

# THE STATE OF FOOD SECURITY IN ZIMBABWE: A SWOT ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

The international community has given priority to food security issues by including in Agenda 2030, goal number 2 (zero hunger) and closely related are goal number 1 and 6 alluding to ending poverty and ensuring clean water and sanitation respectively. This article discusses the four main dimensions of food security which are accessibility, availability, stability and utilisation, as well as giving a SWOT analysis on the conditions of food security in the country. At the moment, food security in Zimbabwe is in a deplorable state. This article argues that Zimbabwe can feed Zimbabwe if the available resources are fully utilised. The article examines the state of food security in Zimbabwe, giving a highlight on the challenges and threats the country is facing in terms of food security as well as the options and opportunities which can be explored for the benefit of the general populace. Through desk research, interviews and focus group discussions with various key stakeholders, the key findings are that there is lack of coordination in the allocation of agricultural inputs as well as lack of monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes meant for food production in the country. Some recommendations are made that Zimbabwe has to treat the issue of food security with the urgency and attention it deserves and increase the land under irrigation, as well as allocate productive resources like land, knowledge and inputs to the rightful people with the talent, will and ability to put the resources to use for the benefit of the whole nation not for recognition, honour or status when the national silos are empty.

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**Keywords:** food security, food stability, food availability, food accessibility, food utilisation

## Introduction and Background

Many countries in sub Saharan Africa are facing challenges of food security due to many reasons varying from the effects of climate change which has reduced the chances of guaranteed harvests for many families who are relying on rain fed agriculture, to lack of agricultural inputs and high unemployment rates which have eroded the capacity of the people to purchase food elsewhere. This has reduced the region to be food beggars or importers of food on an annual basis. This undesirable situation is also true for Zimbabwe, a county which used to be the bread basket of the region, but now in a pathetic situation as the prices of food are out of reach for the majority of the populace due to the shortages in production as well as the inability of the individuals to purchase what is available because of the hard economic conditions prevailing in the country. The country is now a net importer of maize which is the staple food (USAID 2014:7). The situation is affecting all

the people across the country, save for those people with better sustainable livelihoods. According to Zimstats (2012) the majority of the people in Zimbabwe are found in the rural areas and these are the poorest and the most food insecure.

While other scholars (Chirisa & Matamanda, 2016) have alluded to worse situations of poverty and hunger in Zimbabwean cities as compared to the rural areas, this article argues that there is more risk in terms of hazards and vulnerability in rural areas due to marginalisation, poor accessibility, lack of options and entrepreneurial skills compounded by the heavy reliance on rain fed agriculture, which is no longer reliable as alluded to before. This view was also alluded to by Anriquez and Stamoulis (2007), who aver that poverty is a rural phenomenon, thus poverty and food insecurity cannot be separated. This article

acknowledges the existence of challenges in terms of food security but argues that more can be done to overcome the challenges through a multi-stakeholder, multi-sectorial approach for innovation, creativity and diversification of sustainable food sources and production methods. The land reform programme implemented by Zimbabwe had very good intentions to redistribute the valuable resource so that there is equitable access, as well as redressing the imbalances perpetuated by the colonial masters who underdeveloped the rural areas for almost a century. However, the intended results as stated in the objectives of the programme are elusive, thus leaving the country in continued hunger, food insecurity, and abject poverty for more than 70% of the people in the country. This article will therefore examine the reasons behind the continued hunger and food shortages despite efforts by the Government of Zimbabwe to promote food production and self-reliance for the citizens of Zimbabwe.

## Theoretical framework

This writing borrows from the Boserupian theory on population and food production. Unlike the Neo-Malthusian theorists like Paul Erlich considered as pessimists, who viewed population growth as a threat to food security and a time bomb for a Malthusian catastrophe, Esther Boserup, the innovator and optimist considered population growth as an opportunity in which more people will have more innovation and creativity to find out new and better sources and methods of food production to meet the demands of food during their time. While she also believes that pressure on the land will inevitably create reduced levels of soil fertility, she argued that necessity is the mother of invention, thus solutions will also be found through the numerous talents and ideas from the increased population, creating more sustainable contemporary methods of food production (Scanlon 2003). Such a theory of positive thinking may be what Zimbabwe needs in which the people in whatever numbers, are educated and trained to stand up to the prevailing

challenges and find solutions befitting the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Literature review

### Food security and its four major dimensions

Gibson (2012) defines food security as regularly having enough food to eat; not just for today or tomorrow, but also next month and next year. This implies a family, a community or a nation should have peace of mind knowing where their food is going to come from for now and the foreseeable future. In addition FAO (2008) uses a 1996 World Food Summit definition in which food security is considered as a state when all people at all times have sufficient food for their dietary needs to live a healthy life. Soetan (2019) elaborates further and avers that food and nutrition security are the corner stone that affect and define the lives of all people, rich and poor to be able to live a healthy life. This shows how important it is to prioritise issues of food security at all levels of development (Leroy et al 2015). It will therefore be a mockery to the people to start implementing plans to build flashy expensive buildings or purchasing warplanes while the majority of the people are hungry. That alone may show a failure of governance, a condition which Alex de Waal (in Oxfam 2018) called a political scandal, a complete failure of the political leaders to do what is right to ensure food security.

A lack of prioritising food security issues shows a lack of knowledge and understanding of the importance of basic needs on the hierarchy of needs proposed by Abraham Maslow. Bajagai (2013) takes another dimension by defining community food security as a situation when all citizens obtain a safe, personally acceptable, nutritious diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes healthy choices, community self-reliance and equal access for everyone. This situation appears elusive for most communities though because of inequality at all levels from the micro, meso and macro stages. A food secure community is therefore characterised by: absence

of anxiety or worry that their food would run out before they have money to buy more food; enjoying all meals as and when required; enough food reserves, affording to buy or have balanced diet meals for all members of families in each household as well as not getting food through socially unacceptable means like thefts, prostitution, charity or buying food on credit.

The same applies for the household. The adult members of the family do not have to compromise their own meals so that children can eat- a common practice with female household heads when there is food insecurity. A household is food secure when food stocks are available (materially and financially) for the foreseeable future without facing any risk of losing the ability to get the correct quality and quantity of safe, socially and culturally acceptable food. It is critical to note at this point that food security at global or national level does not warrant food security at household level due to inequality and other governance challenges, thus problem specific policies have to be developed to avert food insecurity at the micro and meso levels. (Bajagai, 2013). In concurrence is Gross et al (2000) who define food security as a situation when adequate food, of good quality and quantity, which is socially and culturally acceptable, is accessible to all members of the community for effective biological utilisation for a healthy active life. This definition encompasses three dimensions which are availability, accessibility and biological utilisation, thus it becomes necessary to discuss these dimensions at this point.

Food security has four main dimensions which are: availability, accessibility, utilisation and stability, although some scholars like Quisumbing et al (1995) discuss the first three, without including the last one. These four dimensions are also presented as the four main pillars of food security in other literature (Khan, 2015; Parvathamma, 2015; Charlton, 2016; Quisumbing et al., 1995). Food availability looks at how food is being provided to the people. The two main means of food provision are either through domestic production or imports. The dimension of food

availability requires careful planning and consideration on the physical availability of food on the farms, the storage silos and granaries, as well as on the market. Well-functioning infrastructure in terms of rail and road networks and processing technologies are a prerequisite to food availability. In addition, FAO (2003) posits that food availability focuses on the supply side with regards to sufficient quantities and appropriate quality. In times of difficult or shocks, household heads, community or national leaders may end up just laying their hands on whatever they come across even if it is not to the preference of their families. Such food may not be of the correct quantities or quality, leading to malnutrition, hunger and starvation. (Abu & Soom, 2016; Caswel & Yaktine 2013, Erokhin 2017, Leroy et al., 2015).

Food accessibility implies having direct access to food through purchase or personal production. It also means the act of actually managing to get hold of the right food for an adequate diet and nutritional level. The major aim is the individual self-determined opportunity to purchase food given by income, safety nets and access to markets. Adverse effects like unemployment, little income, loss of livelihoods and price hikes seriously affect food accessibility (Aidoo et al 2013; Leroy, 2015). This article adds that food availability at national, community or household level does not mean that food is accessible to all members of the different levels mentioned earlier. Food accessibility can be very unequal along lines of age, power, sex, political affiliation and other lines of differentiation which portray inequality in a country. Even in a single household, food can be available and prepared in a single pot but may not be accessible to all members in the family on a needs basis. Some members may have less chances of accessing the same food for example looking at stepchildren or the elderly in some families. While these factors may not be homogeneous across families, inequality impacts a lot on food accessibility.

For Pavathamma (2015), accessibility of food focuses on the affordability and allocation of food

along preferences of households and communities. There are two main types of access to food which are direct access and economic (indirect) access. Direct access is when a family produces and stores own food while economic access is when a family uses other means to access food produced elsewhere. This means the assets owned by a family including income, determines the ability of a family to access food over the other. Factors like access to fertile productive land, farming inputs and other farm implements like machinery, inheritance factors, or gifts from other family members and relatives all differentiate families on how easily they can access food. However, the ability to access food does not necessarily tally with the actual purchasing of real, adequate food of nutritional value to the family. Factors like gender of the household head, education levels, geographic location, and so on affect the priorities which income can be used. In other cases other non-food assets like alcohol or cars may be prioritised and purchased at the expense of nutritionally adequate food for the family or country. According to Bajagai (2013), indicators of food access in a country include food prices, wage rates, per capita food consumption, meal frequency, employment rate and many more. As alluded to earlier in this article, policy formulators and implementers should pay particular attention to detail in terms of differentiation according to status, gender, age, political affiliation and other fissures which are used to draw inequality in society. Policy interventions may therefore focus on employment creation, off farm and on-farm activities, school feeding programmes, breast feeding campaigns and many more. However this article pays particular attention to breastfeeding campaigns so that the focus should not only be on feeding the baby but feeding the mother so that she stays healthy and ready to produce the milk.

Food stability relates to the sustainability or continuity of a source of provision. This is directly related to economic performances, livelihoods sustainability and the planning should anchor on disaster and risk management in unforeseen shocks such as droughts, wars, pests and diseases.

(FAO 2008). For stability to be attained, there should be alternatives sources and diversification of livelihoods. Bajagai (2013) emphasises that this dimension of food security can only be seen if the other three dimensions discussed above are stable. For Gross et al. (2000), food stability is a temporal factor which is measured by the specific period when a household, a community or a nation has all the other three dimensions of food security in check and in control. There cannot be stability without good accessibility, availability and biological utilisation of food. Instability of food markets, uncertainty of prices and lack of capacity to plan for and mitigate unforeseen shocks such as droughts, floods, disease epidemics. This calls for an assessment of food reserves at national, community and household levels, industrial performances, rates of employment creation and so on to be able to ascertain if people have food stability.

Lastly, biological utilisation refers to absorption of the food eaten. This means the correct quantities should be taken with the correct nutritional value. As Bajagai (2013) puts it, it addresses the how much of what, and how it is eaten. This means it goes further to clarify the preparation stages, the hygienic conditions under which storage, preparation and serving is done. In the opinion of Parvathamma (2015), this dimension involves the metabolism in the body of the quantities of food ingested. Important factors like health systems, how healthy the population is determined the extent to which the food ingested can be made use of by the body. Unhealthy people cannot make use of the food to their advantage so that they live a healthy life. This means the amount of nutrients and examination of state of the food is very important before it can be consumed. This dimension covers important variables which the other three dimension do not consider because there are other factors like time available, political stability, availability and nature of utensils used, amount of energy available for cooking and the health and mood of the person preparing the food, which may be taken for granted in considering food security.

Relationships at household, community or national level are also considered to be critical here, the reason why food poisoning cases have been reported in media at weddings, funerals, beer parties or political party meetings. Many societies use food as a symbol of unity, respect and generosity because food is an essential social component of many cultures and societies. Good conflict resolution techniques should always be employed so that food poisoning is not used as a war weapon rather than the basic need it is. Food utilisation also depends highly on the health of the person physically, mentally and emotionally. Sometimes food may be eaten in very large quantities which are useless to the body system due to lack of correct nutrients or due to absence of good health in the individual. Indicators of lack of proper food utilisation include anaemia, goitre, stunting, night blindness, body mass index, body weight for age and so on which can be assessed through demographic health surveys, immunisation charts and so on.

On the contrary, food insecurity is defined as a condition when the above dimensions are not being met. In the opinion of Premanandh (2011), food insecurity is a complex situation which does not only involve the inability of a country to feed its people but a variety of factors affecting it which include availability of arable lands, population growth, water resources and climate change. Parvathamma (2015) and Gross et al, (2000) concur that food insecurity may not be a permanent condition for some societies, thus it is important to distinguish between chronic and transitory food insecurity. Transitory food insecurity is temporary and short term, most likely to be caused by disasters like floods, wars, and other sudden midseason droughts. It can be seasonal, annual or specifically for a disaster period like war or other hazards like floods, earthquakes or disease epidemics like the current COVID-19. COVID-19 disease being caused by coronavirus which is bedeviling the world when people are no longer free to move or work. This affects more people in developing countries with

unstable economies where food availability and access is characterised by hand to mouth and high levels of vulnerability and unsustainable. Chronic food insecurity is more persistent and long term (FAO 2018). These may be due to other factors promoting vicious cycles of poverty like lack of education, lack of access to property and resources like land as well as lack of access to credit (FAO 2008). Such levels of food insecurity need a lot of planning and intervention from the government, and Non-Governmental Organisations and the private sector who to come up with pro-poor policies to alleviate poverty and hunger especially in rural Third World economies. Both chronic and transitory food insecurity is found in developing countries, Zimbabwe included.

According to the UN (2014), there is a lot of food insecurity in Zimbabwe and efforts should be made to design policy frameworks which deal with poverty in rural areas, with particular attention to women, children and other vulnerable groups. These key issues should be imbedded in the overall goals of environmental sustainability, sustainable use of natural resources and adaptation to climate change. In addition UN News (2019) reports that due to unreliable rains in the country, 8 districts out of the 59 districts in the country have acute malnutrition—thus 5.5 million people and 2.2 million in the rural and urban areas, respectively need help. These conditions have been exacerbated by the harsh economic conditions which have resulted into an 85 percent unemployment rate due to the closure of industries and companies nationwide. The Food Assistance Fact Sheet (2019) recommends that there is need to resuscitate irrigation schemes, as well as addressing food insecurity together with urban poverty. Stringent measures also have to be put in place to eliminate mismanagement of resources, and promote multi-stakeholder approaches where different people unite for common national goals such as promoting food security at the macro, meso and micro levels.

## Findings

1. Food security in Zimbabwe is in a deplorable state. There have been consecutive years when food production suffered due to low rainfall amounts considering that the majority of farmers rely on rain-fed agriculture.
2. The majority of people in Zimbabwe's 58 districts are facing hunger and malnutrition, more so for children under the age of five who remain stunted due to inadequate quality and quantity of food.
3. Food is available in the shops but people cannot access it due to high prices. High unemployment rates and harsh economic conditions have worsened food insecurity in the country for both the urban and rural population. Food prices have gone up during the COVID-19 pandemic and vulnerable groups who survive on small businesses cannot afford to buy basic needs on a daily basis.
4. Inequality along sex, age, class, and political affiliation is impacting heavily on accessibility to food. Poverty is more along vulnerable groups leading to insensitivity on the part of the leaders who are not facing the same food insecurity challenges as the majority of the people in the country.
5. There are strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for Zimbabwe which are presented in figure 1 below.

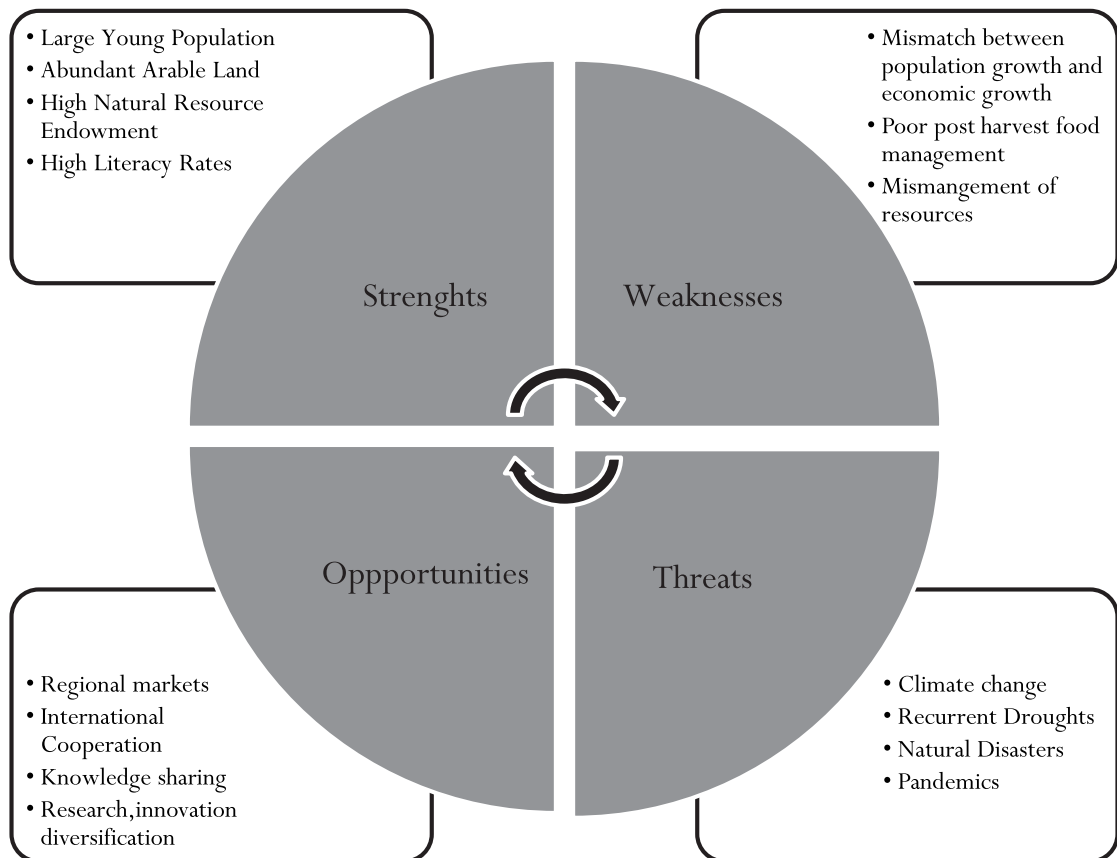


Figure 1: A SWOT analysis of Zimbabwe's food security

## Discussion

Access to food should be considered as a basic human right for all, thus leaders should take issues to do with food as priority number one in any developmental agendas. The four dimensions of food security examined in this article must all be considered and every individual should be able to access this basic need. The reason why most people in developing countries cannot achieve the higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs is because they spend most of their time in life trying to source food. More than 70 percent of their income is spent on food which means not much is left as excess to finance other dimensions of development. A SWOT analysis of Zimbabwe done by this article reveals that Zimbabwe can feed Zimbabwe if the strengths and opportunities can be maximised for the achievement of national goals. At the same time, the weaknesses and threats can also be turned into strengths and opportunities if a multi-stakeholder approach is considered, where different people from different sectors are given a chance to exercise their expertise, and willing to come forward with their contributions, for the benefit of food production, economic growth, employment creation as well as diversification so that people have alternative methods to source food for their families.

For example, Zimbabwe is well known for having vast quantities of arable land (33 million hectares according to FAO 2019) and this is a strength other countries do not have. The availability of this resource can be combined with the large population which comprises mainly of young and strong people with high levels of energy capable of providing the much needed labour. This is a dynamic which other developed countries do not have since they have aging populations. The aforementioned strengths can be augmented by the high literacy rates in the country with the majority of people being able to read instructions from packs of inputs. Good planning in terms of policy formulation is required so that land and other farming implements are given to the rightfully deserving people who can convert inputs into outputs in order to feed the country. To

the advantage of the Zimbabwean populace, the former late President Robert Mugabe implemented the land reform programme which saw many people repossessing the much needed fertile lands which the populace was once stripped off by the white colonialists, an achievement which other countries in the region are admiring and fighting hard to emulate. If only Zimbabwe can fully utilise the land to curb food insecurity, then the country becomes a pacesetter for the whole region in terms of land redistribution to the masses. Land ownership and food security should match so that measures and indicators of success can be recorded.

In addition, Zimbabwe must utilise the opportunities she has in terms of food security. Considering the Mantra by the current president which says Zimbabwe is open for business, the availability of other nationals can also promote the growth and increase of stakeholders who can also play part in contributing to the needs of the food industry if the leadership is well conversant for effective achievement of national goals. It is a matter of engaging the others (Private sector, NGOs, Ambassadors of other nations and so on) to contribute in terms of research, innovation, creativity and diversification efforts so that high production and productivity is reached in the country. New foods can even be introduced through research and knowledge sharing, including the promotion of small grain crops which are region specific and suitable for the climatic conditions in specific geographical locations.

On the other hand, Zimbabwe can also learn from other countries through knowledge sharing on how to produce food locally as well as on how to industrialise and create more options for people to buy and access food. Cash crops needed in other countries can continue to be produced through the available irrigation schemes so that the cash can be used to purchase food for the country. However, the farmers have to get good deals for their produce so that they do not continue to ail in poverty despite being the producers of the cash crops bringing so much foreign currency into the

country. What it means is the farmers will just be used as growers and producers to the advantage of other people without themselves benefiting as much as they should from the value chain. Satisfying the farmer through fair beneficial deals is the best way to keep them motivated to produce for the benefit of the country. An additional strength for Zimbabwe is the abundance of natural resources in the mining sector. The country can make use of these resources to gainfully sell them and purchase food elsewhere if the agricultural sector is not performing well. Responsible authorities in each sector should be monitored and evaluated against the rate of extraction and use of the money reaped from the sales. A lot of professionalism, patriotism, transparency and accountability are required so that the majority of the people do not suffer malnutrition, hunger and starvation when only a few individuals are benefitting from the natural resources of the land. With such minerals in the country, the country can surely afford to feed everyone, without considering what the country can produce from own land.

An example can be given of the neighbouring country, Botswana that has mainly desert land and nothing much can be produced, but the sale of diamonds enables the country to import food from South Africa. The neighbouring country is in a better state in terms of food security since the prices are low and everyone can access it. Zimbabweans are even crossing the borders to buy food from Botswana which is mainly desert as compared to Zimbabwe with arable land as well as a wide range of mineral resources. This is surely a cause of concern and the leaders should sit and plan, implement, monitor and evaluate policies for effective food security for the country. Considering the higher levels of education in Zimbabwe, surely there is a mismatch between the resources available (human and natural) and the state of food security in the country. Something is not adding up somewhere and a multi-stakeholder approach is called for to improve the state of food security in the country.

Zimbabwe has some weaknesses which need to be addressed for the strengths and opportunities to be fully exploited with benefits for all. With good leadership and effective communication, weaknesses can be turned into strengths but it needs cooperation from all stakeholders. From figure 1 above, the weaknesses listed, are findings made by this article and they include: a mismatch between population growth and economic growth, poor post-harvest food handling, processing and storage facilities, absence of coordinated stakeholders, and mismanagement of resources. With reference to the Boserupian population theory referred to in this article, it is an advantage to have a large population so that many ideas and innovations come forth from the people. This will enable an increase in productivity and production as the large population contribute into the economy each according to their ability and expertise. However, this is not the case in Zimbabwe as there is no match between the large population of (approximately 14 million according to Zimbabwe National Worldometer 2020 online and 13 million according to Zimstats 2012) and the high literacy rates in the country.

This is a weakness which can be converted into strength with good leadership, planning, monitoring and evaluation. If particular people are given targets, for example the many young graduates from universities, vocational training colleges and agricultural colleges can be given land, seed, fertilisers, machinery and irrigation equipment with a target to fill say 10 silos in a specific period, then such a programme is monitored and evaluated for challenges and successes, this article is confident that some levels of success can be achieved. Such programmes can be done across the country with openness in an all-involving system which politicking is avoided since these are national programmes not party programmes. Through monitoring and evaluation, there will be a great decrease in the misuse of national resources if a multi-stakeholder approach is used to include people from Government, to private institutions and key

friends of Zimbabwe from other countries, leading to increased accountability.

The greatest challenge Zimbabwe has is food processing, conservation and preservation techniques. During summer, the country has a lot of wild fruits, traditional vegetables, pumpkins and other garden fruits which can be canned and be preserved for later use. Due to shortage of storage space and processing techniques, most of these perishables go to waste and people have to face shortages and malnutrition again during the dry season. This is a weakness which can be converted into a strength or opportunity by inviting other investors to process and can the fruits and vegetables. Besides reducing wastages, the country will be creating employment for young people to operate the processing machines, adding yet another dimension which becomes a source of income to secure food for the nation. The country is evidently overlooking a lot of opportunities, resources (natural and human) which can be fully utilised and increase the potential of the nation to feed themselves with enough input from various people coupled with research, innovation and creativity. Lastly the threats shown in Figure 1 are not peculiar to the country alone. They are common threats which are inevitable across Sub Saharan Africa.

At the moment for example, Corona virus is bedevilling the whole world. When nations take measures against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic for example the movement restriction, then families with unsustainable livelihoods are affected because they have to be selling their wares on a daily basis in order to put food on the table. This means food security continues to be affected for many families who neither have food stocks at home nor large savings which they can use to continuously buy basic needs. The Government has to intervene, but in the case of Zimbabwe the country herself is facing harsh economic conditions and to be able to supply food for its populace is another challenge. Climate change for example cannot be avoided but can be mitigated

through the use of irrigation equipment to continue agricultural production during the dry years. With enough planning and investments on irrigation, there is a possibility for Zimbabwe to be able to feed itself as there are a lot of resources still to be fully utilised.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This article concludes that the state of food security in Zimbabwe is in an undesirable state and it should be treated as an emergency situation. The country has so much potential to feed its citizens because of the abundance of human and natural resources within. These include vast arable land (33 million hectares), a wide range of mineral resources which can be used to purchase food just like other countries worldwide, as well as a large young population with energy, ideas and high levels of education. There is urgent need of restructuring the way things are being done so that every individual contributes their expertise towards food security, and this can enable the country to be a bread basket again in Sub Saharan Africa. As a result, this article makes the following recommendations:

- Increase security, transparency and involvement on resource distribution.
- Increase area under irrigation, small grain production, devolution across all regions and accountability systems in all sectors and along the food value chain.
- Resuscitate and reactivate Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and use it along with modern methods in food production, processing, handling and storage.
- Increase stakeholders through partnerships with other countries, private sector, the youth, individuals, civil society and many more so that diverse roles and ideas can contribute to rural industrialisation, diversification, and sustainable livelihoods.

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