

*Testimony of Kevin G. Lowther, Regional Director for Southern Africa, Africare
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Agricultural Development in Sustainable Global Poverty Reduction,” before the
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to share with the subcommittee my experience with the work of the International Fund for Agricultural Development—IFAD—and my perspective on the role of agricultural development in reducing poverty abroad, and particularly in Southern Africa. My association with IFAD dates back nearly 20 years. At Africare, where I have been responsible for our programs in Southern Africa since 1978, I have worked on several IFAD-funded activities. I also serve on IFAD’s Washington-based NGO advisory group.

The context of my testimony is Southern Africa. Having lived or worked there for the past 28 years, I have had the opportunity to observe several trends as they evolved over an entire generation. When I went to live in Zambia in 1978, Southern Africa was locked in several armed liberation struggles and confronting apartheid in South Africa. HIV/AIDS was yet unknown. And the region was essentially food secure. Today, apartheid is history and there is peace throughout. HIV/AIDS has emerged as a modern-day plague. But the most surprising change is that Southern Africa has become chronically food insecure.

Africare works in eight of the SADC-member states. We are extensively engaged in agricultural programs in most of these countries. You name it, we have worked on it: crop production and village-based food processing, marketing, credit, smallscale agribusiness, seed multiplication, permaculture, drip irrigation, community-based natural resource management, aquaculture and crop diversification. I will return to this last, because I believe it is the most important.

If Southern Africa was feeding itself a generation ago, what has happened that requires the World Food Program, USAID and other agencies annually to provide hundreds of thousands of tons of food to sustain millions of people? The short answer is: the “maize trap.”

For decades, smallholder farmers in Southern Africa have relied almost exclusively on maize as their staple. Colonial and post-colonial governments alike promoted this dependence for reasons of their own—but not because maize was the best agronomic choice to ensure long-term food security.

The trouble with maize is that it is not particularly nutritious; it exhausts the soil; and it requires reliable rainfall. This would not be a problem if there were an endless supply of fresh land and cheap fertilizer. It would not be a problem if rainfall in much of Southern Africa were still reliable, which it is not. This, then, is the maize trap. Farmers continue trying to grow maize on soil that is increasingly infertile and in a climate whose

rainfall patterns have become notoriously fickle. A more recent factor is HIV/AIDS, which is decimating families' capacity to cultivate their land. But the core reality is that farmers in Southern Africa are trapped in a vicious cycle. The more they cling to maize, the more food insecure they become. Even in relatively good rainfall years, few are able to produce enough maize to feed their families. The region is in a death-spiral in terms of food security.

Enter crop diversification. Along with dependence on maize has come a collateral myth that Southern African farmers are unwilling to change or to adopt new crops and technologies. Nothing could be further from the truth. Africare's experience in the SADC region shows the contrary.

Perhaps the most instructive lessons have been learned in the drought-prone Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. Africare began working with about a thousand families to test their willingness to try several "new" crops, such as pigeon peas, sunflower, soybeans, sweet potatoes, groundnuts and cassava. Skeptics pointed out that Zimbabweans traditionally do not eat cassava. Nor did they grow many other crops, which were difficult or impossible to process—soybeans, for instance. Promoting these crops, many believed, was a waste of time.

Africare decided to ask what the farmers of Midlands Province thought. We first organized a series of farmer demonstrations. Residents were introduced to simple, affordable technologies for processing more drought-tolerant crops. These include sunflower processed into edible oil and soybeans converted to a variety of tasty and nutritious products. Farmers also began to appreciate what they could do with improved varieties of cassava, with more drought-tolerant crops like pigeon peas, and with the leaves—as well as the flesh—of cassava and sweet potatoes. They found that all of these crops could be easily integrated into their farming systems, and that soybeans in particular restored soil fertility by fixing nitrogen. Because they could process these crops themselves, mainly for consumption, they did not have to worry about selling to some distant market. Their diets were enriched and their immune systems strengthened. When communities elsewhere continued to suffer through drought, our Midlands farmers did not.

Who funded this innovative program? IFAD, which provided Africare with modest grants to promote crop diversification and village-based food processing. As a result, we have a proven, farmer-driven model which has liberated more than 4,000 people in several wards of Midlands Province from the "maize trap." This is the kind of breakthrough programming which IFAD was intended to nourish. IFAD had the flexibility to invest in a couple of \$100,000 grants in Africare—and in the Midlands farmers—to see what might happen. But IFAD's policies and procedures do not allow it to expand this program more broadly in Zimbabwe unless it does so through a loan to the government. IFAD is not presently able to consider new loans to the Zimbabwe Government, and even it were, we would have to hope that the Ministry of Agriculture

was prepared to embark on a national campaign to de-emphasize maize in favor of more nutritious, drought-tolerant and soil-friendly crops.

The farmers in Midlands Province—and elsewhere in the region—have demonstrated that they **are** willing to diversify away from maize if they know that they can process and utilize these alternative food crops. Within a decade, the face of smallholder agriculture could be changed dramatically **if** those agencies most concerned with food security and poverty were able to join forces to make it happen.

It was the Rockefeller Foundation which got Africare to begin focusing on soybeans—mainly as a means to strengthen soil fertility. The work has been very successful, in a limited geographical area, but the foundation is not prepared by itself to replicate this throughout the region. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is funding Africare in another part of Midlands Province to test crop diversification, but again on a limited scale. Meanwhile, our IFAD-funded work in Zimbabwe is nearing its end.

IFAD has a leadership role to play here. IFAD has the broad understanding of agriculture and its centrality in addressing poverty in regions such as Southern Africa. It should have a clear and documented awareness of what works and what doesn't at community level. It does **not** have the mandate or resources to restore sustainable food security in Southern Africa. But it does have the credibility to lobby governments, its fellow United Nations agencies and major donors to launch a coordinated effort to end Southern Africa's dependence on a crop that its steadily aggravating food insecurity.

It is sad to say that Africare's largest funder in Zimbabwe is not IFAD, not the Rockefeller Foundation, nor the Gates Foundation. It is the World Food Program, which contracts Africare and other NGOs to deliver food—grown far, far away—to vulnerable groups. There is something very wrong with this picture. We know what needs to be done—and can be done—to achieve sustainable food security throughout Southern Africa. Emergency food aid is a bandaid at best, and at worst a crutch which allows us to believe that all will be well in the long-run.

All will not be well in Southern Africa if we do not take concerted action to arrest the region's decline into chronic food insecurity. IFAD is positioned to assume a key role in this regard—if it has the resources, but more importantly, if it has the responsibility to take the working models it has helped to pioneer to a regional scale.

Thank you.