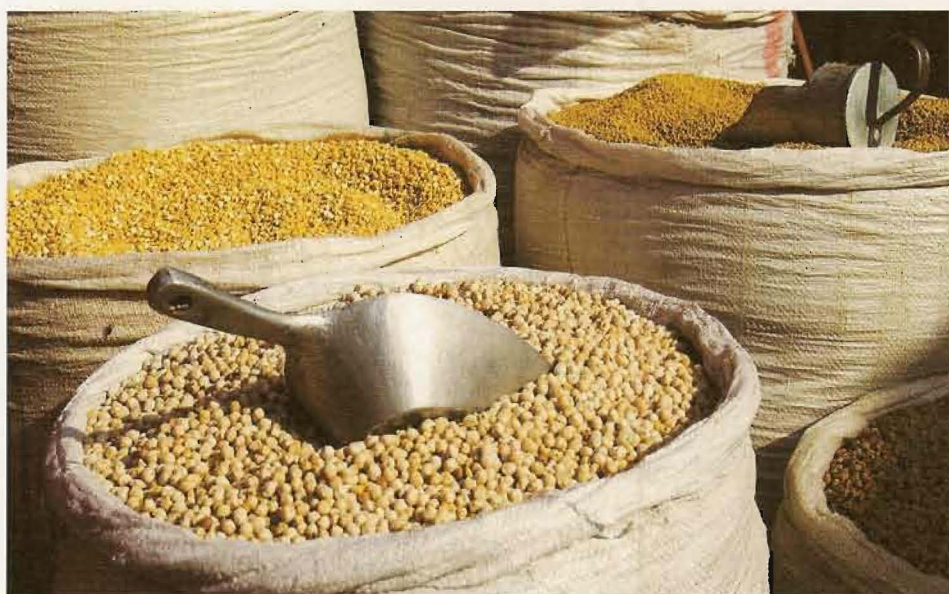


An African voice to fill African mouths: Improving the international food-aid regime

Hilton Zunckel

The lingering global financial crisis has been accompanied by a less publicised but in many respects more sinister crisis in Africa – a food crisis. The severe food shortage and regulatory lag in taking corrective action has led to efforts by farmers in Southern Africa to influence the manner in which food aid is dealt with internationally. Indeed, given that a staggering 65 percent of global food aid lands in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is critically important to address its impacts on Southern African farmers through the forums available under international treaties and organisations – principally, the Food Aid Convention, the FAO and the WTO.



Food aid consists of the transfer of commodities (mainly grain), or payments close in nature, to developing countries as a form of development assistance for the provision of food. Three broad categories of food aid can be distinguished: Emergency Food Aid (humanitarian/crisis purposes); Project Food Aid (linked to development projects); and Programme Food Aid (donor government to recipient government budget support). In the broader context, food aid is also related to the concept of 'food security'.

In Africa it is crucial to prevent food aid from weakening the agricultural sector, and instead seize the opportunity of making food aid a tool that helps unlock the agricultural potential of the region to produce enough food for its people, enhances commercial capacities and creates jobs for rural people.

The WTO and food aid

The most interesting activity on food aid internationally is within the realm of the WTO. In taking the issue forward from the current position to the future Doha deal, there is consensus among WTO members that the WTO shall not stand in the way of the provision of genuine food aid. There is also consensus that what is to be eliminated is commercial displacement.

Food aid trends

The volume of food aid has declined over the past decade, with quantities decreasing from 15.1 million tons in 1999 to 5.9 million tons in 2007. This is a record low for food-aid deliveries. It has been found that the availability of food aid is high when there have been good harvests and low prices. In contrast, food aid is low when prices are high, which critically compromises the compensating role of food aid in times of food shortages. This is completely counter intuitive and indicative of the link between food aid and surplus disposal policies.

In 2007, the United States provided 44 percent of global food aid, while the European Union provided 25 percent. The EU has a milder, development orientated approach, while the United States still suffers from a legacy of politics linked to food aid and surplus disposals; admittedly, however, changes in the US approach are afoot. Ultimately, no effort to improve food aid can be considered worthy unless the United States, the biggest food aid donor, is involved. African agriculture will have to remain attuned to this in their strategies in the international fora.

The African contingent has been rather successful in having their views reflected in the negotiating texts. The African proposal distinguishes between emergency food aid and other non-emergency food aid. In emergencies they support the 'Safe Box' concept, arguing that as it will be used for emergency food aid, it should not be subject to any disciplines. With regards other forms of food aid, the African aim is to ensure that food aid does not displace commercial trade or adversely affects local agricultural production.

In addition, the WTO Decision on Net Food-Importing Developing Countries (NFIDCs) allows for poor countries to ask for assistance to improve productivity and infrastructure. However, it is unclear that any least developed countries (LDCs) or NFIDCs have really made serious requests under the Decision. This might be an opportunity for better voicing of African needs.

The international architecture

The Food Aid Convention (FAC) is arguably the primary international instrument dealing with food aid. The objectives of the FAC are firstly to contribute to global food security and only secondly to improve the ability of the international community to respond to food emergencies. While it is generally a legally well constructed treaty to administer international food aid, its Achilles' heel – the exclusion of food aid recipient countries from the treaty and a lack of transparency – requires attention.

In the FAO the Consultative Sub-Committee on Surplus Disposal (CSSD) looks to ensure that agricultural commodities that are exported on concessionary terms result in additional consumption for the recipient country and do not displace normal commercial imports. Likewise, domestic production should not be discouraged or otherwise adversely affected. Its principles, however, are not binding, and thus represent only the intent of the signatory countries. Africans are present here although their inputs seem low. This again is potentially an opportunity for greater 'voice' by African countries

A regional approach

From a regional perspective it seems that the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Plan (CAADP) initiative holds much promise in regional coordination and development action for food aid, within a wider food security and agricultural development agenda. In short, the top drivers that will influence food aid flows over the next decade are: the production of biofuels from food crops, the global economic crisis and climate change. These factors exist in tandem with developments in international law to reform the global institutional regime for food aid.

From a policy perspective, the farmers of Southern Africa have recognized that food aid cannot be a replacement for the benefits of a long-term food security strategy. In this regard, African farmers

have compiled a list of policy responses and positions that they feel need to be taken up by Southern African governments and the requisite international organisations. They acknowledge the necessity for and benefit of food aid to augment their productive activities in times when circumstances outside of the control of farmers lead to a severe food shortage. However, they also wish to guard against the introduction of ill-timed and poorly targeted market-disrupting food aid into their domestic and regional markets.¹

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The policy response on food aid should focus on making the international legal architecture more friendly and participative for recipient countries, but also encourage a more proactive and participative role from regional agriculture, primarily in four ways:

1. Africans need to pursue the reform of the Food Aid Convention under the auspices of the International Grains Agreement to engineer the emergence of a mechanism for food aid recipient countries to make their voices heard under the Convention;
2. Africa must take a more active role in forums where it does currently have access, like the FAO's Consultative Sub-Committee on Surplus Disposal;
3. Africa needs to guard the textual progress to which it has successfully contributed as reflected in the current WTO draft modalities text;
4. Africa needs to question why the current WTO draft modalities text breaks the existing linkage between the WTO and the Food Aid Convention that is present in the WTO Agreement on Agriculture.

There seems to be a growing understanding that forceful words from African mouths at international forums have a direct role in filling African mouths with food in sustainable manner. In this regard the donor community needs to be encouraged to provide relief during food shortages, while guarding against the introduction of ill-timed and poorly targeted food-aid deliveries, including by allowing food-aid recipients their rightful voice in the architecture of international law in this field.

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Notes

- 1 In this regard readers may be interested in reading the food aid policy of the Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions (SACAU). The SACAU Position on Food Aid, is available at: <http://www.sacau.org/hosting/sacau/SacauWeb.nsf/SACAU%20Positions%20on%20Food%20Aid.pdf>