

Food Security and Safety Nets: NGOs in Northern Mozambique

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Like most humanitarian organizations, Save the Children is committed to offering the most effective programming to improve living conditions of people in developing countries, especially focusing on the welfare of children. This paper describes work in northern Mozambique that Save the Children has been managing since 1997, with the financial support of USAID and other donors. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the programming, and to achieve the target goal of improving food security and child nutritional status, staff of Save the Children have conducted several rounds of data collection about the communities served to ensure that programs are as culturally sensitive and feasible as possible. The authors of this paper have all worked with Save the Children in some capacity, J. Richard Dixon as the program

manager for more than a decade, Agy Herminio as one of the field staff and now nutrition project manager, and Miriam Chaiken as an independent consultant who has worked with the project several times over the past decade to collect data and help shape program design.

Over the past decade programming has changed in response to what we have learned, and in response to changing priorities from the donor community. But the consistent goal of this project has been to improve people's access to high quality food, increase food sovereignty, and ultimately, to facilitate an improvement in the welfare of children living in this area. The project area, Nampula Province in northern Mozambique, has had a long history of challenges that have made food access and control problematic, beginning with the long war for independence (1962-1975) followed by the long civil war (1975-1992). These conflicts caused the destruction of what little infrastructure had existed, displaced people from their homes and productive lands, and resulted in the abandonment of many important practices that helped people create and manage resources. The signing of peace accords began a new era where Mozambicans could begin to rebuild their nation, and more importantly rebuild the civil society that permits people to prosper and live in peace. More than three decades of conflict resulted in an adult population where very few had ever attended formal education, virtually non-existent health care and public education systems, and very low agricultural productivity in areas once considered the bread basket of the nation. It is in this context of challenges and possibilities that Save the Children began working in Nampula with a variety of programmatic approaches aimed at improving food access, food sovereignty, and livelihoods.

We have been conducting formative research that is intended to improve the efficacy of Save the Children programming since 2004. In the course of our research efforts we have examined land tenure, household composition and resource allocation, food usage and preference patterns, social safety nets, gender, and labor availability, among other

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topics. One of the clear challenges to the people of Nampula Province has been accessing sufficient quality and quantity of reliable food sources, as evidenced by the high frequency of child stunting (>40%), which is a marker of long-term food insufficiency.

Nampula is one area that has experienced some of the emerging challenges to ensuring food access, but has remained relatively unaffected by some of the processes of globalization that have eroded food security elsewhere. In other regions of the country, and increasingly throughout Africa, multinational organizations have undermined food sovereignty. Challenges to food sovereignty include the co-opting of land and resources through neocolonial processes of resource extraction and land appropriation, which have negative impacts on the abilities of rural people to feed themselves and have secure livelihoods (Rosset 2011). This process is now clearly emerging in Nampula Province as Chinese interests have begun building a rail line and upgrading the port at Nacala Porto for eventual transshipment of goods overseas, and Chinese logging and cement manufacturing industries have been established in the past few years. Additionally the road from the port city to the inland capital city of Nampula, and then beyond to the Malawi border, has been upgraded with funds from the World Food Program. The intention was to permit easier transshipment of food commodities to the landlocked interior, but this also provides a corridor to hasten the impact of forces of globalization. While these multinational forces may soon exert pressure on the viability of the traditional subsistence production systems, they could also potentially provide a means to improve livelihoods, if local farmers could penetrate the market system, either through production of goods for export, or through value chain contributions. But for the smallholders of Nampula, the opportunities to achieve this economic advantage appear to be minimal. Local farmers engage in subsistence production, but have minimal market participation except through occasional marketing of cashews, and productivity is insufficient to meet needs. In

examining the reasons for low agricultural productivity we concluded that land access did not appear to be the primary constraint to production. The severe disruption caused by decades of war has rendered much of the land in Nampula in legal limbo, and it appears that usufruct land rights are the norm when it comes to smallholders. When we asked in interviews about how particular parcels of cultivated land were acquired, we expected to hear that these were handed down matrilineally, as the local Makhua people are traditionally matrilineal. Instead we also heard about people receiving lines through patrilineal relatives, through “borrowing”, and through in essence squatting on lands that were unoccupied. When we examined the most significant constraints to local food production it appears that labor, rather than land, is the more pressing challenge. The annual shortfalls in food production result in an annual hunger season (Longhurst Chambers and Swift, 1986), sometimes prolonged by crop failures resulting from drought. As a consequence of the food insufficiencies that last from 3 to 6 months, many smallholders find it imperative to take on odd jobs and wage labor to get by during this season – precisely at the time of the year when investing labor in land clearing and cultivation is most critical. This creates a vicious circle, as shortages in one year result in labor being siphoned away from agriculture, ensuring a subsequent shortfall in the following growing season.

In order to address this, and other pressing problems, our research in 2007 examined the nature of existing social safety nets in Nampula, in part to see whether traditional self-help patterns were helping to mitigate against this annual stress. Our goal was to understand the current conditions in order to use the existing social fabric as the foundation for new programs that Save the Children would be introducing. Efforts were already underway to engage local people in new collaborative ventures for self-help and mutual assistance. In the nutrition and health sphere, Save the Children had already established programs to train local women as community volunteers, or

animadoras to serve as peer health-educators in their respective communities, and farmer's groups that were trying to introduce improved agricultural practices. We reasoned that having a comprehensive understanding of the nature of existing patterns of social support would allow us to build on these networks, and help foster new forms of collaboration. Ultimately we hoped to improve people's welfare, and secure their livelihoods through new collective action.

We conducted literature reviews about the nature of social institutions that might be operative in the local communities. According to our research, we could expect to find types of rotating cooperative labor groups in which neighbors help each other in turn, to manage the most difficult tasks in the farming system. In addition, we expected the mosques and the local religious traditions would reinforce community cohesiveness and facilitate cooperation (Bonate 2006; Pitcher 1998). Elsewhere, in nearby regions outside of Mozambique, there are also rotating credit groups and other types of cooperative farmers' groups, and we anticipated finding similar such institutions in Nampula. But upon examination, through conducting a dozen focus groups that gathered 250 local residents, we found no indication of the traditional institutions providing material, financial, or moral support to the local residents, despite the documentation of these traditions in earlier eras. This was powerful evidence of the deeply disruptive influence that the wars had engendered in this region (Chaiken, Dixon, and Herminio 2012; Chaiken et al. 2009).

Somewhat to our surprise, our focus group interviews in the Nampula villages revealed that although none of the traditional social systems were still operational, people had quickly come to rely on the social networks that had been created by Save the Children's interventions. As noted above, the two initial interventions were aimed at improving agriculture and health, and ultimately food security/food sovereignty in this region, where nearly half the children have chronic malnutrition as measured by stunting. This imperative was easily

recognized and embraced by the local population – they were keenly aware of the suffering they had experienced in the decades of war, and eager to embrace plans to improve their livelihoods and the welfare of their children. This was not a development goal imposed on locals by a well-meaning international NGO. Indeed, this reflected local people's very real goals for themselves, which may explain why the actions of Save the Children have been so effective.

In the first years of program activities in Nampula, Save the Children trained local staff to be extensionists and health educators, and they in turn recruited local volunteers to participate in groups. Two types of peer groups were formed. The first focused on agricultural productivity. In addition to the other problems of infrastructure and civil society that had affected Nampula, the late 1990s saw the arrival of the Cassava Brown Streak disease (CBSD), a disease that affected the staple crop, cassava. As is found in many regions of east and southern Africa, droughts are also appearing more regularly and with greater severity. These greatly affect the other critical crop in the region, maize, so the reliance on cassava has been intensifying, as it is generally more drought-tolerant than maize or other grain crops. The agricultural staff had the goal of establishing a network of farmer groups that could train local farmers on improved agricultural techniques, and replicate improved, disease-resistant planting stock of cassava, so that members of the group would be able to plant varieties that had shown resistance to the CBSD.

Each extensionist formed several groups and worked with volunteer farmers to cooperatively tend a demonstration plot where they could learn first-hand about the improved cultivars. They planted the Nihkwaya variety of cassava that had demonstrated resistance to the CBSD. Cassava is a root crop that has the virtue of being quite drought tolerant – it can remain in the ground and continue to grow indefinitely if it is not harvested, rather than having an obligatory annual harvest season as is typical of grains and pulses. Additionally the leaves

of the plant that grow above ground are a nutritious vegetable and are frequently harvested in small quantities while the tuber develops below ground. Cassava thus can provide continuous food access throughout its growing cycle. When affected by CBSD the leaves show signs of yellow spots and they die and drop off the plant, and when the tuber is inspected it has pulpy, inedible qualities – improving the cassava quality and health was central to Save the Children’s goals of improving food security.

The farmer groups received stalks of cassava for replication. Unlike other plants, cassava is not propagated by seed, but vegetatively by cutting the stalks that grow above ground into 4-5 pieces and transplanting each stalk piece and allowing it to take root. Thus at the point of harvest when the farmer typically cuts the stalk off of the tuber and keeps the tuber to eat, he or she is able to then divide the stalk into several pieces and each plant can produce 4-5 new plants in the successive growing season. The farmers’ groups received samples of the improved cassava and were soon able to grow enough of the improved variety that each of the members could take part of the harvest home for planting in their own, individual fields.

By 2011 more than 45,000 farmers had participated in these groups, demonstrating the remarkable success of the farmers’ groups. Each participant received planting stocks to use on their own farm. In addition, surveys have indicated that each participant has typically shared improved planting stock with several relatives or neighbors, so the real numbers of farmers who have been helped through these groups far exceeds the count of those who formally participated in a farmer group. Another important variable is the participation of women farmers, as here, as well as many other areas of Africa, the production of food and management of food resources is largely done by women. The farmer groups included both men and women, some groups including both sexes and some were single sex groups, but overall the project estimated that

40% of participants in these farmer’s groups were women.

The training of women to serve as village peer health educators, termed *animadoras*, [earlier, this is merely defined as “community volunteers” ; so perhaps add this in brackets and vice versa, or explain?] was the other major activity that intended to improve health and welfare. Like the proliferation of farmer’s groups, the growth of the numbers of participants demonstrates the success of this program. To date nearly 2,000 women have volunteered and undergone training as an *animadora*, they have established nearly 4,000 groups, and nearly 60,000 women have participated in one of these groups as a member.

The women who volunteered, and were sometimes nominated by their communities, all agreed to participate in several days of training in one of the larger towns or village centers, as well as in periodic refresher courses. They received no salary for the work they did. They were truly volunteers whose only compensation was a colorful cloth wrapper, commonly worn by African women (*capulana* in Portuguese), and the meals and accommodations they received in the course of their training. Each woman volunteer agreed, upon return to her home village, to establish two women’s groups, each with 10-15 women participants. These groups were to meet weekly and the *animadora* used her training to prepare a weekly lesson on topics of public health, child feeding practices, or hygiene for the participants to discuss. At the end of the year, each *animadora* could pronounce her original group as complete in their training, and then establish two new groups with another dozen women.

In retrospect, given the rapid growth of the Save the Children programs in terms of the volunteer participants, it is not surprising that participants in our focus group interviews indicated that the only social safety nets they were able to rely upon were those that had been introduced by Save the Children through the Farmers and *animadora* groups.

The active participation in the Save the Children programs, and active volunteering likely reflects several related variables that fostered this success. In large measure the professionalism of the Save the Children staff and the transparency in their operations are partly to account for the overwhelming buy-in by local people. The success of these programs is also attributable to the emergency response that Save the Children implemented in 2004. At this time our research documented a localized, but critical crop failure that resulted in severe hunger in the coastal districts of Nampula Province. This information allowed Save the Children to partner with the World Food Programme and provide supplemental food rations to 50,000 children and pregnant women to see them through to the next harvest, and to mitigate against what would have been a very prolonged and difficult hunger season. Local people report this is the *only* help they had received at a critical time, and that virtually everyone wished to participate in this food distribution. There were no longer any traditional means of support to mitigate against this crisis. In some respects, this short-term crisis which Save the Children helped mitigate effectively may have helped increase the trust and reliance in the organization by local people, who could see that there were means to improve their welfare through collective action.

As a consequence of what we have learned in Nampula, other new microcredit and labor mobilization programs have been initiated that build on these now well established networks within communities. The *Ajuda Mutua* (Mutual Aid; hereafter AM) program brings together farmers to work in rotation on each others' fields, so the work is less taxing and the heavy jobs can be tackled in an economy of scale. This type of labor rotation was formerly practiced in the area, but no one in the population that we interviewed had actually engaged in this practice themselves. They recognized that rotating labor groups had been past practice, but this was abandoned as a consequence of the social disruption of the war, and due to negative attitudes towards the compulsory

collective actions that the Frelimo-Party government had tried to impose on rural people immediately following Independence. A second type of collaboration is the Village Savings and Loan Program (VSL) in which members of the savings group each contribute an agreed upon amount to a central "bank" that is kept by members. The savings group meets weekly and each participant pays in his or her agreed upon share, and with great transparency it is deposited into their lock box that can only be opened with two separate keys kept by two group members. At the end of a savings cycle, often a year, the members each receive back the funds they have saved. While the sums they save are small by many standards, in a community where there are always emergencies and urgent things requiring money, this helps people save their own funds out of temptations' way for investment in larger items that require capital outlay. The VSL groups, like those of the farmers and *animadoras*, requires high degrees of local participation and are predicated upon high transparency in operations. This has helped local people re-establish relationships of trust and collaboration after a long history of mistrust, suffering, and violence.

The impact of the AM and VSL groups is currently being examined, as Save the Children created four experimental treatments to see which type of economic change is most effective in realizing improved welfare for children. The four experimental conditions are communities with VSL only, AM only, both VSL and AM, and those where no such interventions were introduced. The next step of data collection is to ascertain which of these treatments is the most effective, what impact these have had on the children's welfare, and what strategies might permit the scaling up of these approaches in other regions served by Save the Children's programs. We are hopeful that the previous success in rebuilding social safety nets will be borne out in this case as well, and that measureable improvements in child welfare and food security will be the outcome.

Overall, if we examine the essential conditions that have helped ensure the success of these programs, it is the acknowledgment of the agency of the local people and the importance of their full participation in both establishing priorities and in seeing the project through. These success stories provide us with both cautionary tales for future such enterprises, and a strong understanding of the power of collective action, the value of transparency in development programs, and the importance of shared goals in community development.

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