

Food Insecurity in Kenya: Policy or Politics?

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Abstract

The occurrence of food shortages and famines seems to be more common in the 21st century, even though there have been significant improvements in overall agricultural productivity. Despite the development of more advanced soil fertility management techniques, better-yielding crops, drought- and disease-resistant crop varieties, increased food diversity, improved animal husbandry, and biotechnological solutions to stabilize food supplies, the number of people who cannot feed themselves has steadily increased since the 1960s. This research examines the worsening food insecurity scenario, first globally and then in Kenya. Food insecurity is analyzed from three perspectives: food availability, access to food, and vulnerability to future hunger and famine. Each perspective highlights the progress made through various national policy initiatives. In recent years, these policy efforts have spanned three to five years and are now incorporated into larger development goals. While successful strategies for coping with food insecurity have been enumerated in other parts of the globe, these efforts in Kenya have become increasingly politicized.

Keywords: food shortages, famine, food insecurity, food policy

Introduction

The dilemma of food insecurity is not new, yet the challenge of addressing it continues to be relevant to scholars and policy makers. Historically, the dialogue on food insecurity dwelt on inadequacies of food supply in relation to food requirements at national, regional and global levels (Maxwell, 1996). A recent shift in the debate brought the level of focus to the micro level; local, household, and individual (Maxwell & Frankenberger, 1992). More recent developments have broadened the scope of food insecurity to incorporate Amartya Sen's work on elements of access to food; of vulnerability to hunger and famine and the perception of sustainability of practices by vulnerable groups in a given population as viewed by outsiders (Chambers, 1989; Sen, 1981; Watts & Bohle, 1993).

This article is divided into four parts. It begins by defining the terminology used, before moving on to a detailed examination of Kenya's food policy efforts from the 1980s to the present day. The third section uses Amartya Sen's perspectives on addressing hunger as a framework to evaluate Kenya's effort towards becoming more food secure. The fourth section

reflects on the failures and loopholes of recent national food policies, programs and efforts and the opportunities it has created for politics.

Although the terms "food insecurity" and "famine" are often used interchangeably in popular media, they have distinct technical meanings that reflect different levels of severity of hunger. A person is considered to be food secure when they have reliable access to sufficient food for a healthy life (Maxwell & Frankenberger, 1992). This secure state includes the following aspects of access to food: (i) sufficiency in quantities and nutritional content, (ii) security or the absence of vulnerability to hunger, and (iii) sustainability of existing practices that allow continued access to food. Food insecurity, therefore, is the absence of such certainty. The term "famine" as used here refers a situation where a significant portion of the population is unable to access enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs (Swift, 1989). In a famine situation, there is a severe and prolonged shortage of food, often resulting in widespread hunger. Famine may result from the absence of adequate precipitation (drought) or disruptions in rainfall patterns that are likely to lead to widespread crop

failure and therefore cause severe food shortage. The devastation of an entire crop from pest infestation may also lead to widespread food shortage and famine.

Food insecurity in Kenya over seven decades

Agriculture has historically been viewed as the mainstay of Kenya's economy. The agricultural sector continues to play a significant role in the country's economic development, supporting nearly 80% of the population's livelihoods and contributing approximately 20% (one fifth) of the Gross Domestic Product in 2022 (KIPPRA, 2022). The prospects of a food secure Kenya, where every person has assured access to food at all times required for a healthy and productive life remains bleak. Maize, beans and wheat are viewed as staples in the Kenyan national diet, contributing a significant proportion to the daily calorie supply for rural and urban residents. According to the Ministry and Planning and National Development (currently the Ministry of Devolution and Planning), this diet composition has remained virtually unchanged since the 1960s.

Beginning from the first decade of independence, the bulk of the production of agricultural commodities came from small scale farms. Most of these small-scale farmers were organized under cooperative societies which handled the procurement of farm inputs and marketed the agricultural commodities produced by their members. These organizations handled both procurement of farm inputs and marketing of produce on behalf of the small-scale farmers. The very large, small-farmer organizations were state-run. Examples include the National Cereals and Produce Board and the National Irrigation Board Authority. Many of these state-run boards were reorganized and reconstituted through revisions in the legislature in the wake of the 2010 constitutional review (Government of Kenya, 2010).

Food production in Kenya fell sharply in 1979 and 1980 due to a major drought (Actionaid International, 2005; Nyangito et al., 2006). The decline in food production continued over the next three years, even as the population increased steadily. The combination of declining food production, a rapidly growing population, and massive crop failures due to drought conditions, culminated in a catastrophic

famine in Kenya in 1983-1984.

Several policy failures also precipitated this crisis. For instance, pricing policies protected food consumers at the expense of the farmers while research and development were focused on production of cash crops (e.g., tea, coffee, sisal, and pyrethrum) instead of food crops. Although significant efforts were made by research and development programs to develop high yielding technologies for farmers, there were significant shortcomings in their transfer to farmers. Agricultural research and development were dominated by the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) which was established as a parastatal in 1979. In its early years, KARI's strength was on agricultural research. Over time, the advances made in agricultural research did not translate to increased yields on small-scale farms. There were significant weaknesses in the transfer of technology from laboratories and test fields to small farmers' fields. These weaknesses were partly due to reduced government spending associated with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1980s and 1990s. As such, the Ministry of Agriculture's extension services became less efficient and effective, severely hindering the transfer of technology to farmers.

Kenya's first National Food Policy, which is contained in Sessional Paper no. 4 of 1981, was produced in the wake of that first major famine 1979-80 (Government of Kenya, 1981). An overproduction of maize in 1976-77 had left the stores at the National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB) full and therefore unable to buy future surpluses from farmers. A combination of a fertilizer shortage and a discontinuation of credit for farmers resulted in a significant decline in maize production in 1978. The slow response to exporting maize surpluses discouraged farmers. Poor growing conditions in early 1979 further reduced maize production, leading to a food shortage and famine in 1979-80. The first national food policy was produced in a hope to correct the problem. The policy sought to maintain broad self-sufficiency in major food items and achieve equitable distribution of food to all citizens mainly through state monopoly of input distribution, provision of subsidies on fertilizers, and setting grain prices.

A second National Food Policy (contained in Sessional Paper no. 2 of 1994) was produced after the 1992-93 famine (Government of Kenya, 1994). The policy reflected on the succession of the earlier food policy with increased food production in years of “good weather” and acknowledged the problems experienced in 1984-85 and 1992-93 when failed rains had caused widespread crop failures. This second food policy shifted focus away from food production and instead towards spurring on agricultural production (including the much-celebrated coffee, tea and horticultural exports). This second national food policy heavily promoted a market-driven approach to addressing food insecurity concerns through the involvement of multiple sectors including the health, education, agriculture, and private sectors. As was the trend across every sector of the economy in the 1990s, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s Structural Adjustment Programs undermined national goals of self-sufficiency by reducing national budgets intended for agricultural support. As a result, this second National Food Policy was crippled by lack of funding for implementing planned activities and had no clear coordination mechanism to increase food production. The economic reforms implemented from 1993 devalued the Kenyan shilling; thus, the problematic balance of payments greatly undermined efforts to import fertilizers targeted for increased maize production for much of the 1990s (Nyangito et al., 2004). The NCPB used to bridge food deficits and help guard against food insecurity. However, after it was restructured, its monopoly was dismantled and it became a commercial buyer and seller of last resort. It aimed to maintain strategic food reserves with the support of foreign exchange reserves (initially pegged at US\$60 million) (Nyangito et al., 2006). The reliance on balance of payments to import fertilizers had a significant negative impact on food production after that.

Subsequent national food policies were incorporated into the five-year national development plans. In 2008, the Kenyan government launched a national, long-term economic policy called Kenya Vision 2030. This policy incorporated the five-year development plans (referred to as medium plans). Kenya Vision 2030 identifies four key areas that the government will focus on continuously and

incrementally, known as the Big 4 Agenda. Food security is one of these areas. Kenya Vision 2030 has implemented three medium-term plans so far, and a fourth plan is expected to be launched soon.

The first medium term plan (2008-2012) included a modest amount of attention on agriculture (Republic of Kenya, 2008). This initial plan introduced the government’s first 12 flagship projects. Of these flagship projects, only one directly aimed to increase food production. This was the fertilizer cost reduction strategy, which in its early stages explored ways to import fertilizers in bulk and ultimately set up distribution mechanisms for farmers to access them.

The social unrest that followed the 2007-2008 Kenyan post-election violence led to a significant decrease in food production. (Rutten & Leliveld, 2008). During this period of unrest, many farmers and entire communities were displaced from their land. As a result, a severe maize shortage occurred later in 2008, after large numbers of farmers were displaced and unable to tend their crops. The situation was exacerbated by the destruction of maize fields in many parts of Rift Valley and Western Provinces, the country's largest producers of maize, during the post-election violence (Schlein, 2009). Wheat and beans were also affected by the civil unrest, which led to disruptions in production areas around the country (Rutten & Leliveld, 2008). In addition, disrupted rainfall patterns experienced in most of 2007 and 2008 (Wesangula, 2009) extended the period of reduced food production in both urban and rural areas until the end of 2008. Similarly, reports of food shortages were widespread across the country during the first half of 2009. (Andenje, 2009; Bii & Okwembah, 2009; Githaiga & Nyassy, 2009; Mathenge, 2009; Otieno, 2009; Rutten & Leliveld, 2008). The initial medium-term plan was well-received and was expected to address the prolonged food shortages.

The second medium-term plan had a dedicated agriculture sector plan that identified 13 flagship projects, including the previous 12 and one additional new one (Republic of Kenya, 2013). The larger and more nuanced agriculture sector plan demonstrated the national commitment to the sector. Of the 13 flagship projects, two directly focused on food production: (i) the newly added irrigated agriculture program, and (ii)

the fertilizer cost reduction strategy. The irrigated agriculture program recognized that most food production in Kenya is rainfed agriculture, which is constrained by weather patterns. The program therefore focused on horticultural production, as indicated by its stated objective of constructing 300 small-holder water harvesting structures and increasing the irrigated acreage from 650,000 acres in 2013 to 1 million acres by 2017. As part of its fertilizer cost reduction strategy, the government purchased 615,121 metric tons of fertilizer in bulk and implemented plans to use the private sector to supply and distribute it. This led to a 31% reduction in the price of DAP fertilizer and a 17% reduction in the price of CAN top dressing fertilizer (Republic of Kenya, 2013). The corresponding increase in maize production from 40.7 million bags in 2013 to 42.5 million bags in 2015 may be attributed to these efforts. However, a significant drop in maize production occurred in 2017, with only 35.4 million bags produced. This was due to insufficient rains during the growing seasons in 2017, as well as post-election violence in late 2017, which also contributed to the decline in production. The reduced rains in 2017 led to a sharp decline in food production across the board, including wheat production. In 2016, 214,700 tons of wheat were produced, but this number dropped to 165,000 tons in 2017. Further momentum was demonstrated when one investor was identified from a shortlist of investors to establish a local fertilizer plant. Toyota Tsusho Corporation was selected as the strategic partner for the fertilizer blending facility. However, these two initiatives have yet to be implemented, as the fourth medium-term plan is awaited (Republic of Kenya, 2013).

The third medium-term plan, which ran from 2018 to 2022, focused on increasing agricultural output and processing, with a particular emphasis on increasing livestock output (Republic of Kenya, 2018). This plan had 21 flagship programs and projects, an increase from 13 in the second medium-term plan. This was in addition to the shift in focus towards livestock production. The fertilizer subsidy program was continued in the third medium-term plan, with the addition of a soil analysis component and a monitoring and evaluation of impact component. A new food and nutrition security project was initiated in

the third medium-term plan. The project targeted increased maize production, as well as increased rice and Irish potato production. These new initiatives also indicate a slight shift in focus towards expanding production areas, enhancing access to seed and fertilizers, irrigation, mechanization, and post-harvest management.

A fourth medium-term plan for 2023-2027 is being developed and is available for public scrutiny in the form of a concept note. As a result, missing data limits the assessment of the success of the third medium-term plan. The assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food production is also not possible at this point.

Evidence of progress towards a more food secure future

In this section, Kenya's national food policy efforts are evaluated using Amartya Sen's framework for addressing hunger (Sen, 1981). This framework is used in this paper to assess progress towards a more food-secure future. The following three perspectives are used: (i) food availability/production, (ii) access to food /entitlements, and (iii) vulnerability to hunger.

i. Food availability and production

Kenya's agriculture sector contributes 27% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Although the economy is becoming more diversified and robust, agriculture remains the largest contributor to the GDP. The sector contributes 75% of raw industrial materials, 65% of export earnings, and about 60% of total employment (KIPPRA, 2022). Agriculture remains a significant part of the economy and a key driver of future development. Remarkable technological advancements have been made in recent years to increase Kenya's food production. Traditional and genetic engineering techniques have been used to produce higher-yielding, disease-resistant, and drought-tolerant varieties of numerous food crops. The Ministry of Devolution and Planning (formerly Ministry of Planning and National Development) acknowledges that there is still significant room for improvement in addressing the food production deficit, particularly in the staples of maize, wheat, and beans. These gaps have been routinely met by

importing food to supplement domestic production, as indicated by the self-sufficiency ratio and import dependency ratio. The self-sufficiency ratio for grains ranged from 69.1% in 2000 to 79.1% in 2005. The desired target is 100%. The self-sufficiency ratio¹ for grains ranged from 69.1% in 2000 to 79.1% in 2005. The desired target is 100% (Kenya Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006). The country's import dependency ratio² for wheat ranged from 50% to 80% between 2000 and 2005 (Kenya Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Kenya has a disproportionate number of organizations working to advance agricultural productivity compared to its neighboring countries. These organizations vary in size and scope, from local and international to non-governmental and non-profit. They work with individual households and communities to implement agricultural development projects. Some organizations, such as international relief agencies, work in remote districts, while others, such as government ministries and departments, work countrywide. Despite their differences, all of these organizations share the common goal of increasing food production. There has been a significant increase in the variety of seeds available for staple crops such as wheat, maize, and beans since the 1960s. For example, the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI), in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, has consistently contributed to improving crop varieties through scientific research over the years. KARI has collaborated with a variety of European partners, including individual governments and European Union agencies. The projects have ranged from multimillion-dollar projects involving multiple countries to smaller microfinance programs targeting women's self-help groups.

According to KARI, the country's extensive network of field extension centers and workers have disseminated research findings and new seed varieties to farmers at the grassroots. These varieties respond to

the country's various farming community needs, preferences, and consumer demands (KARI, 2008). There has been a renewed interest in traditional grains like millet, which has led to the development of new varieties that are more productive, disease-resistant, and nutritious. These traditional grains are being used to supplement maize and wheat, Kenya's staple crops. Additionally, biogenetic innovations have increased the nutritional content of these crops. Significant progress has also been made in irrigation and water conservation, as well as soil fertility management in various parts of the country. These advancements have been acknowledged in the country's medium-term economic plans.

Most efforts to support food production have been focused on small-scale farmers. A more coordinated effort would likely result in greater food production. For example, if organizations involved in agricultural production, such as private, public, non-governmental, non-profit, and relief agencies, focused on staples such as maize, wheat, and beans, they could achieve a larger impact. This would require that the national food policy consistently articulate this focus and that the national and county government budgets reiterate it.

ii. Access to food and entitlements

A person's access to food is hinged on his/her entitlement set, as Sen argues (Sen & Dreze, 1999). That entitlement set consists of a person's endowment comprising of their land, their labor, and the few other resources that they may have and, the exchange entitlement involving the set of alternatives that correspond to each endowment.

A person's access to food is determined by their entitlement set, as argued by Sen (Sen & Dreze, 1999). This entitlement set consists of a person's endowment, which comprises their land, labor, and other assets, and the exchange entitlement, involving

commodities (e.g. rice).

² The Import Dependency Ratio (IDR) indicates how much a country is dependent on imported food stuffs for domestic consumption. IDR is calculated by dividing the imports by the sum of production and the difference between imports and exports, and then converting the result into a percentage.

¹ The Self Sufficiency Ratio (SSR) indicates the extent to which a country relies on its production resources. A higher SSR indicates a greater degree of self-sufficiency. SSR is calculated by dividing the overall national food production by the sum of production and the difference between imports and exports. The result is then converted into a percentage. It is calculated for groups of commodities (e.g. cereals) or for individual

the alternatives that correspond to each endowment.

Land is a key endowment that can be used to grow/produce food. Land can also be mortgaged, pledged, or disposed of in exchange for food and thereby prevent starvation. Kenya has seen a sharp increase in landlessness since the 1990s. The amount of arable land is fixed and the pressure for arable land has increased as the population has grown steadily. Declining soil fertility, increasing soil erosion, soil contamination from industrial use and from mining activities as well as general environmental degradation have simultaneously effectively reduced the amount of land that is available for food production.

Although difficult to achieve, reducing landlessness and increasing land tenure security are important components of economic development for agricultural economies in Sub-Saharan Africa. Land tenure security can be assessed using proxy measures, such as increased long-term investment in agriculture. This is because studies in Sub-Saharan Africa have shown that land tenure security is strongly correlated with long-term investment in agricultural productivity (Holden et al., 2009; Meinzen-Dick, 2002; Otsuka & Place, 2001). In Kenya, efforts towards tenure security has been closely linked to land titling. However, land titles are not a reliable indicator of land tenure security and do not necessarily lead to increased investment in agricultural productivity (Barrows & Roth, 1990; Bruce & Migot-Adholla, 1994; Odhiambo & Nyangito, 2002; Place & Migot-Adholla, 1998). Thus, while there has been significant progress in land titling and registration across Sub-Saharan Africa, agricultural productivity has not necessarily increased. For most farmers, family members are the main source of labor. Everyone's labor can always be exchanged for food. This is especially true in Kenya, like across Sub-Saharan Africa, where much of the agricultural labor force consists of women. However, women rarely have control of the land they till, thus affecting long term investment and overall productivity.

Kenya is one of the Sub-Saharan African countries that has had significant success in increased land titling and registration, particularly in Central Province (now Nyeri, Kirinyaga, Embu, Tharaka Nithi and Meru counties) and the areas around Nairobi (now Murang'a, Kiambu and Machakos counties) (Atwood,

1990; Odhiambo & Nyangito, 2002). Yet, land disputes are vastly common in the country. Kenya has witnessed sporadic land-related violence in recent years, including 1992 (Atwood, 1990; Green, 1987), 1997, 2002, 2008, and 2017. Much of the land-related violence has been politically motivated, especially in the multi-ethnic Rift Valley region. This is because the political party that loses power in each region often contests the land ownership of the people who supported the opposing political party. Regardless, these 'land clashes' have led to displacement of many people from their homes, loss of tenure security, increased landlessness, and reduced productivity of the contested land. Alarmingly widespread post-election violence occurred in early 2008, displacing the largest number of farmers in Kenya's history. Unsurprisingly, this unprecedented displacement was a major factor in disrupting access to and exchange of entitlements in late 2008 and early 2009. It is important to note that land clashes in Kenya are also a result of the country's checkered history of land reform (Rutten & Leliveld, 2008). Similarly, politically motivated 'land clashes' occurred following the 2017 national elections. Once again, the election-related violence disrupted people's access to their entitlements, including land, labor, and exchange entitlements.

Besides land and labor, other resources that can be considered part of the entitlement set for many Kenyans include household items such as furniture, farm implements, and livestock. When households' entitlements (land and labor) collapse or are rendered unproductive due to natural or man-made factors, and households are faced with the risk of starvation, they may be forced to trade such assets for food. The order in which assets are traded off, either initially or in subsequent waves, has been a subject of debate among scholars. Corbett found that households will strategically plan to minimize their impacts through short-term responses, such as borrowing from merchants, rationing current food consumption, collecting wild fruits to supplement food supplies, borrowing food from kin, breaking up households and sending children to live with distant relatives, selling productive assets including livestock, and pledging land in exchange for food or cash (Corbett, 1988). The specific strategy chosen and how it is used varies

widely by household and region. According to de Waal, the sale of livestock was the last resort for groups facing starvation in Sudan (de Waal, 1989, 1993). Similarly, Devereux found that the disposal of livestock, such as goats, was the final strategy for groups facing starvation in northeastern Ghana (Devereux, 1993). In extreme cases, land may be sold outright in exchange for short-term food returns. In Kenya's 2008-2009 drought, affected populations in Eastern and Northeastern provinces and northern Rift Valley (including Mandera, Wajir, Isiolo, Turkana, Marsabit and Samburu counties) used a variety of coping strategies, as reported in the country's press (Andenje, 2009; Bii & Okwembah, 2009; Githaiga & Nyassy, 2009; Mathenge, 2009; Otieno, 2009; Schlein, 2009; Walt, 2008).

As we analyze the growing numbers of Kenyans who are unable to feed themselves in the 21st first century, it is important to understand the complex factors that affect access to food and the entitlements' endowments that are available to the population. For instance, each person is endowed with their own labor, which they can exchange for food or use to grow their own food. However, ill health can affect a person's ability to grow or trade their labor for food. This endowment collapses when impacted by a disease like HIV/AIDS, which is now widespread in Kenya. In 2002, an estimated 2.5 million people between the ages 15 and 49 years were infected with HIV (Actionaid International, 2005). Infection rates in the rural areas were estimated at 11-12% of the working-age population. The disease renders those afflicted unable to use their labor to grow their own food, let alone trade it for food. This further increases the number of people likely to be food insecure in the future. The loss of labor attributed to HIV/AIDS translates to declining productivity, especially for small-scale farmers who rely heavily on household labor. The collapse of endowments for segments of the population leaves individual households vulnerable to hunger, regardless of progress made in increasing food productivity in other parts of the country. Underuse of labor due to declining access to productive assets like land is a more significant challenge to Kenya's agricultural productivity than HIV/AIDS.

As we continue to understand the complex

ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Kenyans, we can draw on our knowledge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic to make inferences. Although COVID-19 illness had a much shorter timeline than HIV/AIDS, it still impacted access to labor entitlements in affected households. As we continue to learn more about the impact of COVID-19 on food production in 2020-2021, some early indicators suggest that food production may have increased in some parts of the country. The national and worldwide lockdown undoubtedly redirected labor entitlements from other economic sectors towards household food production. However, this entitlement exchange was only available to households that had access to land. Therefore, further investigation into the impact of COVID-19 on food production is needed.

iii. Vulnerability to future hunger

The severity of hunger can weaken a group's ability to resist future hunger events. Corbett (1988) identifies three distinct stages of famine. The first stage is characterized by the widespread use of short-term coping strategies, as discussed in the previous section. The second stage is marked by the gradual disposal of key productive assets, such as ploughs and oxen (Corbett, 1988; Devereux, 1993). The third stage involves destitution and distress migration, often to roadsides or relief camps (Corbett, 1988; Sen, 1981). Studies have shown powerful prioritization in an effort to protect households' longer term viability by hanging on to the most productive resources like large livestock, ploughs or land (Devereux, 1993; Watts & Bohle, 1993). The sequencing of short-term coping strategies reflects a keen desire to avoid making irreversible changes to domestic resources. However, as starvation becomes more severe, households may be forced to make irreversible changes, such as disposing of productive assets like ploughs, oxen, and even family land (Watts & Bohle, 1993).

In regions where households depend on rain-fed agriculture, the risk of crop failure is always high, leading to increased vulnerability to future hunger events, especially when the resource base has been greatly reduced through the disposal of productive assets (Devereux, 1993). Post-famine recovery therefore depends on the stage that households had reached before recovery begun. From this perspective,

famine is an economic crisis, above all else.

Small-scale farmers in Kenya account for a significant share of the country's agricultural production. An estimated 4 million small-scale farmers produce 75% of the total maize crop, and half of this produce is marketed (Actionaid International, 2005). This means that these farmers play a vital role in Kenya's food security and economy. Increasingly, many small-scale farmers depend on markets to meet their food consumption needs as a result of declining yields and post-harvest losses (Actionaid International, 2005). Thus, an estimated 70% of the food consumed in households is purchased from both rural and urban markets. Poverty, therefore, impacts the vulnerability of households and significantly shapes their prospects for recovery. (Sen & Dreze, 1999). To effectively tackle vulnerability to hunger, it is essential to address the underlying components of poverty and implement economic and social policies and strategies that enhance the economic well-being of vulnerable segments of society. Poverty eradication is therefore essential to Kenya's efforts to reduce hunger and vulnerability.

Regional and local instability and conflict are major contributors to food insecurity and poverty. Conflict can significantly undermine a society's ability to feed itself, and there is a growing body of research that suggests a link between poverty, food insecurity, resource degradation, and prolonged instability and conflict. (Pinstrup-Anderson et al., 1997). While not all poor, food insecure societies experience conflict, the likelihood of conflict increases as people's ability to meet their basic needs declines. While the body of knowledge on this topic is still evolving, the link between widespread poverty and increased vulnerability to hunger remains evident. Addressing hunger and vulnerability is a major step towards achieving food security, which is an essential long-term economic goal. Evaluating Kenya's efforts to address food insecurity from this perspective is essentially evaluating the country's efforts to reduce poverty, as vulnerability to hunger is tackled by short-term coping strategies that involve disposal of assets. Lowering vulnerability to hunger is a true indicator of poverty reduction, and vice versa.

Reflections on policies and politics of addressing food insecurities

The three perspectives on addressing hunger provide evidence that Kenya's efforts to address food insecurity have not been successful. First, the government's response has been remarkably slow. It took more than two decades for Kenya to develop its first national food policy. The initial food policy documents, which were annual government goals, were essentially short-term responses to the food crisis experienced in the 1980s. For instance, the stop-gap measure of importing grains to bridge the gaps has been heavily politicized. The companies awarded import permits have consistently been a small circle of elites, including sitting politicians and their close associates. In some cases, the imported grains have been sold on the domestic market without the promised significant price reduction. In other cases, the imported grains have driven down the prices of domestically produced grains so much that local farmers have been unable to cover their modest production costs. In any event, food imports have not addressed the underlying causes of food insecurity and are instead short-term fixes. Like many other developing economies, attempts to fill food deficits with imports of large quantities of grains do not address the root causes of declining domestic food production.

Subsequent food policies were incorporated into broader agricultural sector policies and initiatives as part of five-year development plans. The incorporation of current efforts into the longer-term vision of Kenya Vision 2030 demonstrates a significant improvement in the government's commitment to addressing food insecurity. As mentioned earlier, the one or two flagship projects and programs are focused on increasing the production of staple foods, such as maize, wheat, and beans. One commendable effort is the fertilizer cost reduction program, which has been consistently included in all three previous medium-term economic plans (2008-2012, 2013-2017, and 2018-2022) (Republic of Kenya, 2008, 2013, 2018). However, there is a striking lack of well-defined implementation strategies and action steps at both the central government and county government levels. Instead, the distribution of bulk-purchased imported fertilizers has been delegated

to the private sector. This created opportunities for a small elite group to obtain subsidized fertilizers and use them for large-scale maize farming. The private sector distribution mechanisms consistently resulted in the same elite group becoming fertilizer retailers. As a result, only a limited amount of the subsidized fertilizer reached the intended small-scale farmers at the prescribed lower cost. Reports have emerged that imported fertilizer, in the same bags it was imported in, has been found on store shelves and is being sold at much higher prices than the subsidized price. Small-scale farmers across the country have expressed outrage at the lack of oversight of the fertilizer reduction program and the multiple bulk importation events.

Land ownership conflicts have long hindered food production in Kenya. Some of these conflicts arise from the country's dual land tenure system, which combines common law and customary law (Odhiambo & Nyangito, 2002). In some cases, land disputes have been tied up in court for decades, preventing the land from being used productively. To improve land tenure security and agricultural performance, the legal system needs to be strengthened and the overlapping responsibilities of land enforcement agencies need to be clarified. KIPPRA estimates that it takes at least 18 to 20 months to resolve a land preservation order (Odhiambo & Nyangito, 2002). To improve the efficiency of the land enforcement system, it needs to be streamlined and made more transparent. Additionally, although it may be unpopular, the political causes of land disputes need to be addressed.

Many Kenyans are at risk of hunger due to high levels of poverty. In 2000, 60% of the rural population was classified as poor (Nyangito et al., 2006). Poverty is most prevalent in low-potential areas³ and in overexploited high-potential areas. High incidence of rural poverty in Kenya can be attributed to low agricultural productivity, poor marketing, unemployment and low wages, high dependency, inaccessibility to productive assets, and high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates. One lasting solution to poverty in Kenya is to target poverty alleviation

strategies to high-poverty areas. One effective strategy is for the government to subsidize fertilizer use for staple food production over a prolonged period, until affected populations can grow their own food. The Kenyan government could potentially implement food-for-work programs, in which citizens would work on infrastructure projects in exchange for food. Although food-for-work programs are not popular with governments due to their high costs, they have been shown to be effective in other developing countries in providing food security in the short and medium term.

In conclusion, the prospects of a food secure Kenya, where every person has assured access to food at all times required to lead a healthy and productive life unfortunately remain bleak.

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potential areas. High and medium potential areas are suitable for rain-fed agriculture. Low potential areas are referred to as Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL).

³ Land is classified into three categories based on precipitation received: high potential areas with the highest amounts of rainfall followed by medium potential areas and then low

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