

# The Hunger Crisis: September '92

## *Operation Hunger*

Operation Hunger has been deeply concerned about the drought since December 1991. Every early warning signal indicated that the effects of the drought, compounded by the current economic depression, would lead to a hunger crisis of unprecedented magnitude in South Africa. We decided that all our energy and resources should be channeled toward avoiding a situation in which too many children hunger and die before help is given.

But the situation is worse than we anticipated. Every field trip, every new application, is a journey into previously uncharted depths of misery, human suffering and want.

### **North-western Transvaal**

There is an appalling deterioration in the "homeland" areas from Rustenburg to Zeerust, and Mmabatho to the Botswana Border. Water tables are dropping daily. The villages near the border gate on the roads to Lobatsi are the worst we have seen in 13 years of exposure to the ravages of poverty. Cattle are dying daily and people show visible signs of extreme misery. At Braklaagte, beyond Zeerust, a French medical group, applying for support, submitted a height for weight for age survey where the majority of the children measured were severely malnourished.

### **Northern Gazankulu (Giyani, Malamulele)**

In January and February we received urgent requests to implement school feeding in the Giyani area. We were assured that the Gazankulu health authority was starting these schemes in March and April. The "homeland" government feeding was implemented for one month only in the Giyani area. Again in August the local education authority insisted that the schemes were underway and nothing happened. Meanwhile, our field staff were reporting visible deterioration of the children in the area. Photographs and statistics, from staff at hospitals and clinics were the final straw. We had to commence feeding 30 000 children in the area this month.

## **Lebowa**

There is severe hunger in the north west, in the crescent Bochum to Potgietersrus. In the Kgapane hospital area, the community group that has approached us, claims that feeding is required for 22 000 children. At Jane Furse Hospital, our staff are processing individual applications daily. We met the health department months ago, and they agreed that hospitals and clinics would supply families with food. However, help has not been forthcoming when our people apply to those sources. At that meeting we also urged that they involve themselves in Kgapane.

## **Orange Free State**

In the Orange Free State, because the sisters in charge were too scared to admit that they had appealed to us for assistance with family rations, the chairperson of the regional welfare board harassed our staff and made allegations that we were 'dumping' food at the board's clinics. We agreed to refrain from clinic feeding. In the week of this agreement, a government clinic in Virginia sent an application to us for a supplementary feeding scheme.

## **Other areas**

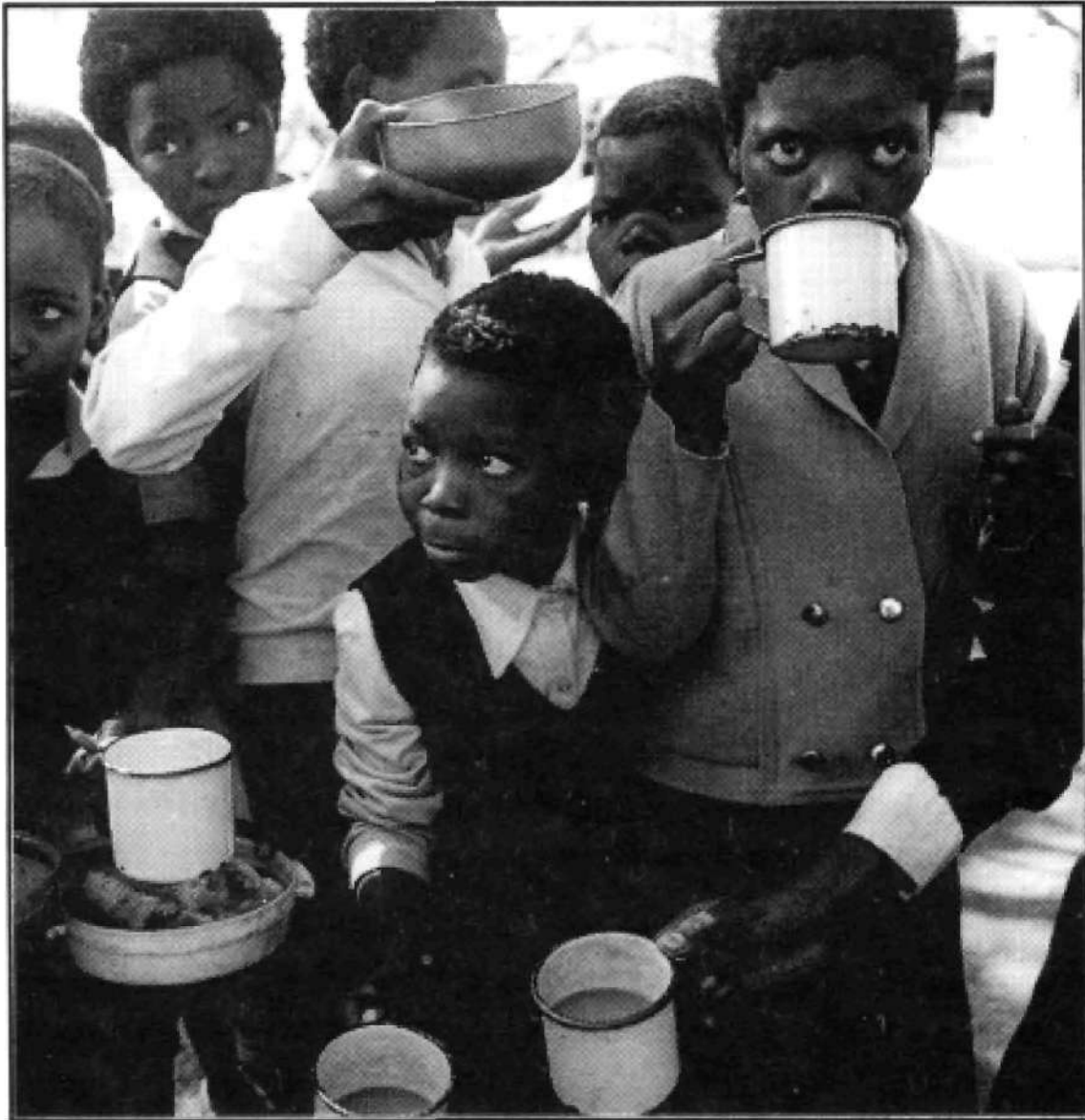
In the PWV, families arrive daily in our office with letters from various Baragwanath Hospital social workers referring hungry families.

At Orange Farm, the situation is a shambles since we had to close down our feeding schemes there. We did so after being told that the local welfare board had given vast sums to other newer organisations, and that we should not duplicate. It is months later, nothing is happening, and there is still no help for the poorest.

## **The Nutrition Development Programme**

It is crystal clear, countrywide, that the government's Nutrition Development Programme, is unable to prevent starvation. Dr Rina Venter, the minister of health, recently announced yet another grand design (the third in 18 months) that will streamline relief programmes and address every future crisis. We have not seen details of this latest master plan yet, but you will forgive us if our reaction is that of Eliza Doolittle: "Words, words, words, I'm so sick of words".

You might recall that we first applied for government funding in October 1991. After a war of words in the press, we were given R10m of the R27m we had applied for. We insisted that we receive funds nationally and that we be assured that there would be no interference from the "homeland" authorities. We had no



Operation Hunger feeding scheme, Lebowa. *Photo: Paul Weinberg*

alternative in the face of the mandate given to us by the community we serve.

We applied for the balance of the grant in April this year. In May we were informed that we could only obtain funds regionally, which in at least seven areas would mean applying through the "homelands". We refused to make regional applications, because of our mandate and as well the need to maintain financial control as required of us by the fund-raising act. In the same month, Operation Hunger met with the director general of health, Dr Coen Slabber, and deputy director, Dr Hans Steyn. They agreed that Operation Hunger could continue receiving funds nationally. Since then we have not received funds, for the reason apparently that some 14 regions have had to be consulted.

## **The root of the problem**

This brings us to heart of the moral dilemma. We compounded suffering in certain areas such as Giyani by postponing our response to feeding appeals in the

knowledge that the local authorities had neither the competence nor the will to do the work. According to Len Abrams, the director of the Operations Room of the National Consultative Forum on Drought:

“Our understanding of our primary mandate is to provide relief for those most directly affected by the drought. A secondary mandate is to work together with all the constituents of the forum to most effectively achieve the first objective. In practice we are finding that these two objectives are increasingly beginning to conflict. While it is necessary usually to suspend active critique of the root causes of a disaster in the interests of immediate relief, in this situation the root causes are not only responsible for the disaster but are also the largest obstacle to the disaster relief activity. This is a widely held opinion of a large number of the participating organisations of the consultative forum and it has been unanimously endorsed by the foreign disaster relief engineers who have had to be brought in to help address the crisis”.

According to Abrams, “The comment of the engineers is that in all their substantial experience in places such as Ethiopia, Somalia and Iraq, they have never worked in a situation more chaotic and with less support. The state has used its structures of the “homeland” administrations to channel public drought relief funds where they are to be managed by the same bureaucracy that is responsible for the problems and largely spent by the same consultants who have designed the systems that are presently failing”.

These engineers have now been withdrawn by the Overseas Development Agency of the British government because, from agency’s point of view, the problems are not “as a result of emergency conditions brought about by drought, rather they are long term problems of neglect”.

We have the same problems in the relief and development fields. The structures we are expected to work with are the same ones that formerly accepted the unacceptable without protest, and more often compounded it by maladministration, inefficiency and neglect.

Are we not by co-operation, especially with the homelands, shoring up incompetence, defending the indefensible, and giving credibility to that which has none? More important, how is this affecting the people we serve who have always seen us as unaligned, as independent, as dedicated solely to their service. Their great fear when they consented to our applying for government funds was that this would lay them open to manipulation and interference.

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