No quick fix for high food prices

By Mercia Smith

A symposium on high food prices was recently organised by the Inter-ministerial Committee (IMC). The symposium was aimed at opening a national discourse on food prices, formulating joint strategies with the business sector as well as civil society, all in an effort to address the food price challenges.

Participants were drawn from the South African commodity organisations, input suppliers, manufacturers, retailers in the food industry and other allied industries in support of the food industry.

The situation

Despite national food security, many South African households experience continued food insecurity, malnutrition and unemployment. These vulnerable households include those headed by single women in the lower income groups, elderly persons on state pensions who have assumed financial responsibility for the household, child-headed households and the very susceptible households with barely any resources to even secure basic foods.

According to Ms Lulu Xingwana, Minister for Agriculture and Land Affairs, these are the households which seem to have been affected severely by the price increases of basic foods such as maize, bread, sugar, fruit and vegetables. Food insecurity and malnutrition are the highest in provinces with large rural popul-
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The stark reality is that many South Africans simply do not have enough to eat. More than 45% of the population in the rural areas and 26% in metropolitan areas reported in 1998 that they go hungry at least once a month; 17% of people living in the rural areas reported going hungry at least once a week and 6% of those living in urban and semi-urban areas going hungry every day. This situation is worsening because of the high food prices.

Between January 2006 and May 2008 maize and wheat grain prices rose by 144.1 and 107.1% respectively, soya-bean and rice increased by 114.7 and 218.4% respectively. Proteins increased as follows: beef by 3%, chicken by 28% and pork by 6%.

Between March 2007 and March 2008, the price of dairy products increased between 17.05% for skimmed milk and 93.89% for butter.

Causes

Although it is almost impossible to pinpoint the exact cause of soaring food prices, experts have placed the blame on rising fuel costs, lower agricultural production, weather shocks, greater meat consumption and shifts to biofuel crops.

The increased demand for animal proteins (requiring grains as inputs for the production of more meat), trade restrictions that were imposed by major grain-exporting countries and the potential misuse of market power on the input and output sides of the agro-food chains also played a role.

The sharp depreciation of the Rand against all major currencies in the world caused raising commodity prices.

Way forward

At the end of the symposium it was decided that government should review the Competition Act to proactively discourage anticompetitive behaviours in the food markets. Government should continue strengthening the small, medium and micro enterprises in the food and agro-processing sector. It would also develop an Agricultural Trade and Tariffs Policy for addressing and countering subsidised imports. A comment that evoked loud applause from the audience was that in addition, government would implement a proper plan for Transnet Freight Rail to support the cost-effective movement of grains across the country. Major input suppliers must supply inputs such as fertiliser at competitive prices.

In the long term, government should link agricultural machinery to the industrial strategy.

Through interdepartmental engagements, an in-principle agreement was reached concerning the need to directly address the root causes of the high food prices in production and productivity, strengthening national platforms for a comprehensive and responsive and informed response. Key activities in this regard include the expansion of agricultural starter packs with the intention of increasing the target of 70,000 households per annum.

In terms of its mandate, government must be certain that the reason for the unaffordability of food is not linked to unfair business practices.

In conclusion, it was agreed that the country is facing a food price crisis (affordability) and not food crisis (availability).
In an effort to ensure that disability does not mean incapability, the Minister for Agriculture and Land Affairs, Ms Lulu Xingwana, launched the first-ever Braille Atlas in South Africa at Filadelfia Secondary School in Soshanguve, North of Pretoria, on 5 March.

The purpose of the Braille Atlas is to show that visually impaired persons have access to information on maps and knowledge improvement about their country. This will also serve as an educational aid to visually impaired learners.

The Minister highlighted that the Department of Land Affairs had made “considerable progress” in addressing the needs of the disabled.

“The atlas, which covered the entire South Africa, would assist the blind who could use it “to navigate the world”. We have developed a disability strategy which provides us with an effective framework to tackle challenges facing people with disabilities. This launch is part of her department’s contribution to equality among people, including those living with disabilities.

The Minister, who holds two government department portfolios, added that in the entire employment establishment, they have 98 (2.4%) staff members who are all people with disabilities.

She encouraged children at the school to choose careers in land affairs such as surveying, planning, engineering, assessing and land evaluation, saying bursaries were available for these careers.

The Director in the Office on Status of Disabled Persons, Benny Palime, praised the Minister and her departments for outperforming other government departments in taking needs for disabled people to another level.

“We must use this department as a sign of showing care about disabilities. This atlas will assist learners to read and understand carefully. This is one of the major deliveries from Land Affairs”, stated Palime.

The Chairperson of the Learners’ Representative Council, Johan Milolo, stated that the atlas would provide the blind with the opportunity to visualise the world.

“For the first time blind people will be able to know the size and shape of South Africa,” he continued.

“I used to have a problem when going somewhere; people will tell you go straight and turn left, forgetting that I do not understand because I am blind... now I know where Cape Town is,” he said, reading the map to demonstrate to guests at the launch.

The Principal of Filadelfia Secondary School, William van der Merwe, also stated that he was excited about the atlas.

“It will lay a foundation for the learners in grade 8 and 9, they will be able to learn about the provinces, the rivers and mountains,” he said nonchalantly.

The atlas can be obtained from Heindrich du Plessis, acting director for special information and professional (021) 6584350 HduPlessis@sla.wcape.gov.za

On the right is Ms Lulu Xingwana, Minister for Agriculture and Land Affairs, looking as Mr Ngwatle Ezekiel from Filadelfia Secondary School reads from the atlas. Looking on in the back is Ms Lesego Masemola from the Pretoria News.
Rift Valley fever information

By Mercia Smith

There has been a confirmed case of Rift Valley fever (RVf) in cattle in the Ixopo area of KwaZulu-Natal in February. The outbreak remained localised and under very strict monitoring and control. The last cases of RVf in South Africa occurred in localised areas of the Mpumalanga, Limpopo, Gauteng and North West Provinces in 2008.

What is Rift Valley fever
It is a viral zoonosis, affecting primarily domestic livestock, however, it can be passed to humans, causing fever. It is named after a trough stretching 4 000 miles from Jordan through eastern Africa to Mozambique. The disease is spread by the bite of infected mosquitoes, typically the Aedes or Culex genera. The disease was first reported among livestock in Kenya around 1915, however, the virus was not isolated until 1931. RVf is generally found in the regions of eastern and southern Africa where sheep and cattle are raised, although the virus also exists in most countries of sub-Saharan Africa and in Madagascar. An epidemic of RVf is generally observed during years in which unusually heavy rainfall and localised flooding occur. The excessive rainfall allows mosquito eggs to hatch. The eggs are naturally infected with the RVf virus and the resulting mosquitoes transfer the virus to the livestock on which they feed. Once the livestock are infected, other species of mosquitoes can become infected from the animals, further spreading the disease. In addition, it is possible that the virus can be transmitted by other biting insects. Animals grazing in low-lying areas are highly susceptible to the disease.

Signs and symptoms of RVf
In pregnant livestock infected with RVf abortion of virtually 100 % of foetuses occurs. Age has also been shown to be a significant factor in the animal’s susceptibility to the severe form of the disease. More than 90 % of lambs infected with RVf die, whereas mortality among adult sheep can be as low as 10 %.

Other symptoms in cattle include slow movement and lack of energy, high fever and rapid breathing, vomiting, bloody faeces and a lack of appetite.

Prevention and control
Outbreaks of RVf in animals can be prevented by a sustained programme of vaccination. Several animal vaccines have been produced to protect against RVf infection. The first one to be developed was a live vaccine. When administered to mice the results were promising and the vaccine provided immunity for 3 years. However, a problem was encountered: on many occasions administration to pregnant ewes led to abortion. Attenuated vaccines have
therefore now been developed. Both modified live attenuated virus and inactivated virus vaccines have been developed for veterinary use. Only one dose of the live vaccine is required to provide long-term immunity but it may result in spontaneous abortion. The inactive virus vaccine does not have this side effect, although multiple doses are required to provide protection. Animal immunisation must be implemented prior to an outbreak if an epizootic is to be prevented. Once an outbreak has occurred, animal vaccination should not be implemented because there is a high risk of intensifying the outbreak. Restricting or banning the movement of livestock may be effective in slowing the expansion of the virus from infected to uninfected areas.

How do people get RVf

People can get the disease from mosquito bites and possibly other blood-sucking insects or by being exposed to the blood or other body fluids of infected animals. This can happen during the slaughtering of handling of infected animals or during the preparation of food. Laboratory workers have become infected through airborne transmission while working with virus cultures or laboratory samples containing the virus. People with RVf infection typically have a flu-like illness with fever, weakness, back-pain, dizziness and weight loss. Infected people usually get better in 2 days to 1 week after the onset of the illness. Sometimes, however, the infection can cause haemorrhaging, encephalitis or severe eye complications. Inflammation of the retina is the most frequent complication. About 1 to 10% of affected persons could experience visual problems or partial blindness. Those who die of the disease are usually malnourished, sick with other diseases or far from good medical care.

Public health messages for risk reduction focus on:

- Reducing the risk of animal-to-human transmission as a result of unsafe animal husbandry and slaughtering practices. Gloves and other appropriate protective clothing should be worn and care taken when handling sick animals or their tissue.
- Reducing the risk of animal-to-human transmission arising from the unsafe consumption of fresh blood, raw milk or animal tissue. In the epizootic regions, all animal products should be cooked thoroughly before eating.
- The importance of personal and community protection against mosquito bites through the use of impregnated mosquito nets, personal insect repellent, wearing light coloured clothing, long-sleeved shirts and trousers and avoiding outdoor activity at the peak biting times of the vector species.

RVf forecasting

Forecasting can predict weather conditions that are frequently associated with an increased risk of outbreaks, and may improve disease control. In Saudi Arabia and Yemen RVf outbreaks are associated closely with periods of above-average rainfall. The response of vegetation to increased levels of rainfall can be measured easily and monitored by remote sensing satellite imagery. Early-warning systems could therefore be used to detect animal cases at an early stage of an outbreak, enabling authorities to implement measures to avert impending epidemics.

Minister sets the record straight

By Rony Moremi

Responding to the media reports about land and agrarian reform, the Minister for Agriculture and Land Affairs called on a media briefing to give the Ministry’s side of the story. She reiterated the fact that despite many achievements the Ministry has attained so far, the reports chose to ignore the historical facts that land reform emanates from the inhumane land dispossessions of the past. Further questions were asked regarding the suitability of the beneficiaries of land and the Minister informed the journalists that beneficiaries are screened, assessed and given mentors to assist them. She also told journalists that the Ministry would put the principle of “use or lose it” into place. She further said that farmers who did not show any commitment would be removed and emerging farmers and cooperatives would be given training and be placed on the farms.

The department offers support to the farmers in the form of mentorship, skills transfer and training and, as the Minister stated, with the support given, “No land must be allowed to lie fallow”. The outlook is not gloomy and negative, however, as the articles suggest that there are several successful projects, for example Ntabamyama in KwaZulu-Natal, Klipgat in North West, Swartkop commonage project in Gauteng, Kube and Bronaar projects, both in the Western Cape, and Bluesands in Mpumalanga.
Classical swine fever-free status

The Department of Agriculture is closely monitoring areas around the Eastern Cape in an effort to prevent the recurrence of classical swine fever (CSF), also known as European swine fever or hog cholera, which hit the area more than 2 years ago. The efforts have been applauded and a promise of support was made by the South African Pork Producers’ Organisation (SAPPO).

Accordingly, the first CSF case occurring in South Africa was reported in the very early 1900 century, however, the disease had been eradicated by 1918, and did not recur until 2005, when outbreaks occurred first in the Western Cape, soon followed by the Eastern Cape.

The last case of the highly contagious CSF was last reported in October 2007, again in the Eastern Cape, and currently the area is being controlled as promulgated by Notice No. R371 of 26 April 2007 under the Animal Diseases Act of 1984. Serological surveys have been conducted (whereby blood samples are taken from pigs and tested in a laboratory for antibodies) in the Eastern Cape since the end of the official campaign in April 2007.

More than 20 properties have been sampled every 3 months, including pig holdings in townships, communal areas and all high-risk properties in accordance with the national recommendations on CSF, whereby 20 high-risk properties per month, have to be sampled in each province.

So far, 836 samples have been tested during the first cycle of 2009 and the results showed that none of the pigs sampled showed any signs of CSF. Further serological surveillance cycles will continue for the next 3 months from 01 April, 2009. Before declaring South Africa to be CSF free, proper pig husbandry practices have to be adopted by farmers, and general survey requirements be adhered to by all provinces.

According to Simon Streicher, CEO of SAPPO, they will, in collaboration with the department, conduct surveys on several pig diseases during the period of March to June 2009. Nevertheless, all efforts will be made to make the Eastern Cape free from CSF.

Conditions effected following the outbreak in 2007:

No pigs were allowed to be moved in and out of the CSF controlled area without authorisation by the state veterinarian. A general ban was placed on the export of pigs and pig products, including pork, pork products and pig genetic material. The conditions will still apply until the country is completely free from CSF.

More GM maize planted in SA

The South African Pork Producers’ Organisation (SAPPO) electronic newsletter reports that ‘South Africa produces 10 000 ha of Genetically Modified (GM) maize’. They further reported that South Africa has maintained its number eight position in the world ranking of biotech crop countries planting more than 1,8 million ha of biotech maize according to Dr Kobus Laubscher, CEO of Grain SA.

Speaking at a press conference in Pretoria recently, ‘he said that according to a survey funded by the Maize Trust, the production of GM crops in South Africa continues to expand at an impressive rate. In 2008 GM maize plantings increased by 10 000 ha despite an almost 8 % decline in commercial maize area planted; soya-beans increased by 40 000 ha and cotton by 2 000 ha.

The report further highlights the economic benefits to farmers as a result of the biotech production. According to the report, South African farmers-commercial and smallholders-have enjoyed significant financial benefits from biotech crops amounting to US$383 million during 1998-2007 (Brookes & Barfoot, 2008, forthcoming). ‘A study funded by the South African Maize Trust (Gouse & van der Walt, 2008) showed that a total of 15 million metric tons of GM maize was produced on 402 million ha over nine years (2000-2008). Calculated at an average yield increase benefit of 10,6 % and using average annual grain prices over the period, maize farmers gained an additional income of R2 billion ( US$ 267 million)’.

‘As maize is the staple food for millions of South Africans and beyond our borders, it is interesting to note that every year 40 million South Africans have in one way or another consumed GM food without a single medically or scientifically substantiated adverse effect on humans, animals or the environment’.

‘Smallholder farmers have equally benefited financially from biotech crops, with yield increases of 31% more than conventional and 134 % more than the conventional open pollinated varieties. (Gouse et al 2005)’

Various advanced biotech research events in South Africa include:

• Drought tolerance and streak virus resistance in maize.
• Biofortified GM sorghum.
• Increased insect and herbicide resistant maize.
• Tuberculosis and virus resistant potatoes.
• Drought-tolerant soybeans and groundnuts.
• Maize with tolerance to two herbicides.
Fertiliser plays a vital role in Africa’s future

Fertilisers play a pivotal role in Africa’s future and will continue to do so only if we use them correctly and judiciously. New hope will be given to millions of poor farmers, freeing them from the shackles of food insecurity and hunger.

Agriculture and the spread of cities both require large tracts of land. Although the population density of Africa is relatively low, most of the good agricultural land is already being used. Ironically, new settlements are often built on the best lands for food production. As a result increased agricultural production often requires higher yields on existing agricultural lands, or the conversion of fragile lands and precious wildlife habitats to cultivation.

Without the adequate and timely use of fertiliser, farmers often cannot meet the food needs of their own families, much less those of a rapidly growing population. To feed themselves and their countries, farmers will have to shift from low-yielding, extensive land practices to more intensive, high-yielding practices, with increased and sustained use of fertilisers.

This is the only strategy that will assist Africa in realising the Millennium Development Goal on hunger and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) 2015 vision.

Fertilisers are chemical compounds given to plants to promote growth, and are usually applied either through the soil, for uptake by plant roots, or by foliar feeding, for uptake through leaves. Fertilisers can provide the missing nutrients, which will also improve the balance among the required elements and therefore enhance the plants’ uptake of nutrients from existing organic sources.

Higher yields (except for groundnuts) mean there is more organic matter introduced into the soil, thereby allowing farmers to enrich their soils to increase the chances of successful crop production in subsequent years.

The most significant change in crop production has been the more intensive use of organic and inorganic fertilisers and the consequent heavier load of grain bearing on the stems of cereal plants.

Where adequate water supplies and sunshine are present, the plant has a good chance of absorbing large quantities of fertiliser, however, it is a well-known fact that successful application of such quantities is inhibited by the limited ability of the stems of existing varieties to remain upright until harvesting time.

In an ideal world, all sources of nutrients are combined in an approach called integrated plant nutrient management. Farmers start with onfarm sources of nutrients such as manures, crop residue and legumes and then supplement these with fertilisers. In Africa’s case available, organic materials are limited, and there is always a competing demand to use these for other purposes, such as fuel for fires and for reinforcing mud buildings.

Moving from scarcity to abundance

In the face of an appropriate understanding of the prime role of fertilisers in agricultural and national development, the starting point in discussing the challenges facing Africa is to remove the misconceptions we have concerning “development” and define the term more precisely. Only then will we be able to set meaningful targets or measures of progress to judge the relative importance of the various problems which arise in the process of development, and therefore improve national and international policies.

This is the only strategy that would contribute to Africa’s ability to meet the Millennium Development Goal on hunger with a target of a 50% reduction in food insecurity by 2015 as well as the 2015 Nepad vision.

To realise this vision, the African Heads of State and government adopted the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) as a framework for the restoration of agricultural growth, food security and rural development in Africa. Stakeholders have identified that addressing the fertiliser crisis will assist in accelerating agricultural growth, ensuring food security and income for farmers and, therefore, the entry point for the socio-economic development of the continent.
Notice and invitation to attend the annual deciduous coordinating meeting for exports of deciduous fruit to special markets during 2009/10 season, 10 June 2009 at the Olive Groove Auditorium (ARC-Infruitec).

Deciduous fruit producers, exporters and roleplayers for exports to the special markets in China, USA, Israel, Taiwan, and Mexico are invited and encouraged to participate in the Department of Agriculture’s Annual Deciduous Coordinating Meeting to be held on 10 June 2009 in Stellenbosch (Western Cape) at ARC-Infruitec (Olive Grove Auditorium). All the arrangements and requirements for the 2009/10 export season will be finalised and explained based on the South Africa’s deciduous fruit export programmes. Please note that a successful fruit exports depend on compliance with the requirements of target markets, and compliance begins in the orchard (please see the relevant export protocols on http://www.nda.agric.za/ > Regulatory and Other Services > National Plant Protection Organisation > Plant Health > Import/Export Programmes). Representatives of the DoA’s Directorate Plant Health, Directorate Agricultural Product Inspection Services and Directorate Food Safety and Quality Assurance as well as key industry role players will troubleshoot the past export season with the aim of further streamlining export procedures. All new developments will also be on the agenda. Further information can be obtained from Ms Khomotso Mashala, tel. +27 12 319 6289, fax: +12 319 6580, E-mail: KhomotsoM@nda.agric.za OR Ms Faith Thobela, tel. +27 12 319 6151, fax: +12 319 6580, e-mail: BongumusaT@nda.agric.za OR Ms Juliet Maja, tel. +27 12 319 6178, fax: +12 319 6580, e-mail: JulietM@nda.agric.za OR Mr Ndivhuwo Tshisudzungwane, tel. +27 12 319 6026, e-mail; NdivhuwoT@nda.agric.za.”

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**Short Course in Irrigation Management**

**Course Date:** 10 – 11 June 2009

**Course description:**
The course covers the basic principles of plant water relations and irrigation management. The various methods of irrigation scheduling available to farmers will be discussed, including practical guidelines on the use of these methods. Computer modelling and the use of the SWB (soil water balance) model in particular will also be covered. The different irrigation systems used commercially, their advantages and disadvantages, and system efficiencies are also attended to.

**Learning outcomes:**
- At the end of the course, attendees should:
  - know the dynamics of the soil-plant-atmosphere continuum (SPAC);
  - know the basic principles of plant water relations;
  - know about the different scheduling methods and how to use them for irrigation management; and
  - know about the SWB model and how to use it.

**Who should attend:**
This course is aimed at persons involved in irrigation management, technical advisors, extension staff and farmers.

**Course Fees:** R2 700

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