



Hunger and Malnutrition in a Food Secure Nation

1. Introduction

Food insecurity occurs when people's access to food is minimally adequate and they struggle to meet their basic dietary requirements. The opposite – food security – occurs when all people at all times have access to sufficient and nutritious food to meet their dietary requirements for an active and healthy life. This is achieved when the following objectives are met: (1) food availability; (2) food accessibility; and (3) food quality for all people at all times, and (4) when food sustainability and stability are ensured. *Food availability* depends on healthy cultivated and non-cultivated (natural land) systems that enable food production. *Food accessibility* is based on people's entitlements and rights to acquire food, as enabled by political, legal, economic and social arrangements. And *food quality* is mainly concerned with people's uptake of appropriate and nutritional food as per the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) nutritional and health standards.

The global food system (production, processing and distribution of food) operates under extreme pressures, and is rife with inequalities that prevent the achievement of food security for all. It is estimated that about 821 million people are undernourished, 151 million children under the age of five are stunted, 613 million women and girls aged 15 – 49 suffer from iron deficiency; while on the other hand two billion adults are overweight or obese.¹ Some of these pressures are associated with socio-economic challenges such as increasing population growth, income growth and consumer behaviour; which are consequently interlinked with environmental concerns including climate change and natural resource degradation.

These pressures are expected to increase in impact, and the prevailing global COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the inability of the global food system in its current form to handle these pressures. A critical lack of access to food has been encountered by many in poor communities and households, even in food secure countries. During strict national lockdowns imposed by governments to curb the spread of the virus, people lost their livelihoods and could not access food due, in some cases, to a lack of financial assets and, in others, to a shortage of food production input requirements for those who usually produce their own food.² This indicates the risk of dependence on a largely centralised economy and on a food system that excludes people on the margins.

2. The South African Context

South Africa is considered food secure at a national level, but many people still struggle with access to adequate nutritious food at household and community level. The 2019 Global Food Security Index ranked South Africa 48th as a food secure country, taking into consideration the amount of food that is produced and exported annually.³ This reflects very well on the country's agricultural development goals and on the sector's contribution to Gross Domestic Product. However, the local outlook depicts a different reality that the country still grapples with, characterised by increasing poverty, unemployment and inequality. A recent report by StatsSA examining the extent of food security in the country, cites research that links poverty, unemployment, and inequality to food insecurity.⁴ The inability to redress these

challenges is largely attributed to lack of transformation in South Africa's development policies.

It is indicated in the report that about 20% of South African households had severely inadequate access to food in 2017, which in fact reflects considerable progress over previous years. The report further shows that the number of individuals and households experiencing hunger dropped drastically between 2012 and 2017. However, recent events indicate a trajectory that is changing for the worse. The current economic decline resulting from COVID-19 is expected to increase food insecurity and threatens to undo the significant progress the country has made towards ending hunger and achieving food security, while at the same time potentially providing us with an opportunity to discern the flaws of the current food system.

3. Agriculture and Food Security

Agriculture plays an essential role in household and national food security and can significantly contribute to economic development. South Africa has a dual agricultural economy that consists of a well-developed large-scale commercial sector on the one hand, and small-scale subsistence-oriented enterprises on the other. This seems to be in alignment with the economy's overall scheme, which is also arranged into two streams – formal and informal. Large-scale commercial agriculture is central to the country's development priorities and is well integrated within the formal market value-chain. However, subsistence and small-scale agriculture remain largely neglected, receiving very little policy support and limited access to the formal market. This, among many other factors, has over the years contributed to the decline in rural and household-based food production. Therefore, people are increasingly developing exclusive reliance on large-scale production and formal market purchases in both rural and urban areas alike.

The challenge of food insecurity is even greater among the urban poor in South Africa, in comparison to their rural counterparts who, to some extent, are still able to exploit natural resources and generate income or make food. The general consensus in South Africa is that households access food from markets, own production, other households and public

programmes such as feeding schemes. It has become very common even in rural areas for people to get food from markets more than from the other sources. Which makes markets a priority in food supply regardless of where you are, thus allowing them an important role to play in food security/insecurity. A very key variable in market purchases is money, and the poor majority living in both rural and urban areas lack employment and income generation. Markets mainly get their food supply from large scale producers through formal value chain processes in most cases. This plays a big role in their high price determination and price transfer processes, making it difficult for the poor to afford food. The biggest challenge in South Africa's agricultural development, is accommodating the diversities between the two sub-sectors in agricultural and land policies, without trying to commercialise small-scale production.

4. The Case for Indigenous Food Crops

South Africa has a wide variety of food that is not in the mainstream agricultural food system, and they have a great potential to contribute to food security for poor households. They require very little input for production; they are a significant part of existing indigenous knowledge systems; and they are accessible to poor households in communities and regions where they are grown or found at little or no cost. Moreover, they are adaptable to various weather conditions and can be grown in various regions. Although there is still much need for expanded research and knowledge generation in order for us to understand these crops, they are familiar in most parts of the country.

4.1 What are indigenous food crops?

'Indigenous food crops' refers to crops that have their origin in South Africa, and those that were introduced into the country long ago and are now recognised as traditional food crops. These crops are produced and found growing in the wild under various weather conditions. Their production is prominent in rural small-scale and subsistence farming. Most of the produce is consumed almost immediately at household level, while some of it is dried for the household's future consumption and local supply in case of famine. In addition, farmers keep enough seed for the next ploughing season.

4.2 The role of indigenous food crops in food security

These crops embody the basic elements needed to attain some of the objectives of food security:

- They have very low input requirements and are better adapted to marginal areas than exotic crops – addressing the aspect of **access** to food for people in need.
- They are drought, pest and disease resistant – they will most likely thrive and remain **available** under extreme conditions including climate change.
- They are highly nutritious – satisfying the global **food quality** requirements of the FAO.

4.3 Types and uses of indigenous food crops

There is a huge variety of food crops that are indigenous to South Africa and they are divided into three main categories: grains, vegetables and fruits. Indigenous grain crops are further subdivided into cereals and pulses.

Cereals

- Pearl millet: used as ground flour or grain like rice. Mainly grown in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and Free State
- Grain sorghum: used to make porridge, unleavened bread and malted beverages. Mainly grown in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, North West, Northern Cape, and Gauteng

Pulses

- Cowpea: its leaves are enjoyed as a fresh vegetable and the dried pods are used as preserved vegetables. Limpopo, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, North West, and KwaZulu-Natal
- Bambara groundnut: enjoyed as fresh seeds and ground when dry to make flour. Mpumalanga, North West, Gauteng, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal
- Mung bean: enjoyed as a soup base and used as a legume staple in many diets. Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces

Vegetables

- Corchorus, also known as ‘Jews mallow’: eaten as a leafy fresh vegetable, the leaves can also be dried to make soup. Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga

- Cassava: a tuber used as a substitute for rice and maize meal. Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal
- Amadumbe: enjoyed as boiled, fried and baked corms with stews or alone and can also be processed to produce flour. Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal
- Blackjack: a fresh leaf vegetable and also dried for future consumption. KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo
- Amaranths: has the most nutrients and is enjoyed as cooked leaves, soup or sauce. Limpopo, North West, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal
- Cleome: the tender leaves are boiled to be enjoyed as a stew or side dish. KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, North West, Northern Cape and Limpopo

Fruit

- Wild medlar: enjoyed as a ripe wild fruit and also used as a substitute for apple sauce in puddings. Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, Limpopo, North West and Northern Cape
- Monkey orange: eaten as a wild ripe fruit and used to make jam, juice and dried fruit rolls. Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo
- Kei apple: enjoyed as a wild fruit and used to make jelly, fruit salad and jam. Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo
- Num-num: eaten as a wild fruit and used to make jam and jellies. Found throughout the country
- Mabola plum: enjoyed as a fruit and used to make fermented liquor. Limpopo and Mpumalanga
- Red milkwood: enjoyed as a ripe fruit. Gauteng, Limpopo, North West, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal and Free State
- Marula: enjoyed as a fresh fruit, but mostly processed into beverages, jam and jellies. Found in the Ba-Phalaborwa region in Limpopo

5. Conclusion

Poor households and individuals lack money to buy food and are highly constrained by the inability to secure employment or generate income. These inability to access food vary

according to province, the population group of the household head, and the household size. The challenge is not that South Africa is unable to produce enough food, but rather that prevalent structural poverty and inequality, as enabled by old agricultural and spatial development policies, limit many people's access to sufficient nutritious food. The majority of the people who lack the means to access food and the resources that are needed to be able to produce their own food are still black and 'coloured'; many of whom continue to work for white farmers and struggle to break out of the poverty trap.

Food security is very closely linked to issues of rural development, land reform, and investment in

water and transport infrastructure. Thus, a multi-sectoral approach in addressing food security is necessary, and relevant policy transformation in the concerned sectors would be an essential step forward. There is a great need to establish and support local food systems in both rural and urban areas. This will enable people to generate income, feed their households, and create local jobs. Indigenous food crops could be an instrumental strategy to promote local food production and create work opportunities, since they require very little monetary input in their production, and their cultivation relies largely on indigenous knowledge.

Lovedonia Mkansi
Project Co-ordinator

¹ <https://cutt.ly/XfCyDwt>

² <https://cutt.ly/wfCyGd6>

³ <https://cutt.ly/5fCyKn6>

⁴ <https://cutt.ly/dfCyX6E>

More on South African indigenous food crops: <https://cutt.ly/FfCuvxz>

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