The Hungry Months
A report on drought, crop failure and food shortages in Zambia
Prepared by CARE International in Zambia and CARE Canada
Lusaka, Zambia and Ottawa, Canada
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Targeted Districts: Western Province and Southern Province, Zambia
Assessment Period: April 3 – 26, 2002
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1. Overview

The 2001/2002 agricultural season, which begins with planting in September/October and ends with harvest in March/April, has been crippled by drought in many regions of Zambia. Of the areas affected, the Southern and Western Provinces have been the hardest hit. Crop and vegetation growth has been stifled by limited and inconsistent rainfall, resulting in low yields of crops and wild fruits.

This situation threatens to cause widespread hunger in the coming months. In order to gain some understanding of the prevailing situation and the impact on households, CARE has carried out a rapid assessment in Monze, Choma, Kalomo, Kazungula, Sesheke, and Senanga districts of Zambia’s Southern and Western provinces.

2. Methodology

The assessment was conducted across six districts of the Southern and Western Provinces, surveying a total of 293 households, or approximately 1,750 people.
Table 1: Areas involved in the assessment, April 2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Block</th>
<th>Number of Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>Monze</td>
<td>Monze North West</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Monze East</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choma</td>
<td>Gamela</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Batoka</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Singani</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kalomo</td>
<td>Chikoyo</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Siachitema</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kazungula</td>
<td>Mambova</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>Seshke</td>
<td>Mwandi</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senanga</td>
<td>Kalobolelwa</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lui valley</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data were collected in three ways:
1) District-level data were collected through surveys, provided by the District Agricultural Coordinating Officer (DACO) and the Block or Camp Officers.
2) Community information was collected through focus group discussions with community members.
3) Household data were gathered through a structured questionnaire that was administered with the heads of each household.

3. **Findings**:

a) **Rainfall:** All districts received significantly less overall precipitation, which fell on fewer days and with less consistent geographic distribution in comparison with normal years (Figure 1, 2). The uncertainty of rains resulted in reductions in crop plantings and yields.
[FIGURE 1]: AVERAGE TOTAL RAINFALL FOR SELECTED DISTRICTS: 2001/2002 SEASON

[Diagram showing rainfall amounts for Monze, Choma, Kalomo, Kazungula, and Sesheke districts in normal season and 2001/2002 season.]
1. **Crop damage**: Low precipitation volume and inconsistent rain periods caused widespread crop damage. Of those surveyed, eight out of 10 reported maize crop failure in the range of 76-100 percent of anticipated yields (Figure 3).
As a result of this, crop forecast data collected from the District Agricultural Coordinators’ Offices indicate yield levels in the range of 2-3 x 90 kg bags per hectare for maize. The normal yield for maize is about 35 x 90 kg bags per hectare. At a household level, calculations show an average yield of 2 x 90 kg bags of maize per hectare. These yield levels fall well short of the annual household requirements of about 15 x 90 kg bags of maize for a family of six members.

The drought had an equally devastating affect on groundnut crops – another staple food for Zambians. Of those surveyed, less than 5 percent expected significant groundnut yields. More than half of the respondents anticipated 75-100 percent
crop failure, while four out of 10 never even planted groundnuts because of poor conditions and inconsistent precipitation during the planting season (Figure 4).

2. Household food availability: Over 80 percent of households report that they will run out of maize, the most common cereal staple, by June. At the time of the assessment almost two thirds reported not having any maize remaining from their harvest (Figure 5).
This is also likely to have a very negative impact on the next agricultural season, as households will not have grain for either planting or eating. The current food situation is a complete reversal of the previous season, which approximates a normal year (Figure 6).
As demonstrated in Figure 6, low levels of food stocks are a common problem in Zambia. Even in ‘normal’ years, families must prepare to endure “hungry months” – periods in which they must undertake various coping mechanisms, such as reducing the number of daily meals, in order to make food supplies last. However, the “hungry months” usually refer only to November, December, and January. With such a poor harvest this year, for many Zambians the “hungry months” have already begun.
4. **Coping strategies:**

- At the time of the assessment 75 percent of the families had reduced their numbers of meals. Three-fourths of those who had reduced were eating two meals and the remaining one-fourth ate one meal only (Figure 7). Many more households will reduce the number of meals to one meal after June, when they expect to run out of maize.

- Many households are turning to off-farm activities to earn cash to buy food. These include selling handicrafts, seeking off-farm employment and
selling livestock. Given the current socio-economic situation in regions, these alternative income-generation methods cannot provide enough to sustain healthy diets for families.

- Selling livestock and/or eating livestock in order to meet immediate food needs may provide short-term relief for affected households, however such measures are detrimental to future crop yields, since farmers will attempt to grow crop with less capacity and capital.
- Given the lack of fully-grown crops, many households have begun eating “green” mealies – those crops whose growth was stunted because of the drought. After unripe crops, many of these same households turn to seeds for food, diminishing the seed stock for the coming year’s planting season.

4. Conclusions:

- Findings of this assessment clearly show that many households are seriously affected by the impact of the drought as many have lost their planted crops and have already consumed whatever little could be harvested from the more drought tolerant crops. Coping strategies are far from sufficient to cover the deficit. Thus hunger and malnutrition are already on the rise. A significant food relief effort is required.

- This year’s drought is likely to have a negative impact on the coming agricultural season, as planting seeds will be scarce. In the short term, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donor agencies could avert this problem by embarking on emergency seed programs in conjunction with irrigation strategies. For the long term, investments in water harvesting structures will be crucial, as it is the only way of ensuring that crop production continues during years of drought.

- There is need to support livestock production and development activities in the long term, as livestock have been a major source of livelihood for people in the Southern Province and parts of Western Province during difficult years. What little sustainability livestock have generated is now threatened by cattle diseases and by the fact that households are selling and/or eating livestock to meet their immediate food needs.

- It is vital that governments, NGOs and UN agencies like the World Food Programme begin a food-crisis relief effort to avert widespread hunger. A short-term relief effort should be followed by a long-term sustainability assistance plan in the coming years.