

POLICY BRIEF

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Vulnerability to **hunger during the Covid-19 pandemic**: Proactive food assistance policy actions

South Africa's hunger crisis predates the onset of Covid-19. However, the pandemic has cast a spotlight on the breadth and depth of hunger as well as the need for anti-hunger safety nets that are proactive rather than reactive. During the first two waves of the pandemic, 48% of South African residents remained in food poverty as they were unable to obtain enough healthy food to meet their needs, according to a 2021 HSRC study. The study also shows that, compared to pre-2020 levels of household hunger, there was a 6–12 percentage point increase, with considerable fluidity in proportions of households moving into and out of hunger in 2020. (HSRC 2021) Careful tracking of hunger vulnerability patterns in 2020 holds lessons for uncertain times ahead.

The pandemic crisis exposed and tested the workings of production and distribution circuits through which food travels from farms to final consumers. Investigations by the Competition Commission of South Africa ascribed the abnormal surge in food prices during the pandemic

to agrifood value chain concentration (CCSA 2020). Corporations that control the food system raised the cost of food, passing this on to consumers, the commission found. Higher costs of essential foods made them unaffordable to poor people, accentuating food and nutrition insecurity. This sparked public debates on the meaningfulness of the constitutional right to adequate food, the effectiveness of the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security, and the food support initiatives promised in the National Development Plan.

This policy brief addresses the question: How responsive was South Africa's food-based assistance in helping vulnerable households cope during the pandemic-induced economic, livelihood and social crises? To answer this question, this brief draws on insights from a sample of one million recipients of state-sponsored food assistance in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic.² It showcases key findings and pinpoints policy actions aimed at alleviating hunger vulnerability. Recommendations are

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² The findings and recommendations in this Policy Brief derive from examples and data discussed in detail in a research report commissioned by the National Development Agency (NDA). Titled, "COVID-19 responses and the food and nutrition security of vulnerable population groups in South Africa" (HSRC 2022), the commissioned inquiry set out to improve the effectiveness of food assistance, with particular reference to state-sponsored social safety nets. As detailed in the methods section of the report, the representative sample comes from administrative registers obtained from the Department of Social Development (DSD) which documented the delivery of food, ranging from cooked meals to vouchers, to approximately one million recipients by September 2020. A survey of food recipients as well as key informant interviews for the research report took place between December 2021 and February 2022.

framed within the livelihoods protection options that are prioritised in government's policy agenda as they stood at the time of this writing.

Livelihood protection and food

The economic recession in South Africa started in late 2019 and worsened during 2020 as the SARS-Cov-2 virus infections made growing numbers of people ill. Movement restrictions aimed at bringing infections under control in the absence of vaccines shut down non-essential sectors of the economy, exacerbating joblessness, earnings losses and socioeconomic hardship. By the end of March 2020, economic output had contracted by 2,1% and the rate of unemployment reached 30,1% (Jacobs et al. 2020). The recession worsened in 2020, with updated calculations from National Treasury confirming that economic output fell by 7,2% for the year (National Treasury 2021).

Food and nutrition support to vulnerable people featured prominently in the state's suite of livelihood protection policy responses in early 2020. These responses included direct assistance to vulnerable households and incentive schemes to jumpstart business activities (HSRC 2022). As summarised in Table 3 below, direct assistance ranged from food parcels, to extra funds for the child and pension grants, to the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant of R350 for each qualifying person. For instance, the Solidarity Fund, set up by government to collect donations from the public to bolster its response to the pandemic, reported that the distribution of food parcels and vouchers had reached almost 300 000 households by May 2020, sparking concerns about whether the provision of food assistance at such a scale could be sustained for the duration of the pandemic (PMG 2020).

In addition, government subsidies to rescue farmers and businesses in distress aimed to slow layoffs. Bailing out businesses through subsidies and loans at discounted interest rates is an indirect employment and livelihood protection measure. This measure rarely stimulates automatic and immediate quality-of-life improvements for vulnerable people because it depends on, among other factors, the employment absorption appetite of the private sector. Irrespective of the reasons for private sector reluctance to create jobs, which often points to weak or missing trickle-down effects, this tardiness invariably perpetuates deprivation. This scenario calls for more meaningful livelihood protection in times of deep and prolonged socioeconomic calamities.

Hunger vulnerability: Correct timing matters

Hunger vulnerability is a broad concept that can be defined as when people are at risk of sudden and steep falls in consumption of enough food to meet their

minimum dietary requirements (Hart 2009). This shortfall in food consumption often endures for more than a day or two and may be temporary, transitory, protracted or chronic. People surviving above the hunger threshold are pushed into hunger and those who are already suffering from a lack of food undergo a further deterioration in their situation.

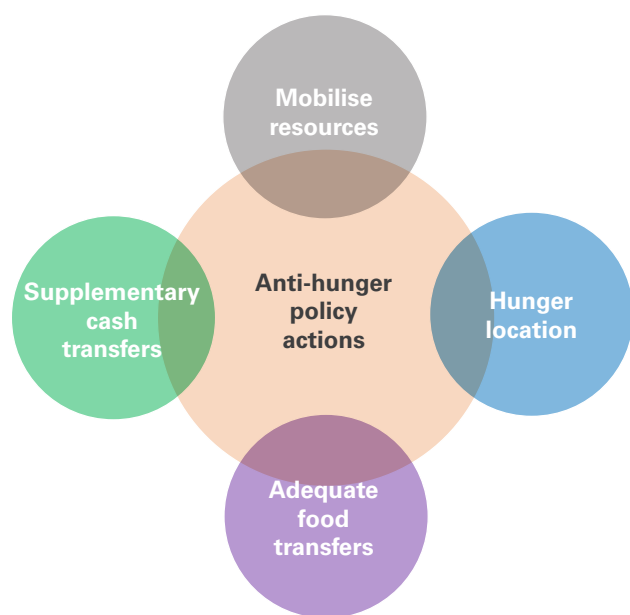
Consuming a well-balanced diet at *all times*, which incorporates easy access to food, sits at the heart of the standard definition of food and nutrition security (Hart 2009). Elaborating on how to interpret the phrase 'at all times', Hart explains that this phrase finds expression in words like 'stability' and 'vulnerability'. Jacobs and Nyamwanza (2021) highlight that 'stability' and 'vulnerability' are now staple words in the vast policy and academic literature on food and nutrition. Timing cuts across the production, consumption and health outcomes dimensions of food and nutrition security (Jacobs & Nyamwanza 2021) and is therefore an essential factor in responses to hunger emergencies. Moreover, food assistance relief practitioners have translated and entrenched these staple words in effective, efficient and self-sustaining practices. Interventions must occur at the right time, coupled with being alert to what early-warning signals reveal about hunger status. Alertness to the time dimension of hunger vulnerability, Hart underscores, is critical to making relief agencies aware of the causes and triggers of hunger emergencies. Good practice policies usually cater for contingencies that are difficult to forecast accurately.

Direct food assistance policy actions

Any food assistance relief must confront basic preparedness questions: Are enough resources available for the provision of food to hungry people? Where resources for food assistance are lacking, how can these resource gaps be closed? Do we know where the hungry people are and how to deliver food assistance to them quickly? How suitable are existing food and nutrition insecurity measurement, monitoring and assessment tools to support relief efforts? Do these tools generate evidence that can inform proactive anti-hunger policy actions?

Each of these preparedness questions has been incorporated in Figure 1, which shows the high-level focus areas on which proactive anti-hunger policy actions ought to concentrate. The rest of this policy brief elaborates on each of these actions without ranking them in any particular order since interventions on all fronts at the same time may be the rule rather than the exception in emergencies.

Figure 1: Direct and indirect food assistance policy actions in hunger emergencies



Source: HSRC Study (2022)

Global and local experiences confirm why food and nutrition security policy imperatives must be integrated into social assistance policy for effective anti-hunger actions, especially in emergencies (FAO 2021; PMG 2020). In South Africa, this approach manifests in section 27 of the Constitution, which promotes access to food and water as basic human rights. Section 27 intertwines the right to adequate food with the right to appropriate social safety nets.

“It therefore recognises that social protection is essential to achieving the right to food, but also that the right to food ought to be prioritised when it comes to the more general right to social protection.”

Integrating the right to food and the right to social protection into coherent development frameworks and practices requires overcoming multiple obstacles. For example, one pervasive and longstanding obstacle is the fragmented approach to food and social protection policies that treat these needs as separate domains. Traditionally, this fragmentation has been reinforced through restricting food security policy to concentrating solely on the volume of agrifood outputs with scant attention to the adequacy of nutritional outcomes for those in need. This unidimensional view of food policy obscures the real or potential linkages between social protection and the volume of agrifood production.

Mobilise enough resources for food assistance

Successes in efforts to eliminate hunger vulnerability require the availability of enough resources to provide nutritious food at the right time and place. Hunger relief

agencies need surpluses of non-perishable food for rapid distribution to those in need. Standby food stocks should be combined with a dedicated hunger relief fund that finances the smooth operations of the food delivery system, including food storage and transportation, especially in the absence of in-kind food transfers.

Decision-makers and advocacy groups can often detect the early-warning signs of hunger emergencies but lack the resources for countervailing actions in advance or to prevent a calamity from further deteriorating. Financing hunger relief interventions is often too costly and therefore unaffordable for poor countries with constrained public finances, such as South Africa. Resources that seemed enough before the outbreak of hunger crises can deplete fast when the actual disaster materialises.

In resource-poor settings with high public debt and no fiscal space, international aid and donor funding will need to be mobilised in support of hunger relief. An optimal combination of resources from diverse sources is vital in these situations.

Identify and locate hungry people

Knowing who is unable to access enough food to meet their basic consumption needs is an essential step in effective food assistance policy actions. Relief agencies must know who is hungry, where to locate them and how to reach them in the shortest time feasible. Information tools that can guide anti-hunger relief efforts must be readily available, functional and frequently updated. Modern information and communication technology (ICT) platforms, especially social media, should be used to help locate those in need of hunger relief. However, exploiting all the benefits of ICTs in these situations depends on the functionality of ICT infrastructure and the capabilities of those involved to optimally use the available devices, especially smartphones and phablets.

Hunger vulnerability identification requires purposeful information collection, analysis and reporting methodologies. Although nationwide surveys of the country’s food and nutrition security status (such as the General Household Survey and Living Conditions Survey) have a valuable role in aiding efforts targeting hunger interventions, real-time data tools remain the ideal in these cases. Investment in real-time administrative data focused on smaller geographic units would aid the efficacy of food assistance programmes. This can be done through secure and integrated dashboards that transmit and display validated hunger indicators.

The information in Table 1, extracted from the study on which this brief is based, gives a sense of how hunger status intersects with socioeconomic status. A nationally representative sample extracted from one million recipients of food parcels recorded in Department of Social Development databases was used to illustrate key provincial differences in food and nutrition insecurity

experiences. The analysis compared the self-reported monthly incomes of these recipients in 2019 and 2020 with the national poverty lines, and showed that, across this sample, headcount poverty rates were 66% in 2019 and 64% in 2020, with the poverty gap at 33% in 2019, pointing to a study population living far below both the food and lower-bound poverty lines.

Monthly income and food spending per person for the poorest 40% of food assistance recipients was well below Statistics South Africa's food poverty line, which was R561 per person per month in 2019 and R585 per person per month in 2020. The food spending share allows for a quick summary of the incidence of food poverty. For the entire study population, on average more than 60 cents of every R1 flowing into the household went towards buying food. Among the poorest 40% the food spending share is as low as 70% and climbs to 87% for the poorest 20%. Furthermore, the small-amounts of monthly per capita food spending suggest that hunger vulnerability also manifests in a food affordability crisis.

Table 1: Food poverty and inequality

Income quintile (ADEQ*)	Income (ZAR per month, 2019) (ADEQ avg.)	Income (ZAR per month, 2020) (ADEQ avg.)	Food spend (ZAR per month, 2019) (ADEQ)	Food spend share (%)
Bottom quintile	163.90	282.24	147.02	87.1
Quintile 2	295.77	366.41	220.55	70.1
Quintile 3	505.99	614.74	291.70	55.6
Quintile 4	494.23	466.02	257.19	50.2
Top quintile	932.37	750.51	405.85	43.1
Overall	469.77	494.04	261.87	61.5

*ADEQ abbreviates Adult Equivalent to give a realistic view of household size by giving smaller weights to children in the family relative to the adult head of the family.

Source: HSRC study (2022)

Running out of money to buy enough food is a standard early-warning signal of hunger vulnerability. Eighty six percent of the study population reported that they ran

out of money to buy enough food in 2019 (HSRC 2022). Hunger and at-risk populations before 2020 underscore the urgency for expanding food and nutrition security assistance. This requires the right tools to collect, assemble and publicise vital indicators of hunger status in real time as emphasised in this brief.

Deliver and distribute adequate food to the needy

Timely food delivery to those who need it is an overriding goal of hunger relief. The failure to do so can spin off other crises. Delays in timely food distribution where it is urgently needed, the World Food Programme (WFP) has warned, can turn a temporary food crisis into a hunger catastrophe (WFP 2021). It can result in protracted illness and the loss of life. Distributing adequate food to the needy starts from basic questions such as: where must the food be delivered and in what quantities, and what would be the best transportation mode? This hinges on agile food distribution and delivery arrangements, including coordination across state and non-state agencies.

Table 2 displays information on food-based and cash transfers among the study population. It helps to answer the following question: how many different types of social assistance (cash, food) did the interviewee or their family members receive? Food assistance was provided in the form of either a food parcel or a voucher. Cash assistance includes standard conditional cash grants, the special SDR grant and ring-fenced support for workers in the temporary-layoff category (see Table 3 for a summary).

Several points can be made from studying Table 2; it is worth highlighting three. First, a food parcel recipient or their family members often obtained more than one type of food-based support, which could include a voucher or food from a non-state agency. Access to more than one type of food assistance appears particularly prominent in Gauteng, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal. Second, the provincial distribution of food-based assistance was uneven, but it is not immediately evident what factors drove these provincial differences. It is plausible that factors such as the agency of hungry people to actively search for food assistance, the institutional capacity of provincial departments, or the heightened activism of non-state relief agencies contributed to this pattern. Third, while access to cash assistance correlates positively with food assistance, it is not immediately evident what could be driving it.

Table 2: Count of food-based and cash assistance accessed per main recipient in 2020

Province	Food-based assistance		Cash assistance		
	One Type of Food Assistance	Two Types of Food Assistance	One Type of Cash Grant	Two Types of Cash Grants	Three Types of Cash Grants
Eastern Cape	24 379	0	20 139	10 599	529
Free State	25 349	0	44 848	5 849	0
Gauteng	369 488	11 729	293 245	181 812	0
KwaZulu-Natal	29 706	10 581	22 788	25 637	1 221
Limpopo	106 583	10 839	77 679	25 291	7 226
Mpumalanga	70 741	1 769	47 751	28 296	0
North West	24 333	0	10 245	8 965	1 281
Northern Cape	13 183	6 592	37 902	8 239	0
Western Cape	33 978	0	61 586	10 618	0
SA (national)	697 742	41 509	616 184	305 308	10 257

Source: HSRC study (2022)

Supplementary cash transfers (conditional or unconditional non-food assistance)

Table 3 summarises prominent livelihood protection schemes during Covid-19, showing that more than 37 million people had received a type cash and food assistance by March 2021. This headcount of social assistance recipients does not report if a social assistance recipient or another household member has received more than one type of food or cash assistance. Calculating the reach of social assistance in terms of recipient numbers with administrative headcounts is thus likely to overestimate 'impact'.

Responses to hunger emergencies often get stuck in a so-called trade-off between direct food delivery and cash transfers. The results presented in Table 2 suggest that this trade-off was peripheral in reality because multiple types of assistance went to the same recipients. Government expanded access to its conditional cash-based social safety nets with the introduction of the SDR grant, set at R350 per month for qualifying individuals. Additionally, both the child support grant and the old age pension grant were increased.

Table 3: Characterising social safety nets during Covid-19

Analysis categories	Food parcels	SRD – R350	TERS – UIF	Traditional conditional cash grants
Intervention purpose	Food-based support to households living below the food poverty line and having inadequate access to food.	Social relief assistance to persons living in poverty and without any other income protection.	Wage subsidy for workers on temporary layoff.	Aims to provide support to those living in poverty and in need.
Primary benefit	Direct food parcels comprising basic food basket items.	Cash transfer at the value of R350 per month for each eligible person.	Cash transfer to eligible worker or employers.	Cash transfer every month; value depends on cash grant conditions.
Recipient numbers	3.2m	10.5m	5.7m	18.4m

Source: HSRC Study (2022)

Before 2020, one in five recipients of social assistance received either a food parcel or food voucher from a government agency. However, since the onset of the pandemic, food assistance substantially expanded, with four in every five social assistance recipients getting

food through state and non-state food delivery schemes. In hunger emergencies, cash and food assistance are not competing alternatives for the poor, but vital complementary lifelines against mass starvation.

Recommendations

Food emergencies happen when there is a sudden and steep rise in the number of hungry people. Trigger events of food emergencies differ, and one cause often coexists with and reinforces another cause. The hunger crisis that accompanied the unfolding SARS-Cov-2 pandemic is a food emergency.

Integrating direct food-based transfers and cost-of-living-adjusted cash safety nets was a noteworthy innovation in social development policy activism against food and nutrition insecurity. Agile policy actions to counter hunger emergencies require that food relief agencies start with a minimum number of high-priority interventions, such as the following:

- Mobilising enough resources for the rapid delivery of social assistance. Set up localised hunger relief funds alongside corporate social responsibility food donations that can quickly ramp up supplies in hunger emergencies.
- Identifying and locating hungry people. Invest in a food and nutrition security dashboard (with meaningful indicators) that is updated through weekly or monthly bottom-up inputs from social media platforms that households use.
- Delivering and distributing adequate food to the needy. Government must implement proactive outreach campaigns in support of food production and distribution initiatives that communities run through their own formations.
- Providing supplementary cash transfers where necessary and feasible. Weave together expanded cash transfers and food-based social safety nets to protect social grant recipients against the disproportionate burden of food price inflation and hunger.

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