AN EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY THE GOVERNMENT TO IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY IN LESOTHO

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ABSTRACT

The persistently negative state of food security worldwide has worsened the already compromised nutritional status of marginalised communities in Lesotho, thus highlighting the need to rethink current policies and strategies. This paper aims to reflect on the implementation and management of the food security strategies that have been adopted by the Lesotho government since 2004 in an effort to improve and sustain food security in the country. A questionnaire survey was conducted amongst senior government officials working in different ministries tasked with the implementation and management of the government's food security strategies. The survey revealed the lack of a sound knowledge base, proper co-ordination and a communication mechanism amongst different stakeholders, as well as poor commitment of most staff towards the implementation and management of the food security strategies. It thus appears that although food security strategies have been adopted by the government of Lesotho, the implementation and management thereof is ineffective.

Keywords: Food security, strategies, Lesotho, implementation, management

1.   INTRODUCTION

Lesotho is a small mountainous kingdom with a population of approximately 2.2 million, situated in the southern part of Africa, where it is completely surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. The total land area of the country is approximately 30 355 km2, of which 75 % is mountainous and only 9 % arable. With a per capita income of US$ 730, Lesotho was among the 47 least-developed countries in 2004 (UN, 2004). The country currently ranks at number 71 on the Human Poverty Index of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2009). According to this international ranking, many of the households in Lesotho can be classified as poor. In fact, according to the aforementioned United Nations report (UN, 2004), more than half the population of Lesotho lives below the poverty line, of which 40 % are destitute. This situation of dire poverty has a direct impact on the food security of households in Lesotho.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO, 2002), food security is achieved through three essential components, namely the availability, accessibility and reliability of food. On this basis, it is evident that in Lesotho, the high level of poverty amongst the population has affected the status of household food security.

For example, the vulnerability exercise undertaken in 2003 by the Southern African Development Community (SADC, 2003) revealed that the major problem faced by poor households in rural areas is limited food availability, while the urban poor are faced with the problem of limited purchasing power due to lack of employment and high food prices. With regard to food accessibility, the vulnerability exercise also estimated a nation-wide food deficit, ranging from 10 % to 47 % of total access to food. This food deficit results from limited purchasing power and escalating global food prices. This situation demonstrates that the majority of poor households do not have a stable food base and as such are unable to consume nutritious and safe foods, which are essential for nutritional wellbeing.

The HIV and AIDS pandemic in Africa has further contributed to the problem of food insecurity (SADC, 2003), since farmers are forced by illness to limit their agricultural labour or even abandon their farms. With the death of household members due to HIV and AIDS, the few people remaining can only farm smaller areas of land, or must resort to less labour-intensive crops that often have lower nutritional or market value (FAO, 2002).

In addition, food production in Lesotho is affected by low input in agriculture. In this regard, the FAO (2004) stated that severe soil and land degradation, inappropriate land tillage and inefficient utilisation of other agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, along with inadequate extension service capacity, have a negative impact on the food security situation in Lesotho.

Although the entire population of Lesotho is affected by the negative impact on food security, high-risk groups include the young, the poor, the elderly, the homeless, low-income women, and ethnic minorities (Hendriks, 2005; Nair, 2008). The devastating fact is that people are affected at both household and national level. At household level, for example, food insecurity leads indirectly to disproportionately high health and medical costs, high funeral expenses, and low labour productivity. Similarly, at national level, food insecurity can lead to social costs such as criminal expenses through theft, low investor confidence, and loss of capital investments. Rena (2005) and Pinstrup-Andersen and Herforth (2008) shared similar sentiments when stating that the negative impact on food security causes undesirable long-term effects such as malnutrition and poor growth and development, posing a major threat to the overall health of the population of Lesotho. This prompted the Lesotho government to implement and manage the food security strategies outlined in the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004) and the Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005). The aim of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004) is to address the major challenges facing the country, such as HIV and AIDS, food insecurity, and unemployment. In the same vein, the Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005) is focused on improving the adequacy, stability and utilisation of access to food supplies at household and national level.

The implementation and management of these national directives has been assigned to eight different government ministries and seven government departments.

In light of the Lesotho government having adopted this particular Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004) and Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005), it is necessary to investigate whether these directives have indeed been implemented by the respective government ministries and departments, and also whether they are being effectively managed at this stage. The paper reflects on the survey respondents' knowledge base regarding the aforementioned strategies, as well as the implementation and management challenges of the food security strategies. The paper concludes with recommendations made to the Lesotho government in view of fast-tracking and enhancing the implementation and management of these strategies.

2.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire survey (quantitative method) was used for purposes of data collection. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions, aimed at investigating the implementation and management of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004) and the Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005) by the responsible government ministries and departments.

A pilot study was performed by means of a draft questionnaire amongst 15 respondents with similar characteristics, employed by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, and the Food and Nutrition Co-ordinating Office in Lesotho. These 15 respondents did not form part of the final data collection process, but based on feedback and observations from this pilot study, adjustments were made to the final questionnaire.

The eventual sample consisted of senior government officials (occupying posts designated as Nutritionist, Food Scientist, Deputy Director, and Director) in the eight government ministries and seven government departments tasked with directing food security in Lesotho. These government ministries and departments have been tasked with the implementation and management of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (2004/2005-2006/2007) and the 2005 Lesotho Food Security Policy. A simple random sample of the officials was selected from each department using the Lesotho government establishment list, which indicates the list of all posts available in each ministry and department (Government of Lesotho, 2008). This method of selection was used to prevent under or non representation of parts of the population. Out of a total of 150 officials targeted for the questionnaire survey, 139 responded, giving a 93 % response rate.

The questionnaire responses were coded and analysed in collaboration with the Department of Public Management at the University of the Free State (UFS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the results in terms of frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and means or medians, as well as maxima and minima for numerical variables.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eight government ministries (Finance and Development Planning; Foreign Affairs; Agriculture and Food Security; Local Government and Land Use Planning; Education and Training; Health and Social Welfare; Trade, Industry, Co-operatives and Marketing; Communications, Science and Technology) and seven government departments (Parliament of Lesotho; Disaster Management Authority; Food Management Unit; Food and Nutrition Co-ordinating Office; National AIDS Commission; Poverty Reduction Programme; Office of the First Lady) have been tasked with the implementation and management of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004) and Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005).

Amongst the survey respondents, 36 % indicated that they were younger than 35 years of age, while 39 % were younger than 45 years, and 25 % were older than 45 years of age. These respondents were comprised of 63 % (n=88) females and 37 % (n=51) males. In this regard, it is interesting to reflect on the national literacy statistics, which show that the adult literacy rate in Lesotho is 55 % for females and 38 % for males (UNDP, 2009). Moreover, in Lesotho, professions related to nutrition are typically occupied by women due to the prevailing perception that nutrition is related to food preparation. The majority (57.6 %) of survey respondents indicated that they had between five and eight years of work experience in their current positions, while 27.3 % of respondents had less than five years of experience, and a mere 15 % had more than eight of experience. It can be deduced that the majority of respondents (57.6 % plus 27.3 %) might not have been involved in the development of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004) or the Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005) at that time.

3.1   Knowledge Base

The respondents' knowledge of the content of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004) and the Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005) respectively was investigated. They were asked to indicate whether they had any knowledge of food security strategies implemented by their government ministries or departments. If they responded positively, they were furthermore asked to indicate whether those policies were derived from the two relevant national directives. The respondents were then asked to list the food security strategies implemented in their respective government ministries and departments. Their responses in this regard are reflected in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Distribution of the respondents according to their knowledge of the content of the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Food Security Policy
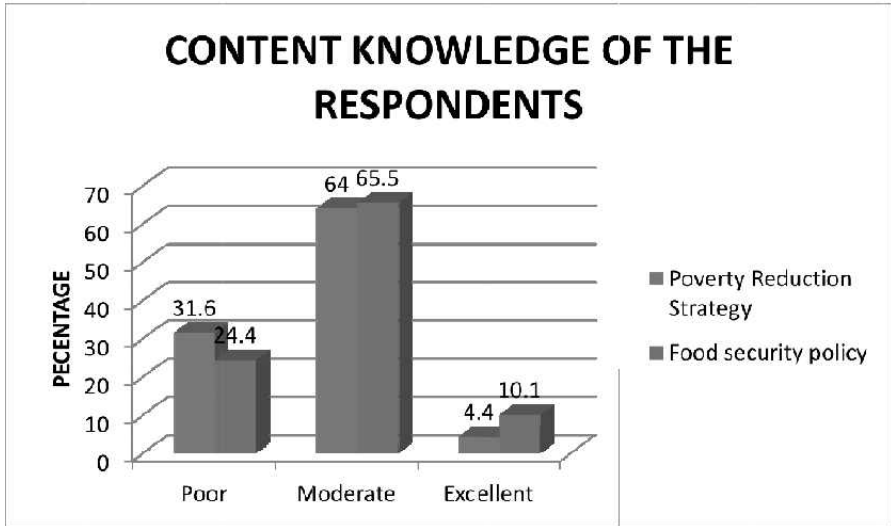

Figure 1 shows that 4.4% of the respondents claimed to have excellent knowledge of the content of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004), while 10.1% claimed to have excellent knowledge of the content of the Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005). Of the respondents, 64% (n=89) claimed to have moderate knowledge of the content of the 2004 Poverty Reduction Strategy, while 65.5% (n=91) claimed to have moderate knowledge of the content of the 2005 Food Security Policy. Of the respondents, 32% (n=44) claimed to have poor knowledge of the content of the 2004 Poverty Reduction Strategy, while 24.4% (n=34) claimed to have poor knowledge of the content of the 2005 Food Security Policy. Although it appears that more than half the respondents have moderate knowledge of the content of the directives in question, 83.5% of the respondents (n=116) indicated that these food security strategies were being implemented by their respective government ministries and departments.

Amongst the respondents from the government ministries and departments tasked with implementing food security strategies, 56.4% (n=65) indicated that the strategies from the 2005 Food Security Policy had been adopted, while 30% (n=16) claimed that the strategies from the 2004 Poverty Reduction Strategy had been adopted. A total of 13.3% (n=16) of respondents pointed to the adoption of strategies from other relevant documents, such as the Millennium Development Goals, Agricultural Policy, Health Policy, AIDS Policy, and Infant and Young Child Feeding Guidelines, all aimed at improving the general health of the population.

It can thus be concluded that the majority of the respondents had at least moderate knowledge of these directives and that they were implementing them to a certain extent.

In this regard, the literature has shown that for any strategy to be implemented effectively, the officials tasked with this responsibility must have adequate knowledge of the strategy in question (Pinstrup-Andersen and Herforth, 2008; Shimelis and Bogale, 2007). However, cause for concern is the fact that some respondents claimed to have poor knowledge of the content of the two national directives in question. This might be ascribed to the fact that during the development of these two documents, most of the officials concerned had not been in the employ of the government or occupying their current positions. It was further indicated that the last time they had mulled over the documents' contents had been during the official launching, which in a sense displays a lack of commitment towards the implementation thereof. Thomas (2002) cautioned against a lack of commitment amongst officials tasked with the implementation and management of government strategies, stating that whilst effective and efficient bureaucratic structures may be in place and attempting to implement a particular strategy, little will be accomplished without commitment from those responsible for the implementation of that strategy.

3.2 Co-ordination or communication mechanism amongst different stakeholders

Forty-seven percent (n=65) of the respondents indicated that their government ministries and departments had a plan of action for the implementation of the food security strategies, whilst 35.3% (n=49) indicated that no plan of action was in place, and 18% (n=25) did not know whether a plan of action existed. The existence of co-ordinating bodies for the implementation and management of the food security strategies, both within (37.4% of respondents) and outside (12.2% of respondents) the government ministries and departments, was confirmed. The co-ordinating bodies established within the government ministries and departments include the multi-sectored food security committees, while outside co-ordinating bodies include the Food and Nutrition Co-ordinating Office and the Ministry of Planning and Finance. According to the respondents, these co-ordinating bodies were not performing effectively and efficiently in their given role. Against this backdrop, it can be concluded that the few co-ordinating bodies in existence were not considered by the respondents to be effective in their functioning.

CHALLENGES	Respondents' responses in respect of the challenges in the implementation and management of the food security strategies		
	YES	NO	DO NOT KNOW
Ministry/department has a plan of action for the implementation of the food security strategies	46.7% (n=65)	35.3% (n=49)	18% (n=25)
There is a co-ordinating body identified within the ministry/department for the implementation and management of the food security strategies	37.4% (n=52)	51.1% (n=71)	1.5% (n=16)
There is a co-ordinating body identified outside the ministry/department for the implementation and management of the food security strategies	12.2% (n=17)	62.6% (n=87)	25.2% (n=35)
There is an evaluation and monitoring plan for the implementation of the food security strategies in the ministry/department	20.9% (n=29)	65.5% (n=91)	13.6% (n=19)
Staff in the ministry/department participated in the development of the food security strategies	57.6% (n=80)	29.5% (n=41)	12.9% (n=18)
Other stakeholders were involved in the development of the ministry's /department's food security strategies	71.3% (n=99)	15.8% (n=22)	12.9% (n=18)
Staff in the ministry/department was made aware/ informed of the existence of the food security strategies	48.2% (n=67)	33.1% (n=46)	18.7% (n=26)
Staff in the ministry/department was provided with necessary skills and education to implement and manage the strategies	36.7% (n=51)	57.6% (n=80)	5.7% (n=8)
Staff in the ministry/department was provided with the necessary resources (e.g. equipment) to implement and manage the strategies	28.8% (n=40)	71.2% (n=99)	0
Other stakeholders were involved in the implementation of the food security strategies adopted by the ministry/department	72.7% (n=101)	27.3% (n=38)	0

Table 1: Implementation and management challenges of the food security strategies

Table 1 shows that the minority of respondents (20.9 % or n=29) pointed to the existence of a monitoring and evaluation plan for the implementation of the food security strategies. However, those respondents who did confirm the existence of such a plan in their government ministries and departments also pointed out that evaluation and monitoring were not regular activities.

At this point it is important to note that 57.6 % of respondents (n=80) indicated that the staff had been involved in the development of the food security strategies, but 71.3 % of respondents (n=99) indicated that other stakeholders had also been involved (Table 1).

The last row of Table 1 shows that 72.7% of respondents (n=101) indicated that these other stakeholders had further been involved in the implementation of the food security strategies. This high level of stakeholder involvement might be due to the fact that according to the respondents, less than 50% of staff had been (i) informed about the existence of the food security strategies; (ii) provided with the necessary skills and education to implement and manage the strategies; and (iii) provided with the necessary resources for this responsibility (Table 1).

The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the relevant government ministries and departments have been allocated different roles and responsibilities in respect of the implementation and management of the food security strategies. However, it is also evident that the two national documents do not clarify the lines of communication and co-ordination between and within these ministries and departments, and therefore nobody takes responsibility for capacity-building and the securing of resources. This lack of co-ordination is clearly illustrated in Table 1. This situation is of particular concern since the literature reveals that the large number of actors with different mandates, roles and responsibilities, combined with their lack of co-ordination, tends to add to the problem of ineffective implementation and management of strategies.

Moreover, the institutional structure as outlined in the two national documents has been built on existing structures. As such, the government has avoided the creation of new and large structures, which would hinder effective implementation. Although there are no new structures, there is an overlap between ministries and departments. For instance, "nutrition" as a responsibility is currently split between the Food and Nutrition Co-ordinating Office, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security. This kind of overlap can be positive and complementary only if it is effectively co-ordinated. Lack of co-ordination leads to the duplication of efforts and a situation where nobody assumes full responsibility for capacity development and resource allocation.

3.3   Commitment

Sixty-seven percent of respondents (n=94) pointed to moderate commitment of staff in respect of the implementation and management of the food security strategies. Worryingly, 31% of respondents (n=43) pointed to poor commitment, while only 1.7% (n=2) claimed excellent commitment of staff. These findings are of particular concern, because according to Hussey (2000:35), lack of commitment amongst those responsible can render the implementation and management of the strategies ineffective or even non-existent.

Although some literature has shown that lack of strong and committed political and administrative leadership is the cause of ineffective implementation and management of food security strategies (Chandy and Pai, 2006; Rukuni, 2002; Shimelis and Bogale, 2007), the findings of this particular study revealed poor to moderate commitment of staff (including senior management) to the implementation and management of the food security strategies. This is probably due to lack of adequate skills and resources, as shown in Table1. One of the fundamental problems standing in the way of targeted and effective service delivery of food security initiatives is the lack of institutional capacity, which seems to be the case in Lesotho. Lack of institutional capacity in the form of human (skills, number), physical and financial resources, coupled with insufficient co-ordination and collaboration between government ministries and departments, make it difficult for government to implement their interventions and to monitor the effects of those interventions.

4.   RECOMMENDATIONS

From the conclusions above, it is clear that there is no effective implementation and management of the food security strategies by government officials. Therefore, the following recommendations are made to the government of Lesotho in view of their ability to effectively implement and manage the food security strategies so as to improve and sustain food security in the country:

Prioritisation of the strategies: Given the broad strategies outlined in both the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004) and the Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005), as well as the enormity of the implementation task, it is important for the Lesotho government to review the strategies and focus on a few priority areas that will yield the highest social returns with regard to achieving food security in Lesotho. It is now essential to investigate whether these directives have indeed been implemented by the respective government ministries and departments, and also whether they are being managed effectively at this stage (2009 onwards).

Institutional reform: There is a need for institutional reform that will allow for timely action and an appropriate response to food insecurity in Lesotho. The institutional reform for food security in Lesotho should enhance co-ordination and collaboration within the government ministries and departments responsible for food security. The institutional reform should also focus on strengthening information sharing among all stakeholders and within the government ministries and departments. In addition, both short-term and long-term training plans should be developed and implemented so that staff can be trained according to the needs of the government ministries and departments. Most importantly, staff should be provided with the necessary resources, for instance transport that will enable them to reach all communities, including those in remote areas of the country.

To allow for adequate resources, the government ministries and departments should allocate a separate budget for food security activities, as is currently the case with activities targeting HIV and AIDS. The existing structures should also be improved to provide for a range of functionaries, whose activities can be integrated to accommodate delivery on the mandate, as well as their advisory, evaluation, monitoring and co-ordination activities.

In addition, an integrated food security implementation and management plan of action should be developed by the ministries and departments concerned. During the development of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Lesotho Government, 2004) and the Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005), the government adopted an integrated approach to addressing food security problems at both household and national level, in recognition of the multidisciplinary nature of food security problems. In pursuance to this, a workshop should be organised for various ministries and departments and other stakeholders in an effort to develop an integrated food security implementation and management plan of action, which should consider the following:

- Gathering information on the situation of food supply and demand in different parts of the country, to be used to identify risk areas with respect to food access and use.
- Developing systems of information sharing among the ministries and departments concerned with food security.
- Establishing and maintaining a register of food-insecure households as part of a larger food security information management system, with food-insecure households being encouraged to become active members of a network of consumer/producer organisations.
- Categorising food security problems according to their nature and scope that is, whether they should be addressed over the short, medium or long term. In the short term, strategies such as income support measures will be considered. For medium- or long-term problems, strategy packages will be designed to improve the multifaceted nature of food security, for example, with links to nutrition, education and sanitation. The emphasis of these strategy packages would be on increasing food production, creating employment and generating income.
- Establishing and maintaining food security monitoring and evaluation systems as part of a broader system to mitigate, prevent, and respond to food emergencies.
- Providing support to improve institutional and organisational development, with special consideration of the human resource capacity. The goal is to improve programme planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

5.   CONCLUSION

Food security involves access to and consumption of adequate quantities of safe and nutritious food at all times by every member of every household in support of an active and productive life. However, poverty, HIV/AIDS, inequality, severe soil and land degradation and persisting droughts, along with inadequate extension service capacity, are having a negative impact on food security. This situation is increasingly evident in Lesotho. In an attempt to address the negative state of food security in the country, the Lesotho government developed two national documents, namely the Poverty Reduction Strategy (2004) and the Food Security Policy (Lesotho Government, 2005), outlining the adopted food security strategies. The implementation and management of these food security strategies was assigned to various government ministries and departments.

It is acknowledged that the success of any policy or strategy relies on the achievement of its objectives, which is only possible through the effective implementation and management thereof. The conclusion regarding the context is that the institutional arrangement as outlined in the two documents is in accordance with the literature. However, there is an overlap between the ministries and departments. This overlap may have a negative effect on the implementation and management of the food security strategies if there is no co-ordination, which is also lacking between and within the ministries and departments charged with the implementation and management of the food security strategies.

The findings show that there is lack of commitment of most staff towards the implementation and management of the food security strategies. This lack of commitment may be due to several factors such as inadequate resources, as observed in the case at hand, which in turn may result in ineffective implementation and management of strategies by the government officials concerned. There is also a lack of institutional capacity, which is a key determinant of organisational effectiveness. Furthermore, although there has been some stakeholder participation in the development and implementation of the food security strategies adopted by the government ministries and departments, there does not appear to be any effective co-ordination or communication mechanism between the different actors geared towards the implementation and management of the strategies. This lack of co-ordination may result in ineffective implementation and management of the strategies.

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