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The new variant famine hypothesis: moving beyond the household in exploring links between AIDS and food insecurity in southern Africa

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Abstract

A number of southern African countries have experienced food crises during recent years. The fact that the scale of these crises have been disproportionate to the apparent triggers of climatic adversity or production decline has led to the suggestion that they are more closely related to the AIDS pandemic which is at its most extreme in many of the same countries. This hypothesis, developed by de Waal and Whiteside (2003), has been termed 'New Variant Famine'.

The New Variant Famine hypothesis is helpful in drawing attention to the effects of AIDS in diminishing both food production and capacity to purchase food, but it focuses more intensely on the household level than many other theories that seek to explain food insecurity, which tend to emphasise the integration of peasants into a capitalist market economy, and the functioning of markets and institutions. The household level focus also characterises much research on the impacts of AIDS. In this paper we argue that the effects of AIDS on food security are not confined to the household level, and that a NVF analysis should also consider processes operating within and beyond the household including social relationships, relations of age and gender, colonial inheritance and contemporary national and international political economy. Recognition of these processes and how they interact with AIDS may offer greater scope for political mobilisation rather than technocratic responses.

Introduction

Food insecurity and famine have recurred in southern Africa at intervals over the past century. Famines were common in the early 20th century, generally less common from the 1940s to the1960s and returned in the 1970s. In the early 1990s, harvests again failed, but mechanisms were in place that enabled a humanitarian crisis to be averted. In the early years of the 21st century, a number of southern African countries have again been plagued by food insecurity, with over 15 million people affected in 2002 (UNOCHA 2002). In Malawi, for instance, the food crisis in early 2002 led to hundreds – maybe thousands – of hunger-related deaths, exceeding any

famine in living memory (Devereux 2002), and at the peak of the crisis in February 2003 nearly a third of the population were dependent on food aid (USAID/Malawi 2004).

In this paper we examine the New Variant Famine (NVF) hypothesis developed by de Waal and Whiteside (2003). This attributes recent food insecurity to the AIDS pandemic, arguing that AIDS reduces the capacity of households both to produce and to purchase food. We begin by contextualising this hypothesis in relation to entitlement theories of famine, and consider a range of critiques of NVF. We then move on to discuss in more detail the livelihoods studies that seek to link AIDS with food insecurity. We offer our own critique of NVF that challenges the household-level explanation and suggests that the impacts of AIDS are not confined to the household scale. Rather they have differential effects within households, and collective effects beyond them. A range of processes are examined through which AIDS impacts on food security within and beyond households. These processes demand an approach to AIDS-related food insecurity that recognises the politics of food and of AIDS.

Explaining food insecurity: availability or access?

Instances of food insecurity or famine are conventionally explained by reference to environmental shocks, in particular inadequacy of rainfall. Vulnerability is attributed to dependence on rain-fed agriculture and intra-seasonal and interannual climate variability (Haile 2005). Alternatively, human-induced production failures and Malthusian explanations are proffered. However, since the early 1980s research has demonstrated that these analyses seldom offer more than a partial explanation. Sen (1981) has shown that explanations that locate the cause of famine in reductions in (aggregate or per capita) food supply (a 'Food Availability Decline' or 'FAD' model) are less satisfactory than those which attribute famine to the inability of individuals or households to access food through a range of alternative means (a 'Food Entitlement Decline' or 'FED' model). For Sen (1989: 8), entitlements are 'a key set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces'. Entitlement relations may be enacted through production, trade, labour or inheritance / transfer (Sen 1981).

Famine is attributable to 'entitlement failure' (Sen 1981), in which these relations break down due to crop failure or other reasons, rather than to failure of food production at national level (Hendriks 2005).

This framework helps explain why, in most cases of diminished aggregate production of food, only a minority of the population is seriously affected. Furthermore, starvation can occur even if food is available in local markets if a household lacks entitlements to access it (Sen 1981). Aggregate availability measures conceal differences of access between and within households (Gillespie 2005), yet overall availability of food is less important in determining whether people go hungry than the ability of the poorest in society to grow or buy it (de Waal and Whiteside 2003). The entitlement approach explains famine in terms of differential command over food, an approach that has 'revolutionized conceptions of food security' (Moseley and Logan 2001: 231).

A major value of the FED model is that it recognises that diminished food production may not be the most important factor rendering households vulnerable to food insecurity. Much of the food consumed in southern Africa is purchased, and purchasing power may fall for various reasons. Across the region many non-agricultural livelihood strategies are pursued by rural people (Ellis 2000). Indeed, the significance of agriculture to the region's rural economy, and its viability as basis for rural livelihoods is questioned (Bryceson 2004; Carnegie and Marumo 2002; Turner 2001). Alternative strategies often include labour migration. In Swaziland, labour migration to South African gold and diamond mines has been crucial to the survival of many rural households (Leliveld 1997), and in Lesotho rural households that were once highly dependent on cash remittances acquired through this practice today require a broader range of strategies, with women's migration to garment factories increasingly common (Turner 2003). Even in Malawi, which is still considered to be highly dependent on subsistence agriculture, 80% of households are net purchasers of maize (Harrigan 2003).

The FED model also explains how the poor are generally able to survive when aggregate food production falls. In most situations, all but the poorest can pursue a

range of strategies that enable them to secure a supply of food and thereby survive production shocks. Although precise patterns vary, reversible mechanisms are generally used first, including disposal of 'self insurance' assets. If necessary, people then dispose of productive assets. Only when they are left with no assets to sell, and no means of generating income, do they become destitute, and dependent on charity, the breakup of their household, or distress migration (White and Robinson 2000).

The entitlements approach has attracted some criticism, largely because it defines famine narrowly and offers a narrow explanation. Firstly, Sen views famine as an aberration in an otherwise functioning society. For many scholars today, famine is not simply 'a discrete event triggered by external causes and amenable to technical solutions' but 'a long-term socioeconomic process that accelerates destitution' (Baro and Deubel 2006: 522). However, Sen focuses on immediate triggering mechanisms, rather than long-term processes that render people vulnerable (Watts and Bohle 1993). He offers economic explanations that are too apolitical and too ahistorical to reveal much about structural causes or political drivers (Devereux 2001). Lastly, by emphasising entitlement through legal means, Sen fails to interrogate the varied social domains in which claims over food are exercised – within the household, community and state – and how social processes shape these entitlements (Gore 1993).

The New Variant Famine hypothesis

The widespread food crisis of the early twenty-first century in southern Africa has been widely attributed to environmental factors including drought and flood. However, in practice the adversity of the environmental conditions does not fully explain the extent of the crisis. For instance, the widespread perception that Lesotho's 2001-'2 food crisis was due to drought is contradicted by evidence of above average rainfall (Care 2002), and Zimbabwe's aggregate rainfall deficit was far from exceptional (Richardson 2007). The decline in access to food is not fully attributable to environmental factors. In those countries where drought did occur, household impoverishment increased more rapidly than during previous droughts (de Waal and Whiteside 2003). Across the region the 'production shock' in 2002

was less severe than during the drought of 1991/2, but the degree of food insecurity was much greater (Forum for Food Security 2004) and in Malawi, at least, there were more deaths (Devereux 2002).

The inadequacy of environmental or 'FAD' explanations of recent food crises has led to a quest for alternative explanations. Six southern African countries that have experienced recurrent severe food shortages also have exceptionally high HIV prevalence rates. This led de Waal and Whiteside (2003) to hypothesise a 'New Variant Famine' (NVF), in which AIDS is the primary cause of contemporary food insecurity in southern Africa.

Although there has been drought in southern Africa in the early 21st century, the recent food crisis has three distinct features: very widespread household vulnerability, including in areas unaffected by drought; a more rapid onset of household impoverishment than is usual; and a failure of households to recover quickly (de Waal and Whiteside 2003). These features are attributed to four processes through which AIDS increases household vulnerability: adverse changes in dependency ratios owing to adult morbidity and mortality; loss of assets and skills owing to high adult mortality; a high burden of care for sick adults and orphaned children; and vicious interactions between AIDS and malnutrition (de Waal and Whiteside 2003).

The idea that AIDS was affecting household food security was being promoted before de Waal and Whiteside published their hypothesis in 2003. Occasional impact studies had highlighted that food security was suffering in AIDS-affected communities (Tibaijuka 1997). The International Food Policy Research Institute (Haddad and Gillespie 2001a; Haddad and Gillespie 2001b) compiled reports, drawing on the findings of small-scale studies, to speculate that AIDS would impact on assets and on the rules giving access to those assets, and that policy responses were needed. Possible causal mechanisms and potential responses were also set out by the World Food Programme (WFP 2001). Baylies (2002) identified the dramatic impacts of AIDS on rural food security. However, it was subsequent to the onset of the 2002 food crisis that a flurry of reports emerged, including the de Waal and Whiteside

hypothesis, and this explanation of the region's food crisis gained widespread acceptability. For instance, UN Special Envoys visiting Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe in January 2003 asserted that AIDS is the fundamental underlying cause of food shortages in the region (Morris and Lewis 2003). The FAO now reports annually to the UN Committee on World Food Security on the impact of AIDS on food security in those countries worst affected by the disease (FAO 2003), IFPRI has set up a Regional Network on AIDS, Rural Livelihoods and Food Security (RENEWAL) and donors have commissioned reports on these connections (de Waal and Tumushabe 2003; USAID 2003). Empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis appears to be growing (Arrehag and de Waal 2006; Mason *et al* 2007).

Contesting 'famine': critiques of NVF

The New Variant Famine hypothesis is not universally accepted. Not all southern African countries with high HIV prevalence have experienced food crises, and the significance of AIDS relative to other factors is disputed (Ellis 2003; Gillespie 2005). Use of the term 'famine' is controversial, particularly when understood in conventional terms of diminished food availability and starvation-related deaths. There is no evidence that there has been a decline in aggregate food production due to AIDS and, with some exceptions, levels of acute malnutrition and starvation-related mortality were not especially high in 2001/2 (Harvey 2003). However, de Waal has long argued that it is inappropriate to define famine in such narrow terms – a point that will be expanded upon below. Whether the term 'famine' is justified depends in large part on whether famine is understood in terms of aggregate food availability, or the diminished capacity of some people to access adequate food (de Waal and Whiteside 2003; Turner 2003). New Variant Famine is said to be occurring due to the impacts of AIDS on livelihoods at household level, and thus fits closely with Sen's FED model. A 'Swiss cheese' pattern of vulnerability (de Waal 2006) emerges, with food insecurity heightened among households directly affected by AIDS. Thus, although at the macro-economic level the impacts of AIDS are unclear, this is unsurprising as the indicators that get used at this level are unlikely to detect aggregated changes happening to individual households (Gillespie 2005).

Others have highlighted the lack of definitive evidence for NVF (Bolton 2003). Considerable insight has emerged from many small-scale studies on how AIDS may impact on rural livelihoods, but empirical evidence remains modest and studies from very particular contexts are employed to make general and universal statements (Murphy *et al* 2005). Many studies are weak on impact attribution and limited in their generalisability (Murphy *et al* 2005). Data from emergency food security assessments conducted in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe in 2002 did establish a strong negative relationship between AIDS proxy variables and food security parameters (SADC-FANR Vulnerability Assessment Committee 2003), but some of the evidence deployed to support the hypothesis is amenable to alternative explanations. Some have explained a widespread shift towards cassava cultivation in terms of labour saving in light of AIDS-related labour shortages, for instance – but this may equally be due to changes in international regulation of agriculture (Wiggins 2005). '[W]hile AIDS clearly affects rural livelihoods, the available evidence does not support any assertion that all households across the large and diverse region of rural sub-Saharan Africa face a similar inevitable and rapid decline in livelihoods security due to AIDS' (Murphy *et al* 2005: 272). There is a clear need for livelihoods studies of households that are currently impacted by AIDS and by drought if the hypothesis is to be tested (de Waal 2006), with consideration of the impacts of AIDS on production-based entitlements, employment-based entitlements, trade-based entitlements and transfer entitlements. However, the full impact of NVF, according to the theory's proponents, is yet to be felt. While the number of new infections may have reached a plateau in some southern African countries, even with widening access to ARVs the number of deaths will most likely continue to rise, and these two successive epidemics (infections and deaths) will be followed by a third epidemic of wider impacts which cannot yet be detected (Barnett and Whiteside 2002).

In light of the relatively small scale of production decline and malnutrition-related deaths, some have suggested that the recent food shortages were exaggerated. Some have used the term 'new variant fundraising' to imply that famine – and its association with AIDS – was deployed to secure aid. It has been suggested that the Zambian government was keen to maximise the distribution of free food for political reasons (Scott, cited in Itano 2003). Similarly, others have elaborated how the

interests of the biotechnology industry were served by the crisis (Itano 2003). At the height of the crisis in 2002 WFP offered genetically modified grain from the US to various countries in southern Africa; the offer was accepted by Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, but rejected by Zambia owing to concerns about future trade with the EU (Mwale 2006). It is argued that 'US food aid policy ... was intended to promote the adoption of biotech crops in Southern Africa, expanding the market access and control of transnational corporations and undermining local smallholder production hereby fostering greater food insecurity on the Continent' (Zerbe 2004: 593).

The use of the term 'famine' is also criticised because it 'tends to lock people into discussion and conceptualisation of a relatively short-term event that can be overcome in a few years' (Drimie 2004: 12). The discursive representation of famine as a disaster event effaces culpability and detaches famine 'from its embeddedness within a set of historically specific and locally based economic and political processes' (Hendrie 1997: 63). Famine becomes removed from the everyday and located in an expert realm of regulation and control by powerful humanitarian institutions, neglecting local understandings of famine that view it as a problem of poverty and intensification of ongoing processes rather than an exceptional situation (Hendrie 1997). It should be said that this is not the intention: according to de Waal famine is not a sudden event of mass starvation but can occur before critical food shortages and raised mortality rates become apparent. Rural people in Sudan, for instance, distinguish 'famine that kills' from other food crises that may not lead to death (de Waal 2004).

Irrespective of terminology and the relative roles of AIDS and other factors, it is doubtless the case that understandings of famine developed in the absence of AIDS need adapting in light of changing household labour supply, skills and long-term viability (de Waal and Whiteside 2003). Moreover, 'The relations between people and land in the agrarian economy will evolve as morbidity and mortality from HIV/AIDS increases' (Ellis 2003: ii).

AIDS and livelihoods: assessing the impacts

Before moving on to our own critique of NVF, we consider the links that have been drawn between AIDS and food insecurity, most of which have focused on the impacts of the disease on the capacity of households to pursue effective livelihoods. As de Waal (2006) observes, 'An array of small-scale studies indicates that HIV/AIDS causes serious losses at household level'. There is evidence that in some communities in Lesotho both agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods are suffering due to AIDS exacerbating food insecurity (Mothibi 2003). In Malawi, evidence exists that AIDS is damaging agricultural livelihoods (Gillespie and Kadiyala 2005) and that AIDS-affected households proved particularly vulnerable in Malawi's 2002 food emergency (Haan *et al* 2003).

Studies of the impacts of AIDS on food security generally adopt a sustainable livelihoods approach, which focuses attention on the assets available to households and the structures and processes that enable them to be put to use in generating livelihoods (Stokes 2003). AIDS may be seen to impact on all forms of household assets – human, financial, social, physical and natural capitals (Haddad and Gillespie 2001a). It also impacts on the transforming structures and processes that allow use to be made of assets – the institutions, incentives, policies and laws that govern access to assets, and their value in livelihood generation (Haddad and Gillespie 2001a). It attacks human capital, incapacitating individual adults, diminishing their capacity to engage in manual labour, but also limiting their potential to transfer knowledge within and between generations. Among children, capacity to acquire and use information may be impaired if they are withdrawn from school to enable the family to maintain its current livelihood or develop an alternative coping strategy. 'Tomorrow's livelihoods are being sacrificed to hang on to today's' (Haddad and Gillespie 2001b).

AIDS impacts at the household level on food production, purchasing power and coping capacity. In terms of food production, sickness and death impose constraints of labour, land, inputs, tools etc, and may affect access to and management of common property resources such as grazing land (Loevinsohn and Gillespie 2003). In Swaziland, for instance, the area cultivated decreased by an average of 51%, and

number of cattle owned fell by 30% in households experiencing an AIDS-related death (Arrehag and de Waal 2006). This may lead to a decline in overall food production, but the decline for AIDS-affected households is perhaps of greater significance in terms of leaving those households unable to provide for themselves.

AIDS also impacts on purchasing power, through direct impacts on the capacity of individual household members to work for money (because they are sick, caring for others, attending funerals) and by diverting monetary resources elsewhere (to pay for medical care, funerals). Both agricultural and non-agricultural income earning possibilities are affected, but AIDS-impact research has neglected non-agricultural livelihoods (Gillespie and Kadiyala 2005), despite their growing importance (Bryceson 1999; Carnegie and Marumo 2002; Ellis and Biggs 2001; Turner 2001).

AIDS is perhaps most significant in the way it affects the capacity of households to cope with a crisis. Household vulnerability reflects risk of exposure, risk of inadequate capacity to cope and risk of severe consequences (Watts and Bohle 1993), all of which may be heightened by AIDS. The impact of AIDS on household vulnerability operates in part through its effects on the capacity of individuals and households to practice coping strategies. Four factors may be important here: household level labour shortages; loss of assets and skills due to adult mortality; the increased burden of care (sick adults and orphans requiring care from a diminished number of healthy adults); and the fact that people with HIV require higher levels of nutrition (particularly protein) than healthy adults (de Waal and Whiteside 2003). Traditional household coping strategies are undermined by – and may also exacerbate – AIDS. Going hungry is dangerous, as undernourished individuals are more susceptible to infection; and poor nutrition speeds progression from HIV to AIDS and also renders antiretroviral therapy ineffective (it is both less effective and harder to adhere to without adequate food) (de Waal and Whiteside 2003). Gathering wild foods or engaging in casual and migrant labour is problematic if less labour is available, or knowledge has been lost as adults die. Help from neighbours, friends and relatives may not be an option if social networks are already overstretched. Selling key assets is not possible if these have already been sold to purchase medicine or cover other illness-related costs. Reliance on the informal

sector may mean reliance on survival sex and crime (Harvey 2004). 'Individuals who are infected and affected by HIV shorten their decision horizons' (McPherson 2005: 1298), risking the future for immediate gain. The social relations and livelihood strategies adopted by the poor, in particular labour migration, tend to promote high risk sexual activity (Masanjala 2007; Mtika 2007).

AIDS also has profound long-term consequences on households' capacity to cope. It differs from other shocks in that it is not cyclical or limited in duration; households are forced to radically and permanently alter their livelihood strategies; knowledge transfer and educational opportunities are lost, and there are therefore long-term multi-generational impacts (Bonnard 2002). AIDS affects resistance to the impacts of a crisis and also resilience – the capacity to bounce back (Loevinsohn and Gillespie 2003). While some coping strategies are highly resilient (e.g. reliance on family networks), these progressively become inoperative, forcing people to move to less resilient and riskier alternatives such as selling essential assets or commercial sex work (de Waal and Whiteside 2003). The notion of 'coping' in relation to AIDS has been criticised for failing to acknowledge that many households are unable to recover, at least in the short-term, from the impacts of AIDS (Rugalema 2000).

Moving beyond the household

Sen's entitlements approach and the sustainable livelihoods approach, although cognisant of the wider context, explain food insecurity largely in relation to household level processes. This is part of a wider shift: since the 1970s 'the unit of analysis (in famine studies) has moved from the global/national level to the local/household level' (Baro and Deubel 2006: 526). Given that aggregated statistics often fail to uncover crises affecting only the poorer households (whose 'deaths do not matter to GDP measures' (Negin 2005: 269)), there is some merit in this shift. Today, the household is viewed as the scale at which famine is experienced, and (if to a lesser degree) the locus of explanation. The characteristics of households are understood to shape the strategies available to adopt and ultimately the outcomes.

NVF similarly locates AIDS and its consequences in the household: household members become sick and die, with implications for livelihood strategies and

household level outcomes. In the words of de Waal and Whiteside (2003: 1234): 'Our hypothesis is that the 'HIV/AIDS epidemic accounts for why many households are facing food shortage and explains the grim trajectory of limited recovery' (p.1234). For them, three of the four AIDS-related factors exacerbating food insecurity are located specifically at the household level: labour shortages, loss of assets and skills, and increased burdens of care (p. 1234). These together reduce food production by the household (p.1235), and diminish the capacity of households to implement high resilience coping strategies (p. 1236). While the authors claim that '[t]he analysis does not neglect the role of factors such as drought and macro-economic disparities and mismanagement' (p.1236), in practice these receive almost no mention.

It is arguably in part because AIDS is seen as an attribute of individuals and individual households that analysis tends to focus at this level. In the remainder of this paper we set out three arguments. Firstly, food insecurity outcomes associated with AIDS affect individuals differentially within households and also extend more widely than individual households. Secondly, the causes of vulnerability to food insecurity, to the impacts of AIDS, and to the interactions between these, cannot be understood through an investigation confined to the household level. Attention to historical, political and economic factors, and social constructs of age and gender, is necessary if the distribution of vulnerability to food insecurity in AIDS-affected societies is to be better understood. Thirdly, such an understanding requires that NVF analyses take seriously the politics of hunger and AIDS.

Locating the impacts

According to Sen, where geographically proximate households simultaneously face catastrophic declines in food entitlements, people face famine (Devereux 2001). Yet, as Gillespie (2005: 32) observes, 'household-level effects do not relate well to more aggregated impacts … Nor do they shine a clear light on what is happening within households e.g. intra-household division of labor, care-giving and other resources – especially impacts on women and children'. Community level effects are not simply aggregations of household effects, and research is sparse on how community-level processes mediate the interactions of AIDS and food security (Forum for Food

Security in Southern Africa 2003). Despite the growing knowledge base in relation to impacts of AIDS on household livelihoods, 'Less is known ... about the wider impacts of the pandemic on livelihoods in rural communities, allowing for market interactions between households' (Dorward *et al* 2006: 429). Evidence from Malawi, for instance, suggests that although AIDS may reduce the availability of labour in individual households; at the community level, AIDS depresses labour demand more than it contracts labour supply, thus reducing wages, which has a negative impact on the poor who depend most on wages. Households affected by AIDS may need to hire out more labour as they become impoverished, yet demand for labour may fall as people lack money from remittances or savings to pay for it or to purchase non-tradable goods and services from those in the non-farm sector (Dorward *et al* 2006). These effects imply that labour-saving technologies may in some cases have very negative impacts. Wider societal effects are also hard to determine. Although de Waal and Whiteside (2003, 1235) recognise that AIDS has effects beyond the individual household: 'Merely by increasing inequality, AIDS increases vulnerability to famine', they do not, however, explore this at length.

There are also differential impacts within households: not all household members have equal command over food, and the fact that a household is able to access adequate food need not imply that all members will eat adequately. Women and children are likely to have less access to food (Sen 1990), and incoming orphans may be particularly discriminated against in the distribution of food (van Blerk and Ansell 2006). In Malawi's 1949 famine entitlement changes had a differential impact on differently positioned individuals (Vaughan 1987). Famine mortality relates to 'social vulnerability' as much as to 'biological vulnerability' and those making decisions may sacrifice weaker household members. 'Children consume scarce resources; cattle and goats *are* scarce resources' (Devereux 2001: 250) hence children may be allowed to go hungry in order to avoid selling livestock. This highlights problems inherent in a focus on the household as principal unit of analysis and in failure to engage with social relations and power inequalities (Devereux 2001). Furthermore, even defining 'the household' is problematic. Household forms vary across the region, and a singular definition 'often bears little relation to the fluidity of actual social relations' (Murphy *et al* 2005: 272).

Locating the explanations

Households are not atomistic but socially embedded and relations beyond the household play an important role in explaining vulnerability to food insecurity. The distribution of food within and between households, communities and nations is shaped by politics, economics and ideology (Young 1996). The wider socio-political and economic context is thus crucially important to understanding livelihoods (Yaro 2002). As Watts (1991: 16) suggests, 'Famines are above all about the exercise, and lack of, power and rights'. Some of the processes that shape food insecurity, the impacts of AIDS, and their interactions are considered below.

1 Social relations

Food security is shaped by power relations that pertain within and beyond the household (Watts and Bohle 1993). Households have internal tensions, and intrahousehold social processes 'including the sexual division of labour, property relations, generational cycles and patterns of resource access' (Watts 1989: 12) are important. Research commonly views households and communities as bounded entities, but access to food may be secured through migration and spatially extended relationships (SADC-FANR Vulnerability Assessment Committee 2003). Resource flows and relationships between households are significant to any analysis of vulnerability in relation to AIDS (Byron *et al* 2007). Indeed, the interdependence of urban and rural households often enables the poor (both urban and rural) to survive (Frayne 2004). With increased levels of mobility, livelihoods are increasingly delocalised, with diverse implications for rural poverty (Rigg 2006). Research in Zambia found that the social fragmentation associated with AIDS may have as much impact on agriculture as the more obvious outcomes of the pandemic (Drinkwater 2005).

At the local level (as well as more widely), collective beliefs, rules, expectations and obligations help determine how food is secured and who is able to access it. Expectations of reciprocity and redistribution contribute to food security, but the social and cultural ties that enable this may be fractured when the burden reaches a certain level – as can happen due to AIDS (Mtika 2000). Conventions and rules exist

concerning who can participate in decisions about entitlement. These rights are made, remade, contested and legitimated through a range of institutions including the chieftaincy and churches (Watts and Bohle 1993). Yet research has neglected extra-household local institutions and practices (Murphy *et al* 2005). Economic and market processes are also socially produced: there is a need for studies of local food systems and the social relations of exchange including complex crop advance systems organised by local merchants which force poor peasants to sell early and take interest bearing loans later on (Watts 1989).

2 Relations of age and gender

Age is an important consideration of the relationship between AIDS and food insecurity, as is apparent from the numerous reports that suggest AIDS will diminish long-term food security through its impacts on young people today. Many children lose property when their parents die, livestock and equipment being sold to fund medical and funeral costs, or misappropriated by relatives (Kimaryo *et al* 2003; Mbaya 2002; Munthali and Ali 2000). Those who inherit land may be too young or inexperienced to farm it: usufruct rights may be lost, leaving them landless as adults (White and Robinson 2000). Traditionally, children acquire livelihood skills by working with older kin whose premature death may interrupt intergenerational knowledge transfer (Alumira *et al* 2005; Imaya and Kapondam'gaga 2003; Loevinsohn and Gillespie 2003; Mphale *et al* 2002; Stokes 2003; White and Robinson 2000). Children whose parents are sick or die are often withdrawn from school to address labour shortages (Bourdillon 2005; Hlanze *et al* 2005; White and Robinson 2000).

It is not only youth that shapes the impacts of AIDS on food security. Old age, too, is significant. Elderly people are often left caring for grandchildren with few resources to provide for them, and may be among the most vulnerable households, even in societies where the elderly are afforded great respect (Drimie 2003). In Lesotho, Botswana and South Africa, old age pensions may mitigate the impacts and even alter age relations.

The differential impacts of AIDS on men and women are also significant in shaping its effects on food security. Where a couple becomes infected it is usually the man that

dies first. Rural areas are left with a preponderance of households comprised of women and children (Gibbs 2006); female headed households have long been more vulnerable in situations of food shortage (Vaughan 1987).

It is, to a large degree, social relations of age and gender that produce these effects. While gender and age help explain differences in experiences within households, they should not be understood simply as individual attributes or attributes of households (as in 'female-headed households') but structural characteristics of society that shape both the AIDS pandemic (see Parker 2001) and food insecurity. Furthermore, gender, age and AIDS are all fluid and in southern Africa are co-constructed.

An obvious area in which particular constructs of age and gender have an impact is in the domain of law and customary practices. Inheritance rights in many African countries continue to favour men over women. Even if women are technically permitted to inherit, in patrilineal societies, when a man dies and his wife subsequently falls sick she may move with her children to stay with her own parents, leaving them unable to inherit when she dies (White and Robinson 2000). Where 'double orphans' do inherit but lack the experience to manage farms, it is increasingly unlikely that relatives will have time and resources to manage farms for them until they are old enough, and they thereby lose usufruct rights to retain their inheritance (White and Robinson 2000). In Lesotho, as elsewhere, neither national legislation nor customary law is currently enforcing children's rights to inherit their parents' property and misappropriation is common (Kimaryo *et al* 2003). The gendered assumptions that underlie customary marriage practices may also render girls vulnerable. Across much of southern Africa bridewealth systems operate, and orphaned girls may be seen as an asset to be exchanged in marriage (Loevinsohn and Gillespie 2003). This may or may not enhance their long-term food security.

Farming systems that are highly differentiated by age and sex are particularly vulnerable to the effects of AIDS (Haddad and Gillespie 2001b). Where livelihood knowledges are gendered, the loss of an individual of that gender has a greater impact, such as where knowledge of wild foods and how to prepare them is passed

from mother to daughter (de Waal and Whiteside 2003). Equally, where female involvement with livestock is taboo, widows may become dependent on paying non-kin to care for livestock and for ploughing. If particular occupations are reserved for those above a certain age, early orphanhood may be more damaging.

Beyond gender and age divisions of labour, there are often significant differentials in pay. Whiteside (1998) found that for casual work in Malawi men were paid 20 Kwacha a day (then about US$1), women 5-10 Kwacha and children 2-3 Kwacha. Women were also restricted to opportunities close to home for reasons of social propriety and domestic responsibilities (Bryceson 2006). Such practices render female-headed and child-headed households particularly vulnerable.

Age and gender are both fluid constructs, and both practices and expectations change. In Malawi women and youth used to work as unpaid family labour, but women are increasingly working to earn money elsewhere and their autonomy is increasing. Meanwhile, they expect their children to do casual work to contribute to household income. However, youth want to control their own income, leading to conflict between generations and threatening the ideal of a collective rural peasant household (Bryceson 2006). The implications for food security are not clear. Furthermore, children are generally better educated than their parents and are reluctant to engage in agriculture (Gill-Wason 2004), which, in the absence of alternative livelihood opportunities, leaves them vulnerable.

3 Colonial history

Fundamental to the structural context of contemporary southern African food consumption is the historical development of capitalism – the market expansion, increasing divisions of labour, proletarianisation and growth of centralised states that took place under colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Watts 1991). Indeed Wisner *et al* (1982: 13) view 'famine and malnutrition as symptoms of contradictions inherent in capitalism and its articulation with pre-capitalist modes of production'. Not only have inherited social relations and inherited property relations shaped access to food, so too has the (not unrelated) legacy of colonialism (Young 1996).

A key practice of colonialism was the alienation of land for plantation production (Bryceson 2006). As land became restricted, colonial states sanctioned male labour migration from rural areas to neighbouring mineral-rich countries, while wives remained in the 'labour reserves' engaged in subsistence farming (Bryceson 2006). This partial separation of Third World farmers from their means of production within the development of global capitalism has been described as de-peasantisation and semi-proletarianisation (Wisner *et al* 1982). The situation of land scarcity produced persists today (Watts 1991) and the semi-proletariat remain the most vulnerable to fluctuating world food prices (Wisner *et al* 1982). Furthermore, the severity of the AIDS pandemic in southern Africa has been attributed to the practice of male labour migration that, alongside removing men from their homes for long periods, encouraged both temporary and long-term sexual relationships at the workplace (Bujra 2004).

Not all peasants were alienated from the land. Some were instead drawn into cash crop production allowing surplus to be extracted for international markets (Wisner *et al* 1982). Commercialisation has long been accused of inhibiting food production for subsistence (Harriss and Harriss 1982), allowing wealthier farmers to prosper but drawing the poor into dependence on wage labour and purchase of food, although the relationship between hunger and commoditisation is not necessarily so clear-cut (Watts 1989). Indeed, the legacy of colonialism has varied consequences in particular sets of conditions, and places, and for different classes of rural African people (Watts 1989).

4. National and international political economy

The volume and mix of food produced domestically or imported, and who has access to that food, reflect national and international policies and the functioning of markets. Mechanisms including subsidies on inputs and consumption, price controls, and land policies all have outcomes. Also important is international trade in food and other commodities, and other transfers such as food aid. The policies that are implemented, whether interventionist or not, reflect ideologies and interests and the character of institutions.

National decision-making in all these areas is often structured by decisions made by international actors (Young 1996). Northern countries have negotiating power in international organisations that enables the threat of hunger within their territories to be limited (Young 1996), but also continue to shape access to food in poor countries. African nation states are influential too, and have their own agendas that may not reflect the interests of the rural poor (Harriss and Harriss 1982). Moreover, 'the internal complexities of African states makes for contradictory and messy involvements in agriculture' (Watts 1989: 28). Large landowners, domestic and international agribusinesses are powerful; states often support the commercial agricultural sector and neglect peasant farmers. Development orthodoxies, too, often favour investment in cash crop production. Thus the Malawian Government, before and after independence, prioritised plantation agriculture over smallholder production (Bryceson 2006). This has contributed to food insecurity as many peasants were reduced to labourers dependent on wages. Peasant farming and other forms of income generation may be neglected in favour of the commercial production of cheap food which is seen as a way of encouraging industrialisation, and also reflects the threat that the urban poor and hungry pose to the state (Young 1996). It is not only agricultural policy that impacts on livelihoods, even agricultural livelihoods (Kydd *et al* 2004).

The availability and cost of food reflects not only domestic production but also import capacity. Access to foreign exchange is significant, but food imports are also politicised, with import licences used for political ends and merchant capitalists straddling public and private sectors (Watts 1989). The cost and availability of imported food reflects international market conditions, and in turn the use of subsidies in Western agricultural sectors: cheap imports may reflect practices of dumping that are harmful to domestic African markets. Furthermore, US law requires food aid to be supplied from US farmers, even though this can be more expensive to deliver and depresses incentives for local production (Baro and Deubel 2006).

Political motivations may not only fail to promote policies that ensure food security; they may actually promote famine and obstruct relief (Baro and Deubel 2006). In Zimbabwe, the government stands accused of using food for political ends in recent years (Solidarity Peace Trust 2007). Hunger is used as a weapon in civil war and geopolitical conflict (Watts 1991), and famines are often politicised as they produce beneficiaries as well as victims (Devereux 2001).

Since the 1980s, African governments applying for debt rescheduling have been required by the World Bank and IMF to implement structural adjustment programmes, which later morphed into 'poverty reduction strategies'. These strongly reflect the neoliberal ideology that also inflects the policies of most international donors and, according to Young (2004: 2) 'have dangerously undermined the ability of governments to protect their population's health and nutritional status'. Neoliberalism favours international trade and in many cases production of cash crops for the global economy has been encouraged at the expense of domestic food production (Kalibwani 2005). In Zambia, for instance, where, unlike in Malawi, the post-independence government had invested in maize production as a symbol of economic modernisation, maize has been discursively reconstituted as an obstacle to food security (Sitko 2008). The growing dependence on export commodities can make national economies vulnerable to poor harvests, and to changing terms of trade in which imports become increasingly unaffordable on the basis of export earnings (Young 1996). In Swaziland, for example, the recent development of commercial sugar production on small scale farms is now being undermined by changes to the EU's Sugar Protocol (Terry 2007). African economies are afflicted both by falling commodity prices and by the requirement to open markets to imports of heavily subsidised cheap grain (Johnson *et al* 2005).

In response to falling agricultural commodity prices, many governments have sought to promote the domestic production of food. In contrast to earlier times, they have been advised to raise the prices received by producers in order to provide incentives to farmers. However, in many countries the poor, if not the majority of the rural population, are net consumers of food, and do not benefit (Watts 1989). Structural adjustment in Malawi, for instance, focused on market and price

mechanisms rather than production constraints and non-economic barriers to economic growth (Chilowa 1998). In 1981/2 a 67% increase in the producer price of maize resulted in self-sufficiency nationally, but not food security at household level. Those who were net food buyers could only increase production if land and labour were readily available, which was seldom the case (Chilowa 1998). The removal of producer subsidies made inputs prohibitively expensive for the poorest households, and further removed them from direct production. Bryceson (2004) argues that in South Africa structural adjustment accelerated deagrarianisation, a process that has accelerated rural class stratification and increased poverty. Similar patterns have been observed in Mozambique (Tschirley and Benfica 2001)

Structural adjustment also required governments to liberalise marketing, by privatising or downsizing state marketing boards. In Malawi, their former role of maintaining affordable supplies of maize for people in the annual food-deficit season was partially passed to private traders with highly differential effects on different sections of the population (Peters 2006). Malawi also sold its strategic grain reserve on advice from IMF (although not entirely in accord with that advice) and during the subsequent 2002 famine, maize production fell by over 30% while maize prices rose by over 300% (Devereux 2002), again having the most serious impact on those who were most dependent on the market to purchase food. Overall, 'liberalisation has increased price risks, raised ratios between input and output prices, resulted in uneven private market coverage, and reduced the outreach of advisory services to crops and livestock' and has affected remote and subsistence farmers most (Ellis 2003: ii).

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the economic situation of all but about the top quarter of peasant households is failing to improve appreciably (Ellis 2006). Even where, as in Ethiopia, economic liberalisation may first appear to have reduced rural poverty, in depth analysis reveals increasing numbers of people to be destitute or at risk of destitution (Devereux and Sharp 2006). Even if productivity is increased, this will only eradicate hunger in a social and political context where the poor are able to command the food produced: 'In the global supermarket … food flows to effective markets, not to people who lack food' (Young 1996: 103).

De Waal and Tumushabe (2003) have emphasised the roles played by drought, floods, low commodity prices, mismanagement of reserves, and liberalisation of services in producing food crises, all of which they argue are compounded by the impacts of AIDS. However, AIDS is not an extraneous characteristic of individuals, but part of a wider social, economic and political picture. It impacts the political economy directly, affecting the integration of individuals into markets, how markets operate, and the functioning of institutions.

The impacts of AIDS, like access to food, are shaped by national and international political economy. Social science has not paid great attention to AIDS, particularly from a political or political economic perspective (Whiteside and de Waal 2004), but this situation is beginning to change (Prens 2004; Schoepf 2001). AIDS is increasingly seen as a threat to global security and has been the subject of UN Security Council resolutions (Prens 2004) as well as major funding initiatives such as the US$10 billion Global Fund and US$15 billion President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), each of which embraces particular ideological approaches and vested interests. Hitherto, 'policy making on AIDS has been strongly centred on biomedical and neoliberal economic discourses' (Lee and Zwi 1996: 356). However, growing attention is being paid to structural factors including the global regime on property rights that inhibits access to treatment by the poor (Shadlen 2004) and 'historically constituted political and economic systems … related to economic development, housing, labor, migration or immigration, health, education, and welfare' (Parker 2001: 169). As Parker (2001) points out, there are economic and political power relations that underpin sexual cultures: 'With whom one may have sex, in what ways, under what circumstances, and with what specific outcomes are never simply random questions' (Parker 2001: 169).

Reference has already been made to the link between male labour migrancy and the prevalence of AIDS in southern Africa (Bujra 2004). However, the southern African epidemic is also an outcome of 'more recent changes in the political economy of sex' (Hunter 2007: 689). In neoliberal post-Apartheid South Africa, rising unemployment and growing social inequalities are leaving some groups, particularly poor women,

very vulnerable. Marriage rates are in dramatic decline, a situation which may relate to the impoverished opportunities for men (no longer able to provide bridewealth or support a family) and growing prospects of economic independence for women. Simultaneously, migration among women is increasing. Many of these single and migrant women weave sexual networks through which men's meagre earnings are redistributed (Hunter 2007). The most important factor in prevention of AIDS is arguably improving people's life prospects (Campbell 2003). The pandemic is thus intricately connected with contemporary social and economic debates (Hunter 2007).

The politics of NVF

Famine is at once political and apolitical – it incites political demands on governments for an urgent response, but provokes governments to blame 'nature' and offer expedient, technical solutions rather than enduring structural change. This begs the question of whether NVF could be more effective in leveraging meaningful political responses.

Drought is certainly more likely to provoke official national and international responses than is AIDS. For a host of reasons, AIDS has seldom figured among politically contentious issues in Africa (de Waal 2006). At household level AIDS remains partly hidden. Illness is often seen as a private issue and AIDS is also stigmatised and invisible in its early stages (Baylies 2002). More broadly, AIDS does not have the same priority as food security: 'there are votes to be gained from dramatically feeding people who are in danger of starving, while there are no votes to be gained from constantly reminding people that certain enjoyable private activities are eroding their life-expectancy' (Scott 2000: 580). Indeed, for rural people in Malawi, ensuring day to day staple food needs has a higher priority – and is regarded as more manageable – than avoiding AIDS, in the face of which many feel powerless, and some individuals even resort to transactional sex to alleviate hunger (Bryceson 2006).

Despite accusations that the association with AIDS has been used by advocates of NVF to achieve 'New Variant Fundraising', it is argued that the resources and

attention devoted to AIDS have been modest, relative to the scale of the pandemic. Whiteside and de Waal (2004) attribute this to the fact that those dying from AIDS are not major contributors to the global economy. Furthermore, even though the 2002/3 crisis in southern Africa was widely attributed to AIDS, the response emphasised food aid delivery, not health services (Griekspoor *et al* 2004). The fact that production decline is clustered in affected households may fail to stimulate those concerned with aggregate production levels. Moreover, the association of AIDS with households keeps it in the private sphere and relatively unseen by policy formulators (Baylies 2002).

There is a danger in seeing the required reaction to AIDS and food insecurity in terms of direct support to individuals and households. Prescriptions put forward in the NGO and donor agency literature today echo remarkably closely what Wisner et al (1982) described as the developmentalist perspective – focusing on political, cultural, socioeconomic and technological obstacles, the need for institutional change, the need for a free market in food that allows food prices to rise, provision of technical solutions, investment in rural social and physical infrastructure, land reform, small farmer credit and marketing (Wisner *et al* 1982). Yet '[r]epeatedly land reform, marketing, road building, well digging and similar 'rural development' investments have enhanced the rate of growth of bigger farmers, accelerating the small farmer's slide towards landlessness' (Wisner *et al* 1982: 7). AIDS-related food insecurity is seen in terms of responses to be managed rather than claims to be secured – as a task for governance rather than politics.

As nature-based explanations of famine are losing credibility (Watts 1991: 151) it seems possible that AIDS, while by no means a random act of nature, risks falling into the place vacated by 'drought', but with even less impetus for structural change. It is possible that aid agencies are more comfortable with attributing famine to AIDS than to more political structural causes, as they were to drought in the past (Richardson 2007). It seems very possible that association with AIDS may serve to depoliticise hunger in southern Africa.

This depoliticisation is problematic, in part because where political claims around food security are strong, responses have been more effective. In India, for instance, state intervention began with the Famine Codes of the 19th Century, and since 1947 there has been a state controlled early warning and food distribution system, public works programme and massive bufferstock of grain. Asset, labour and wage legislation and decentralised relief administration system demonstrate a concern not just with availability of food, but also people's capacity to access it (Watts 1991). These measures have protected the population against famine for over 60 years, although much less has been done about chronic malnutrition. In Africa, by contrast, 'famine has rarely been an effective and enduring political issue' (de Waal 2000: 24). This is partly because, historically, 'some anti-famine measures, such as environmental protection projects, [were] ill-conceived and brutally implemented, helping to discredit them' (de Waal 2000: 24). Africa is also different in macroeconomic, bureaucratic and infrastructural terms, and peasants are politically excluded (Watts 1991). Moreover, the generally slower onset of African famines and their low visibility contributes to their lesser political impact (de Waal 2000), characteristics that are doubtless amplified in the case of AIDS-related hunger.

It is ironic that de Waal (1996, 2000) has been a strong advocate of the view that famine needed to become a political issue (and has latterly written in a similar vein about AIDS (de Waal 2006)). He sketched out the concept of a 'political contract' against famine, wherein those in power would be held to account should famine occur. This requires political mobilisation around a right not to be hungry (Watts 1991). Such mobilisation may be either primary (where people mobilise in support of their own interests) or secondary (undertaken by specialist organisations on behalf of the hungry). Ideally, both forms are needed, but in practice, although the threat of urban riots has secured price controls on food, the rural hungry rarely organise themselves, and their hunger is seldom a direct concern of other social groups (de Waal 2000). This situation is again exacerbated when AIDS is involved. Securing a political right to freedom from hunger is therefore likely to depend on secondary activism that mobilises the skills of professionals and power of the media to put pressure on politicians (de Waal 2000). Such activists need to make famine a legitimate political concern, disarming those who present it as a natural disaster or a

challenge to charity (de Waal 2000). Recourse to food aid is likely to undermine political accountability, since 'there is no international social contract that can enable those vulnerable to famine to enforce their will on international institutions' (de Waal 1996: 203). Instead, a 'political contract' is advocated, wherein governments would ensure for their publics a timely response to threat of famine, effective anti-famine mechanisms, public education, entitlement to protection for *all* citizens and residents, and enforcement of accountability (through the electoral process; the press; legal channels; and the professional accountability of public officials, health workers, planners and technicians) (de Waal 2000).

While most responses to food insecurity remain largely technocratic, there are exceptions. The Regional Hunger and Vulnerability Programme (RHVP),[1] responding to food insecurity in the six 'NVF-affected' nations of southern Africa recognises the importance of mobilising the public to make claims on governments. In Lesotho, its activities are largely focused around mechanisms to strengthen civil society, in part by organising 'categories' of civil society that are said to be present in every village (burial societies, former mineworkers, informal business, support groups, people with disabilities and sports and recreation groups). These groups are brought together and supported to call government to account at local, district and national levels (RHVP 2007).

Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that the NVF hypothesis focuses too narrowly on the household in exploring interrelations between AIDS and food insecurity. This is characteristic of a wider shift from global analyses of food to household level investigations of vulnerability and livelihood strategies (Herbers 2002). In each of the countries allegedly experiencing NVF, food insecurity may be attributed to other causes. These include nation-specific causes (though these are themselves partly products of international conditions): retrenchment of migrant miners from Lesotho and Swaziland; the sale of Malawi's strategic grain reserve; Zimbabwe's foreign exchange crisis which drastically reduced the capacity to import fertiliser (Andersson

[1] RHVP is a 3-year programme funded by the UK Department for International Development and the Australian Agency for International Development to support policy-makers and practitioners concerned with food security, social protection and vulnerability in southern Africa.

2007); as well as the more generalised impacts of neoliberal adjustment across southern Africa. These causes do not stand entirely apart from AIDS as explanations, but interact with the pandemic in complex ways. It is important, therefore, that AIDS is seen as one of a number of interrelated causes of food insecurity in southern Africa; to move beyond single cause or generic theories of famine to multilayered conjunctural explanations (Watts 1989). Furthermore, an excessive focus on AIDS[2] ('AIDS exceptionalism') is dangerous because it detracts from other chronic problems (Murphy et al 2005).

Advocates of the NVF hypothesis are not unaware of the wider factors underlying recent food crises. De Waal (2006) acknowledges that 'the HIV/AIDS epidemic exacerbates existing social and economic problems' but he does not elucidate how. De Waal and Whiteside (2003: 1236) write of the need to 'confront many simultaneous problems, all of which need resolution', but they do not examine how these problems are not only simultaneous, but interact. There is a 'need for a deeper understanding of how AIDS is inserting into complex and dynamic historical processes and on-going structural changes' (Murphy *et al* 2005: 272), without theoretically divorcing the structural from the conjunctural (Watts 1991).

It is common that the long term structural causes of vulnerability do not receive the same level of attention as the proximate triggers of famine (Young 1996). The immediate triggers are easier to mobilise support around, especially if government is seen as an innocent party. AIDS, though, is oddly placed as neither a structural cause, nor a proximate trigger; itself partly an outcome of structural conditions, and causing long-term vulnerability. There is a risk that AIDS will be used to depoliticise hunger, yet AIDS is deeply imbricated in political economy and should not be depoliticising.

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[2] Interestingly, most of those writing on this theme are otherwise working on food security rather than AIDS.

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