



## *The gendered dimensions of food security in South Africa: A review of the literature*

**Food security has 3 elements:**

1. Food resource availability.
2. Access to those resources.
3. Appropriate utilisation of resources.

(Baro & Deubel 2006)

### Introduction

Food security is a core human right, an essential factor of human development and crucial to stable international relations. Food insecurity is a threat to physical wellbeing and normal social activity. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) defines food insecurity as being 'when people must live with hunger but fear starvation' in their daily lives (FAO 2002: 1).

Since the mid-1970s, the African continent has been the only region that has been unable to feed its own population. South Africa could face a plight similar to other sub-Saharan African countries. Currently there are approximately 14 million people in South Africa who are vulnerable to food insecurity and 1.5 million children under the age of 6 years who are stunted by chronic malnutrition (The Presidency 2008). It is unlikely that the country will be able to produce sufficient food in the future unless radical new policies change current practices.

Nourishment, life and survival are inextricably connected to public policies and strategies. Women and children are more subject to poverty. This review explores women as a central factor in food security. It investigates the gendered dimensions of hunger and malnutrition in South Africa, in order to foster an understanding of the relations between gender, food insecurity and policy.

Food security cannot be separated from the broader socio-political issues impacting on individuals and communities. For example, access to water, land and other natural resources, as well as effective waste management, have a significant bearing on an individual's and a community's vulnerability to food insecurity. An assessment of gender in relation to food security can, therefore, not take place without recourse to the multi-dimensional nature of food security.

### The socio-political context of gender and food insecurity

Prominent aspects that impact negatively on food security include:

#### 1. Disasters

Natural and political disasters contribute to the vulnerability of African societies to poverty and hunger. Environmental degradation, exacerbated by climate change further undermines food security. De Haen and Hemrich (2007) propose that in disaster-prone locations, measures to improve disaster resilience should be an integral part of food security policies and strategies.

Africans account for 95% of the poor in South Africa. This is further negatively skewed against African women, particularly those who live in rural areas (Woolard 2002).

More than 5.6 million people within the age group 20–45 years are infected with HIV in South Africa (Oxfam 2008).

## 2. Social forces

Social conditions such as fertility, mortality and gender ratios determine use of the natural environment and food security. Some food security issues that the FAO have prioritised are:

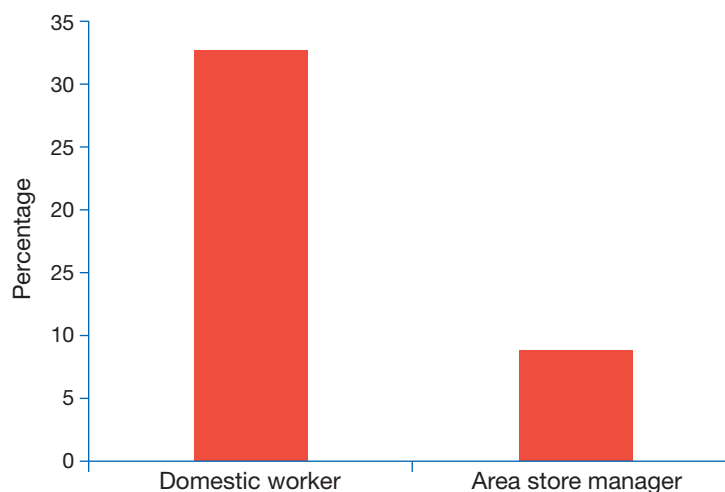
- gender roles and their relation to agriculture and food security;
- the context of globalisation;
- population dynamics such as HIV and AIDS, rural-urban migration and rural ageing;
- increasing pressure on natural resources and their use;
- urban and peri-urban agriculture;
- disaster-related complex emergencies; and
- information and communication technology.

## 3. Gender, race, class and rurality

Gender, race and geographical location impact on levels of poverty and food security. A HSRC study (2004) points out that women are mostly responsible for feeding and caring for children. Interventions that enable women to increase their productivity and lessen the time they spend on food collection, preparation and household tasks such as fetching water and firewood are likely to increase small-plot agricultural output, and thereby food security.

Consumer prices in low-income areas, such as informal settlements, townships and rural areas, are higher than those found in formal suburbs in which there are large retail chain stores (Watkinson & Makgetla 2002). Escalating food prices have impacted severely on the working class, who spend much more of their earnings on food than those who are financially better-off.

Figure 1: Percentage of salary spent on food



## 4. HIV/AIDS

Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the highest HIV and AIDS prevalence. HIV is also one of the greatest hurdles facing South African communities.

There is a link between the HIV pandemic and adequate nutrition levels. HIV-positive mothers are able to care less for their children because they invariably spend more time on gathering food, fuel and water, or feel too weak and sick to do the work (HSRC 2004). Caring for other ill family members also increases their workload.

## **MDG 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**

Target 2: Halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by 2015.

## **The Constitution of South Africa states:**

- (1) Everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water.
- (2) The state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of this right.

(Section 27)

## **The policy context**

Local policies that inform interventions that target poverty, gender and food security in South Africa are influenced by global and regional policies.

### **1. The international policy context**

The World Food Summit, organised by the FAO in November 1996, resulted in the Rome Declaration on World Food Security (RD). This declaration acknowledged the multi-faceted character of food security and identified various commitments that were translated into objectives and action plans through the Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS).

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) reinforced the RD. MDGs have measurable targets that collectively aim to improve the lives of the world's poor. An emphasis on the elimination of hunger, poverty, and maternal and child mortality, requires an emphasis on promoting healthy, productive individuals.

In 2009 the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) stated that food insecurity and rocketing food prices were the result of food production policies and the cost of fuel and other sources of energy (Palitza 2009). Agricultural experts also listed lack of investment in agriculture, unfair trade policies and the inequitable distribution of produce as factors contributing to food insecurity. To address the food crisis, small-scale farmers and livestock owners need support, and gender equality programmes must target the challenges faced by the most vulnerable groups in society, namely women and children.

In sub-Saharan Africa, some member states, such as Uganda, have policies and interventions that recognise gender as a cross-cutting issue in the eradication of poverty and food insecurity. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has regional gender equity policies and treaties, yet they do not address the gendered aspect of food insecurity.

### **2. The South African policy context**

Informed by international policy, South African interventions that target poverty, gender equality and food security are guided by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996).

Gender equality is further informed by South Africa's National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality – known as the Gender Policy Framework (GPF) – which should permeate all other local policies, including those targeting poverty and food security. The GPF has increased the social spending of various spheres of government through, for example, school feeding schemes, child support grants, free health services for children and pregnant and lactating women, pension funds, access to water and community public works programmes. In addition to this social spending, community food garden initiatives, land reform and farmer settlement programmes, loan schemes and infrastructural support for small farmers, and a presidential tractor mechanisation scheme were initiated.

The 2001 Strategic Plan for South African Agriculture published by the Department of Agriculture (DoA 2001), defines the agricultural sector's vision, highlights current realities, discusses various challenges and identifies cross-cutting core and complementary strategies to achieve the DoA's strategic goals.

Measurements of inequality were higher in 2007 than in 1994 (The Presidency 2008).

The vision of the Integrated Food Security Strategy (IFSS) 'is to achieve physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food by all South Africans at all times to meet their dietary and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (DoA 2002a: 13). IFSS streamlines, harmonises and integrates food security programmes, shaped by:

1. The urgency of maintaining and increasing the country's ability to meet its national food requirements, through domestic agricultural resources and importation of food items that cannot be produced efficiently.
2. The need to eradicate inequalities fuelled by inadequate and unstable food supplies, lack of purchasing power, weak institutional support networks, poor nutrition, inadequate safety nets, weak emergency management systems and unemployment (DoA 2002a: 19).

## Programme and policy interventions

While more money is allocated to social spending than ever before, the inequality between the well resourced and those living under conditions of poverty is growing.

At the beginning of 2009, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) planned to hold hearings to determine why so many South Africans are trapped in poverty and to ascertain whether South Africa was making any progress towards meeting the MDGs. These hearings were cancelled due to a 'lack of response from state organs' (*Mail & Guardian* 6–12 March 2009: 39).

The impact of the gender dimension on food security has not been fully interrogated. Freedom from hunger receives much attention as a fundamental human right, but the effects of gender equity on food security – through political and social rights – receive little attention. In spite of a Gender Policy Framework, gender is not acknowledged in any of the South African food security policies. Policies to ensure gender mainstreaming in all food security and poverty interventions are much needed.

The Strategic Plan for South African Agriculture lists food security and employment creation, but does not link these with gender issues. Watkinson and Makgetla (2002) conclude that it is strange that this plan does not provide strategies to encourage women to adopt small-scale farming methods, as this is at the heart of community development.

The IFSS acknowledges, on the one hand, that 'within the household, food insecurity often affects the more vulnerable members of the family, namely children and women' and that the 'costs associated with food-insecurity at the intra-household level relate to slow educational development – often of female children, stunting, etc.' (DoA 2002: 16).

On the other hand, the IFSS does not use gender as a tool for analysis and development. It does not consider the complex ways in which gender, race, class and other social identities, interact to impact on women's and girl-children's access to safe and nutritional food.

While the IFSS refers to universal access to resources and to the need to eradicate inequalities, unless the gender dimension is explicitly spelled out and a clear link is made to the Gender Policy Framework, these concerns cannot be assumed to address gender inequality.

The literature reviewed identifies gaps in the availability of disaggregated data on women and men in respect of food insecurity and how this impacts on their social roles. Despite

overwhelming generic literature on food security there is little empirical and qualitative research which addresses the political, social and gendered factors that affect food security in South Africa.

Although this research indicates that some programmes are doing well, there is a need for monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Gender concerns should be among the key issues considered in planning, implementing and M&E interventions, policies and programmes intended for the improvement of household food security.

Additional research on food security and its links to gendered development should be pursued to clarify how food insecurity relates to the complexities of the gender divide, beyond the identification of women and children as a vulnerable group. Meaningful future studies should assess how the 'voices' of women and men affected by food insecurity could be incorporated into quantitative and qualitative studies to demonstrate what can be learned from 'experience' in order to inform targeted interventions.

Examining questions of food security through a gendered lens can provide a more integrated understanding of the gendered nature of food insecurity. This is crucial to understanding how policy works, whether programmes are focused and whether the scientific literature should pay more attention to this underdeveloped area of inquiry.

The critical challenge for further policy review is to explore how the realities of everyday struggles of ordinary people for basic resources match the promises of policy around broad development, in this case food security.

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