

# Responses from below

## A tale of two Tanzanian villages

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**Given the persistence and severity of the African food crisis, the need for strengthening local 'institutional capacity' is likely to be high on the agenda of policy makers during the current decade. Exploratory research in two Tanzanian villages compares the roles of local institutions in food production and examines the mechanisms for coping with food shortages.**

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The institutional dimensions of overcoming hunger in Africa are not very well known, yet Africa's 'weak institutions' are often cited as a major constraint. In a recent report the World Bank recognizes this by stressing the need for building local capacity for development. Institutions, rather than market forces, are viewed as the instruments of solving the continent's crisis.<sup>1</sup> Given the severity of that crisis, the issue of 'institutional capacity' is likely to feature prominently in the African policy debate in the 1990s.

In this perspective, it is important that we ask ourselves what an institution is and which institutions may be of particular significance in the African context. This article examines the role of local institutions in food production in two Tanzanian villages and the relationship of other institutions, notably the organs of the state, to local production efforts. The study is based on exploratory research during June 1988, when the author spent time in the two villages trying to find out more about local mechanisms for coping with food shortages.

### Meaning of 'institution'

'Institution' is a contested concept and the literature does not always make clear what the term denotes. For those concerned with policy analysis it often becomes a synonym for 'formal organization'. For example, in their valuable comparative study of local institutions that can contribute to rural development Esman and Uphoff emphasize local organizations, ie those that are not 'purely social or cultural associations'.<sup>2</sup> Although such a cut-off may be necessary in the interest of bringing together a broad range of data from many countries, this emphasis fails to acknowledge that much 'development' work takes place in institutions that are not necessarily organizations in the modern sense.

For the purpose of this study an 'institution' is a group or group activity distinguished by having meaning, norms and resources. In other words, institutions do not exist unless the people who make them up know why they are in there, what they are allowed or not allowed to do and how they can accomplish their goals. In this definition not all collective action qualifies as institutional. *Ad hoc* protests, for instance, would not be included, nor necessarily would all organizations. But

<sup>1</sup>Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth, World Bank, Washington, DC, USA, 1989.

<sup>2</sup>J. Milton Esman and Norman T. Uphoff, *Local Organizations: Intermediaries in Rural Development*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, USA, 1984.

unlike the conventional definition adopted in the development policy literature, this use does include kinship groups, savings clubs, self-help associations, secret societies and a host of other functional groups that permeate African society at different levels. Such institutions were important in colonial times,<sup>3</sup> and they continue to be important as the growing literature on intra-household relations and related issues suggests.<sup>4</sup>

That these institutions do not adhere to the instrumentalist rationality that characterizes Western institutions does not render them irrelevant or unimportant. Indeed, they cater for both productive and reproductive needs in the local communities.<sup>5</sup> In spite of their local importance, they hardly ever command a place in the development equation. The result is a miscalculation of the development potential of a given community. This study is a tentative effort to correct this mistake.

### Research sites

Research was conducted in an exploratory fashion in two villages: Mung'elenge in Wang'ingombe division, Njombe district, Iringa region in the southern highlands of Tanzania, and Bulungura in Mubunda division, Muleba district, Kagera region in the north-western corner of the country. The two villages were selected because of their differences rather than their similarities.

#### *Mung'elenge*

Mung'elenge sits along the main trunk road from Dar es Salaam to Zambia. It is only some 20 km away from a major railway head along the Chinese-built Tazara Railway that connects the capital with the Zambian Copperbelt. Although relatively backward in the colonial era, Iringa region prospered after independence from investments in improved communications that helped spur agricultural growth. In the 1980s the region was one of the most important maize-growing areas of the country.

Wang'ingombe division was in the late 1970s the beneficiary of a major water supply scheme built by the government. In 1985 it became the site of a pilot nutrition project funded and operated by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) in collaboration with the Government of Tanzania, targeted on children and their mothers.<sup>6</sup> This project, which still continues, implied not only a concerted effort to remove hunger conditions in Wang'ingombe but also exposed the whole division and its population to growing interaction with the government and the international community.

Most of the cash income in Mung'elenge is earned from the sale of maize, beans and sunflowers to the local cooperative society. Maize is the principal food crop, but several households grow cassava too. The use of oxen for both ploughing and draught has grown in the area in the past three decades. Approximately half the households have access to the use of ox-ploughs. Every family depends on the conventional hand-hoe.

Two types of food processing exist in the village. One is the preparation of local beer made from maize, the sale of which is controlled by the village branch of the women's organization of the ruling party. The other involves sunflowers, aimed at developing a suitable weaning food for children. This project, which also involves

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Little, *West African Urbanization: A Study of Voluntary Organizations in Social Change*, Cambridge University Press, London, UK, 1965.

<sup>4</sup>Jane I. Guyer, 'Household and community in African studies', *African Studies Review*, Vol 24, No 2/3, 1981, pp 87-137.

<sup>5</sup>S.M. Rugumisa, 'Mutual aid groups and their potential for agricultural development in Bukoba District with special reference in Bukabuye village', paper presented at the Ninth Social Science Conference of the East African Universities, Dar es Salaam, December 1973; Mahir Saul, 'Work parties, wages and accumulation in a voltaic village', *American Ethnologist*, Vol 10, No 1, 1983, pp 72-93; Sara Berry, 'The food crisis and agrarian change in Africa: a review essay', *African Studies Review*, Vol 27, No 2, 1984, pp 59-112.

<sup>6</sup>*The Joint WHO/UNICEF Nutrition Support Programme in Iringa, Tanzania: 1983-1988 Evaluation Report*, Government of the United Republic of Tanzania, World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, October 1989.

mainly women, is sponsored by Unicef. The latter is also responsible for a campaign to build better latrines which has been moderately successful. Mung'elenge has its own primary school. There is a secondary school only 5 km away. Several boys and girls from the village go there, learning agricultural and technical subjects.

Ever since colonial days the region has witnessed male out-migration. The exodus continues in spite of the improved earnings that accrue from agriculture mainly because of a favourable location along the main trunk road. Its exposure to outside influences has also caused a certain economic differentiation. Several households earn incomes from artisanal activities, roadside vending or trade. The social stratification within the village is also considerable. In short, Mung'elenge is an above-average village in a region where both leaders and ordinary people are ready to attribute their economic and social advancement since independence to their party and government.

### *Bulungura*

Bulungura, by contrast, is located in a distant corner of Muleba district, approximately 40 km from the district headquarters and some 10 km from the nearest trading and administrative centre. Although a bush road leads all the way to the village, regular transport is non-existent. People have to walk the 10 km to Mubunda to catch a vehicle, and even there it is uncertain. There is little regular cash income, most of it coming from the sale of local beer, made of bananas, to other villages or in Bulungura. No single household is really rich, although a few supplement their meagre income with money remitted from relatives who have long since left the village. The quality of housing, which consists mostly of mud houses with thatched roofs, is generally poor.

The villagers grow bananas, cassava, beans and groundnuts for their own consumption. As in much of Kagera region, bananas are considered the staple but the quality of the plantations is low, due both to dry weather and poor upkeep. Thus, while they are loath to admit it, most people in Bulungura today depend on cassava rather than bananas for food. More and more people grow the type of bananas that allow them to make and sell beer. As a newly started Unicef project in the district has found, the nutritional standards of children in Bulungura are quite low, with several suffering from severe or mild forms of malnutrition. The women are not unaware of this problem and grow groundnuts and beans to supplement the diet. Even so, a serious nutrition problem prevails.

Whereas Mung'elenge is relatively well provided by both a government clinic in the village and a nearby mission hospital, Bulungura has no clinic of its own. The nearest is at Mubunda and rarely has pharmaceuticals. The nearest mission hospital is six hours away by foot through the bush and up a steep ridge. In 1988 no organized effort had been made to improve public health in the village, but it was expected that with Unicef assistance new latrines may be built. Bulungura has no school and children have to walk 4 km every day to attend the nearest primary school.

Unlike Iringa region, Kagera has suffered a noticeable economic and social decline since independence. This is less apparent in Bulungura, but even there people share this view. The confidence that government or outside agencies will provide answers to the villagers' problems is not there.

## Local institutions

In Tanzania, at all levels, the ruling party – Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) – is officially supreme. Ever since independence it has viewed itself as having ‘parental authority’, ie the right to guide the conduct of people on a day-to-day basis.<sup>7</sup> Everybody has been encouraged to enrol as a member, but in Mung’elenge only one out of four and in Bulungura only one out of three actually pays their dues. Membership confers status and access to leadership positions, but non-members are able to participate in the election of local leaders. Such leaders prefer to be elected unanimously by everybody in the community. Thus, local customary rules about ‘democracy’ rather than party regulations prevail.

The village government is expected to be a committee of 25 persons, the assumption being that a village consists of 250 households organized into cells of ten, thus leaving each cell with a representative in the village government. Even here modification is apparent. In Mung’elenge the committee had been cut to 15 for reasons of cost. Instead of the five prescribed sub-committees it had three, but had added special committees for the village-owned shop and the Unicef project. In Bulungura the committee had 18 members. Although it claimed to have five sub-committees, there was no evidence that they ever met. Even the village committee met rarely. The official institutions were largely dormant.

Cell leaders are responsible for collecting the local tax, officially called ‘development levy’. They deliver it to the Village Secretary, a party appointee, who turns it over to the tax clerk at the divisional headquarters of the government. 20% of village revenue is supposed to be returned for use according to the following formula: 17% for village development and 3% for the remuneration of village and cell leaders. Villages are also encouraged to raise their own additional revenue from licensing and trade. The district council, which controls the local revenue, does not always return the 20% because it needs all the money to cover its own administrative costs. Even whatever trickles back to the village does not always get used as prescribed. For instance, the remuneration of leaders may take precedence over other expenditures. This is the case in Bulungura (see Table 1).

In Mung’elenge the village government earned more revenue from other activities than from taxes. At the same time, apart from a loan to the sunflower project involving the village women, and a contribution to a new school building, payments were for overheads: (a) payment of

<sup>7</sup>Norman N. Miller, ‘The rural African party: political participation in Tanzania’, *American Political Science Review*, Vol 64, No 2, 1970, pp 548–751.

**Table 1. Incomes and expenses, 1987/88 (in US\$).**

	Mung’elenge	Bulungura
Revenue collected	1345	525
<i>Incomes</i>		
Return of development levy	267	25
Sale from village farm	360	0
Village shop profit and sand quarry fee	420	0
<i>Expenses</i>		
Development projects	110	0
Loan to development project	570	0
Village leaders’ pay	84	25
Village workers’ pay	290	0
District Commissioner’s house levy	75	—

village leaders, (b) payment of health and day-care workers, and (c) compulsory deduction by the district council to help finance the construction of a new house for the District Commissioner.

The local branches of the Union of Women of Tanzania (UWT) – the national women's organization – and Vijana, the official youth organization of the party, were both active in Mung'elenge. We have already referred to the women's involvement in the sunflower project and beer sales. The youth managed the 50 ha village farm and made available oxen for ploughing and draught. They had built their own carts for transporting crops and other goods within the village or to other places.

In short, official institutions play a prominent role in village life in Mung'elenge. Kinship-based or other informal organizations were not thought by the villagers very significant for the running of the village.

This contrasts with Bulungura, where an almost non-existent revenue limited the scope of village government. Of the little money returned to the village, all went to remuneration of the village leaders. In this situation it is not surprising that the village committee hardly ever met. Because the villagers saw little benefit coming from government, they were more dependent on 'home-grown' institutions. In Bulungura these *vyama* were of four types: three for women and one for men. The last is concerned with the security of the village and is modelled on a customary defence organization. One of the women's associations is concerned with collecting water. Women take turns to collect it and are responsible for keeping the water source clean and safe. A second focuses on assisting the sick. It involves cooking food and, when necessary, delivering it to the hospital. The third type of institution is responsible for food security. To this end women communally cultivate land, planting cassava, beans and groundnuts to complement the production on each family farm.

None of these associations would typically be seen as development institutions, yet all of them have a direct bearing on the welfare and food security of the villagers. In Bulungura it is these institutions rather than those officially prescribed that people recognize as their 'instruments' of progress.

### **Securing food in the villages**

What is the relationship between these divergent institutional arrangements and local perceptions of food security? Two interesting observations can be made.

The first centres on the relative importance ascribed to the village *vis-à-vis* the household. Is coping a communal responsibility or not? In Mung'elenge it is not, but in Bulungura it is. In the former the task of securing food belonged to individual households and there was no institutional mechanism above the household level for such a task. The village committee did not have food security on its agenda, nor was a particular committee assigned to deal with it. The village farm was not viewed as a 'safety valve' but as a business venture.

The assumption in Mung'elenge was that each household could and should look after its own food needs. Failure to do so was typically attributed to indolence. This 'righteous' attitude was reinforced by weather conditions that were normally not adverse. Furthermore, the ability of the village to benefit from government programmes had further enhanced this confidence and dependence on outside forces,

whether government or market, was neither feared nor rejected. On the contrary, it was viewed as a cause of further progress. The official institutions commanded trust because they had served the villagers well throughout the post-independence period.

In Bulungura food security was viewed as a communal responsibility. The contribution by each household is consistently supplemented by communal production organized by the village women. The villagers recognize that this is an integral part of their 'survival' strategy. Unpredictable rainfall patterns help explain this orientation, but so do relative isolation and a lack of expectation of receiving anything from outside. Villagers said that buying food from outside was too expensive. The best solution, therefore, was local and internal to the village. This strategy has worked. Harvests have never failed completely. There is always the cassava, which is available the year round and poses no storage problem. This does not mean that people have always eaten well. In 'bad' years people adapted to poorer diets and hoped that next year would bring them a bigger harvest and thus more and better food. The recently conducted Unicef survey confirmed that even in a normal year nutritional standards in the village are low, with many children receiving too few calories.

The second observation concerns the sexual division of labour. Much of the literature suggests that commercialization of agriculture marginalizes women, that they get confined to cultivating food crops from which they earn no income of their own.<sup>8</sup> Our study supports this thesis, but with some qualification.

What is striking about the food security system in Bulungura is the marginal role of men. Women perform all tasks relating to agriculture whether on the family farms or the communal plot. Men help out only in clearing the land. The low degree of commercialization provides few monetary incentives for males to get involved in agriculture. Men do not control even the little cash that is generated from beer brewing. In the village women sell the beer. Men get involved only when the bananas or beer are being sold to other villages.

In Mung'elenge the situation is more complex. In order to grow maize successfully, manuring or fertilizing is necessary. In spite of the presence of oxen, manure is not enough. Hence, fertilizers must be purchased from the local cooperative society. Only men are members and thus they tend to be more directly involved in agriculture than the men in Bulungura. Because maize is both a food and a cash crop in the village, men and women share in the agricultural tasks in a way that is not common in many other places in Tanzania. Their interest in agriculture, however, does not go beyond the family farm. They had no problem with the idea that the village had its own farm to earn money as long as they were not asked to work there. The employment of the youth league members was a feasible compromise. It gave the village its extra income. It relieved the male household heads from extra labour. And it enabled the youth to be employed and earn an income of their own. It was a local solution that served many purposes but was feasible only by adapting national policy to suit local conditions.

### **Food security, local institutions and the state**

Tanzania is a country which in an effort to accelerate national development became heavily dependent not only on an ideological but also an

<sup>8</sup>Guyer, *op cit*, Ref 4; Joyce Moock, ed, *Understanding Africa's Rural Households and Farming Systems*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, USA, 1985.

institutional 'blueprint'. The official institutions should be the same everywhere. This has been seen as a major reason for the country's disappointing experience with much of the effort to build a socialist society. As one observer reflects on the subject:

the historical tragedy of rural socialist ideals in Tanzania is to have become bound up with the drive for state control, with undemocratic bureaucratic tendencies, and with anti-incentivist approaches to institution-crafting and policy-making, and all of this in a state lacking the experience and the tools of control, and the type of society conditioned to accept it, which might have allowed these policies to be implemented with the modicum of efficacy that could at least have minimized their deleterious consequences.<sup>9</sup>

Other studies have demonstrated the great opportunity costs associated with a 'top-down' strategy in Tanzania.<sup>10</sup> We have no reason to challenge such a conclusion, but this study also points our attention in a different direction: the great institutional adaptability that exists at the local level in Africa.

The cases discussed here suggest two different coping strategies. The first, practised in Bulungura, may be called the 'substitution' strategy: in the absence of functioning or effective government structures, people fall back on their own customary institutions. These are not institutions with specific 'development' mandates, but nevertheless serve the local population also in this respect. The other strategy may be called 'adaptation', and was found in Mung'elenge. There people generally appreciated the contribution made by government to local development, but much of this legitimacy rested on the ability of local leaders – and local households – to modify the institutional set-up to suit their needs and capacities.

Our conclusion confirms what others are already saying: that local development matters.<sup>11</sup> It goes beyond that, however, by suggesting that the 'universe' of local institutions is much more diverse than is typically assumed. For researchers concerned about overcoming hunger in Africa in the years ahead, this means greater attention to varying strategies and means of responding from below. For practitioners and policy makers it implies institutional pluralism, ie broadening the range of intermediary institutions with an ability to relate to these responses from below without choking them in the process. For villagers across Africa it indicates the need to learn increasingly from each other. What this tale of two Tanzanian villages suggests is that when it comes to enhancing food security at the local level there is much more than meets the eye.

<sup>9</sup>Louis Putterman, 'Tanzania rural socialism and statism revisited: what light from the Chinese experience?', paper presented to the International Conference on the Arusha Declaration, Arusha, Tanzania, December 1986, pp 13–14.

<sup>10</sup>Michela von Freyhold, *Ujamaa Villages in Tanzania: Analysis of a Social Experiment*, Monthly Review Press, New York, NY, USA, 1979; Michael Lofchie, *The Policy Factor: Agricultural Performance in Kenya and Tanzania*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, USA, 1988.

<sup>11</sup>World Bank, *op cit*, Ref 1; James Wunsch and Dale Oluwu, *The Failure of the African State*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, USA, 1990.