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A Community Engagement Tool for Understanding and Taking Action Against Food Insecurity in Zimbabwe

7 December 2023

Introduction

On 21 September 2023, ZimRights launched the 2022 State of Peace Report with a major finding that most Zimbabweans are living in a perpetual state of insecurity. The report identified multiple layers of insecurity including among other social and economic insecurity. Many more developments are giving us a greater insight into these insecurities. This Community Engagement Tool (CET) unpacks one of the insecurities under economic insecurity specifically food insecurity and how this is affecting the right to food for millions of Zimbabweans.

Rising Food Insecurity in Zimbabwe

According to the 2023 Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee’s (ZimVAC) Urban and Rural Livelihood Assessment, 29 percent of the urban population (1.5 million people) and 19 percent of the rural population (1.9 million people) are food insecure, meaning they do not have enough food to meet their basic needs. This situation is expected to worsen in the first quarter of 2024, when 26 percent of the rural population (2.7 million people) will face acute food insecurity.

Section 77 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe guarantees the right to food and obliges the State the State to take reasonable legislative and other measures to achieve the progressive realisation of this right. However, the realization of the right to food in Zimbabwe is hampered by multiple factors, such as political instability, economic mismanagement, corruption, climate change, natural disasters, poor agricultural policies, and lack of adequate social protection mechanisms. These factors have created a situation where millions of Zimbabweans are living in a perpetual state of insecurity, as highlighted our 2022 State of Peace. The report reveals that most

Zimbabweans do not feel safe and secure in their own country, and that they have concerns and fears about the future.

This community engagement tool (CET) aims to provide an overview of the right to food in Zimbabwe, the basis, the obstacles to realising the right to food, and the recommendations for the government, civil society, and development partners to address the root causes of food insecurity and promote a culture of human rights and dignity in Zimbabwe. It also encourages communities to act and start a conversation with their local leadership on how to respond to the pending humanitarian disaster.

Basis of the Right to Food

The right to food is enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe, which states in Section 77 that “every person has the right to sufficient food” and that “the State must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within the limits of the resources available to it, to achieve the progressive realization of this right”. The Constitution also guarantees other related rights, such as the right to life, the right to health care, the right to water, the right to education, the right to property, and the right to a clean environment.

The right to food is also recognized in several international and regional human rights instruments that Zimbabwe is a party to, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. These instruments oblige Zimbabwe to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to food for all its citizens, without discrimination.

Multiple Layers of the Right to Food

The right to food is not a simple right that can be satisfied by providing food aid or handouts. It is a complex and multidimensional right that requires a holistic and human rights-based approach to address the underlying causes and consequences of food insecurity. According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the right to food implies three levels of obligations for the State:

The obligation to respect the right to food means that the State must not interfere with people’s ability to feed themselves, such as by arbitrarily evicting them from their land, destroying their crops, or confiscating their food.

The obligation to protect the right to food means that the State must prevent third parties, such as corporations, landlords, or armed groups, from violating people’s right to food, such as by polluting their water sources, displacing them from their farms, or restricting their access to markets.

The obligation to fulfill the right to food means that the State must take positive steps to ensure that people have access to adequate food, such as by providing social protection, supporting small-scale farmers, promoting sustainable agriculture, and regulating the food system.

Furthermore, the right to food has several dimensions that need to be considered, such as availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability:

- Availability means that there must be sufficient food of appropriate quality available in the country or area, either through domestic production or importation.
- Accessibility means that there must be physical and economic access to food for everyone, without discrimination, and that people must have the means to procure food, such as income, land, or other productive resources.
- Adequacy means that the food must be nutritious, safe, and culturally acceptable, and that it must meet the dietary needs and preferences of individuals and communities.
- Sustainability means that the food must be produced and consumed in a way that does not compromise the natural resources, biodiversity, and climate for present and future generations.

Obstacles to Realizing the Right to Food

One of the obstacles to realizing the right to food in Zimbabwe is the lack of access to quality seeds for farmers, especially small-scale and subsistence farmers. Seeds are essential inputs for crop production and food security, but they are often scarce, expensive, or unsuitable for the local conditions and preferences. The seed market in Zimbabwe is dominated by a few large companies, which have a monopoly over the supply and distribution of certified seeds. These companies that are mainly linked to government produce and sell mainly hybrid white maize seeds, which are high yielding but require more inputs, such as fertilizers and pesticides, and are not adapted to drought or pest resistance. The companies charge high prices for its seeds, which are unaffordable for many poor farmers. These companies have also been involved in partisan political campaigns linked to partisan distribution of agricultural inputs. For example, after the 2018 election, the [Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission](#) (ZHRC) upheld complaints about “partisan distribution of farming inputs under the Presidential Inputs Programme, partisan distribution of food aid, threats of violence and intimidation” by elected politicians and local state officials.

Another obstacle to realizing the right to food in Zimbabwe is the policy approach that ignores or marginalizes the nutritious and traditional food options, such as millet, sorghum, cowpeas, and groundnuts. These crops are more resilient to climate change and have higher nutritional value than maize, which is the staple food in Zimbabwe. However, the government and the donors have focused on promoting maize production and consumption, while neglecting the research, extension, and marketing of the traditional crops. This has resulted in the loss of crop diversity, food sovereignty, and cultural identity of the local communities, as well as increased dependence on imported food and food aid.

The third obstacle to realizing the right to food in Zimbabwe is the politics of food aid, which is the distribution of food assistance by the government or humanitarian agencies to the people in need. Food aid is supposed to be based on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, but in Zimbabwe, it has been often used as a tool of political manipulation and coercion. The ruling party has often been accused of using food aid to reward its supporters and punish its opponents, especially during the election periods. Ruling party functionaries have also interfered with the registration and targeting of the food aid beneficiaries, and used the traditional leaders, such as village heads and chiefs, to enforce a partisan agenda. The politicization of food aid has violated the human rights and dignity of the people, and undermined the trust and cooperation between the government, the donors, and the civil society. Food has thus become a form of power manipulated by the few for purposes of political and economic control.

Recommendations

To address the obstacles and challenges to realizing the right to food in Zimbabwe, the following recommendations are proposed for the government, civil society, and development partners:

The government should respect, protect, and fulfill the right to food for all its citizens, in accordance with its constitutional and international obligations, and ensure that the right to food is integrated into its policies, laws, and programs, especially in the agricultural, health, education, and social sectors.

The government should also promote democratic governance, accountability, and rule of law, and end the human rights violations, repression, violence, and corruption that undermine the right to food. The government should engage in dialogue and cooperation with the opposition, civil society, and the international community, and seek to resolve the political and economic crisis.

Civil society should monitor, advocate, and campaign for the right to food, and hold the government and other duty-bearers accountable for their actions and inactions. At ZimRights, we continue raise awareness and educate the public about the right to food and empower and mobilize the people to claim and exercise their right to food.

Development partners should support and cooperate with the government and civil society in the realization of the right to food and provide humanitarian and development assistance that is consistent with the human rights principles and standards. Development partners should also respect the sovereignty and ownership of Zimbabwe, and refrain from imposing conditionalities or restrictions that may violate the right to food.

Humanitarian organisations must help shift the power to marginalized communities by encouraging sustainable local food options, pushing for the liberalization of the seed sector and push back against politicization of agricultural inputs and food aid.

The international aid organisations must provide ethical leadership in resisting political gate keeping in communities that are most in need.

Conclusion

The right to food is a fundamental human right that is essential for the survival, dignity, and well-being of every person in Zimbabwe. However, the right to food is under threat from multiple factors that have created a situation of chronic and acute food insecurity and malnutrition for millions of Zimbabweans. Therefore, it is imperative that the right to food is given the highest priority and attention by all stakeholders, and that concerted and coordinated efforts are made to address the root causes and consequences of food insecurity and to promote a culture of human rights and dignity in Zimbabwe.

One of the key asks in the [People's Human Rights Manifesto](#), compiled by ZimRights on behalf of the people of Zimbabwe, is to ensure that every person has access to sufficient and nutritious food, and that the government takes reasonable measures to achieve the progressive realization of this right. This ask reflects the aspirations and expectations of the Zimbabwean voters, who want their prospective leaders to commit to upholding and working towards the right to food.

In the face of the current assessment showing millions of Zimbabweans are food insecure, we highly recommend communities to start engaging their duty bearers on what role the local leadership and citizens can play in response to the assessment, identify the most affected and act in support and solidarity towards the realisation of the rights to food. This CET provides an important beginning point.