

# Stock up against hard times

GOOD LIVING

BY SOLOMON KARANJA

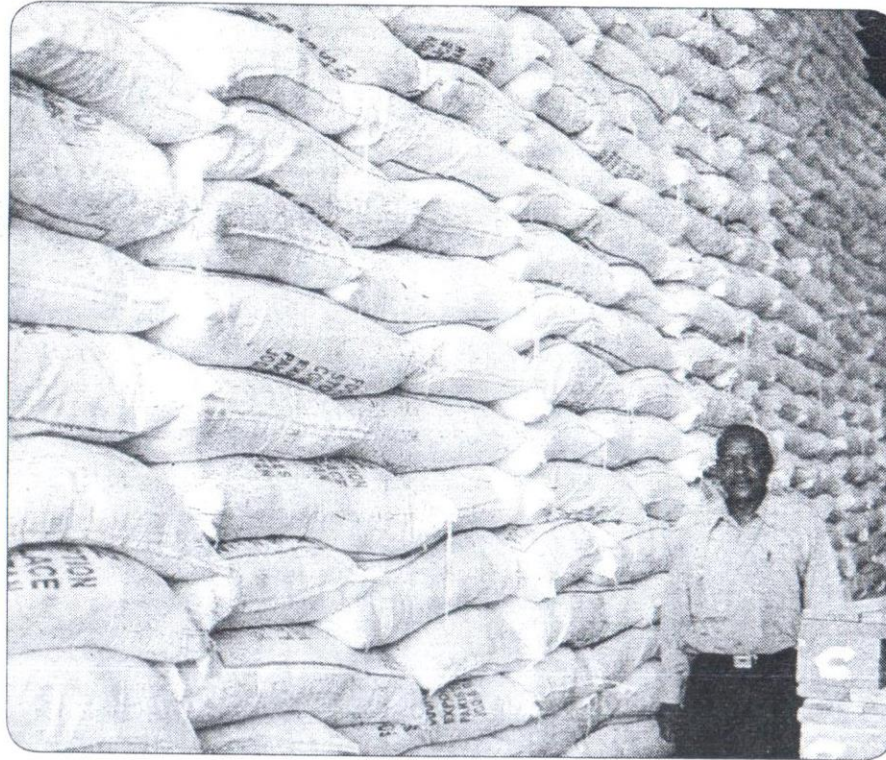
I grew up in my village on *supro* — a government sponsored school feeding programme of the 1970s. My late grandfather, a man of meaty habits with a taste for the good local brew, *muratina*, had a granary outside his hut where he kept maize and beans stocked up until the next season's, harvest whenever it would be. He was careful not to allow the stocks to run out and food emergencies were rare in his homestead; there was always something to eat. It need never be otherwise even today.

Better nutrition makes for brighter kids, and helps brains develop. The brain needs nutrients and exercise — starve it of these and it is stunted. The effects are greater in girls than in boys.

Hungry and mineral deficient people tend to be weaker, more prone to disease and less intelligent. This in turn must make them poorer. Cleverer workers tend to earn more.

A study done in Zimbabwe showed that children who are exposed to a drought completed on average five months less schooling. If your brain is stunted when you are young, that affects the decisions you make later in life. If you can't do simple arithmetic, you won't invest your time and money wisely. The cost can be very high, says a Malawian food consultant, Tomaida Msisika.

The battle against hunger is harder than it should be. Educating women decreases malnourishment by half, as they learn how to use what is available better. Concocting healthy and tasty recipes like mukimo instead of ugali for staple food



Bags of maize at an NCPB depot.

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would alter a community's nutritional and health status considerably.

Globally, people are eating better than they did three centuries ago when malnutrition and malnourishment were rampant. However, as the global average shifts upwards, Africa's figures are not changing. In fact, if nothing is done and urgently, Africa could remain food deficient into the foreseeable future.

During a famine food of whatever quality or kind is scarce. Micronutrients take a back seat and vitamin and mineral deficiencies occur, leading to a serious

health crisis for the affected people. The concern then would be to avoid death due to calorie deficiency but in this era of Aids, it is important to add that ignoring micronutrients can lead to a catastrophe.

Hunger weakens the immune system. Disease worsens malnutrition when infections lead to loss of appetite or impede absorption of nutrients into the bloodstream. This for example makes farm workers too weak to work and so they grow less food. The accessibility of lethal strong brews to hungry manual workers makes them weaker and subsequently they produce less.

If we reintroduced a school feeding programme — which I understand is in the offing — most of the families who keep children at home to work would release them. Some families are so poor that the long term benefits of education may seem unattractive when set against the short term gain of sending out the children to gather firewood or draw water. A child fed at school will be more patient when waiting for dinner at home.

Girls, who are more likely to be kept at home than boys to help with the chores in poor communities, can even be given extra to take home, so can Aids orphans — thus reducing the burden for many a homestead.

And *supro* can regain the notoriety it once had in my village — the best food child could get then. The *ugali* and *mboga* in secondary school was an anticlimax. And families must re-learn to have food stores in times of plenty to take them through the lean times.

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