degree of stability to the market, food prices themselves remained relatively high for the basic commodities required by poor urban households. A 2-L bottle of cooking oil, for example, cost around US$2.50 in 2009 but was selling for almost US$5 in mid-2011. This was higher than the cost of the same product in South Africa, where it could be bought for the equivalent of US$3. Such price disparities are partly explicable by the Ministry of Finance's reintroduction of import duties on basic foodstuffs in July 2011, as well as the speculative nature of the trading environment coupled with greed as businesses continue the profiteering of the Zimbabwe dollar era. One third of the surveyed households in 2012 considered their economic condition to be worse or the same as a year earlier and two thirds indicated that they had gone without food or other basic necessities such as water, electricity, or a cash income in the month preceding the survey.

In addition to high food prices, unemployment, and low wages, Harare's poor face high monthly utility bills from a variety of service providers, including the city council and the electricity supply authority. The Harare Residents' Association, for example, has on numerous occasions threatened to take the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority to court for overcharging residents. In 2012, the Harare Residents' Trust indicated that it had intervened in over 900 cases relating to chaotic billing by the authority. In addition, the power utility has also unilaterally increased the rates without government approval. In September 2011, for example, the power utility was ordered by the Administrative Court to revert to 2009 tariffs because increases had been imposed without following the correct channels. The situation is the same for water supplies. In its 2010/11 budget, the Harare City Council proposed a 40 % increase in water tariffs despite the fact that residents were already paying unsustainably high bills of between US$40 and 100 per month. Residents who do not pay their water and electricity bills risk having their supplies disconnected.

When the changeover from the Zimbabwean dollar to the multi-currency regime took place, service providers converted existing household debts to US dollars at arbitrary exchange rates. Households were saddled with debts that they were unable to settle. In some instances, the council has responded by confiscating property with the intention of selling them to offset the debts. Those threatened with confiscation have tried to make arrangements with the city to pay off the debt in installments, but even this has proved unrealistic as households rarely have surplus cash to service the debt. Poor households in the city are faced with the seemingly insurmountable task of generating an income to feed their members as well as pay off debts form an earlier era.

Conclusion

Although the whole country was affected by Zimbabwe's economic meltdown, at the time, the vulnerability of the urban poor to food insecurity was especially severe given their heavy reliance on food purchases and the need to meet other obligatory expenses. The major factors that underpinned food insecurity during the crisis period included persistent shortages of food on the market, hyperinflation, rapidly escalating food prices, low wages, and the general collapse of the formal food system. In 2009, the coming of the Government of National Unity stabilized the situation by bringing down inflation, introducing a multi-currency regime, and improving the general food supply.

This paper argues, however, that the general livelihoods of the urban poor have not dramatically improved as new challenges have emerged that continue to threaten household food security. These challenges include persistent unemployment and low wages; the enormous debt burden thrust on the poor due to the conversion of rents, electricity, and water arrears from the Zimbabwean to the US dollar; the high tariffs that service providers continue to charge; and the high cost of food in relation to wages. Thus, although the dollarization process and the stable political climate brought welcome relief to residents, the urban poor continue to be threatened by severe food insecurity.

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