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Household food security status in South Africa

M Altman, T Hart and P Jacobs¹

Abstract

The Human Sciences Research Council has established a policy research initiative to monitor household food security and to identify and evaluate policy options. In this special edition, a selection of articles from this project is assembled. While deep chronic hunger has fallen with the expansion of the social grants, under-nutrition is a very serious and widespread challenge. This special edition draws together the best available evidence on household food security with the aim of stimulating wider debate.

Keywords: Food security; social grants; smallholder and subsistence production; poverty

1. Background

South Africa ranks among the countries with the highest rate of income inequality in the world. Compared to other middle income countries, it has extremely high levels of absolute poverty. The South African government has committed to halving poverty between 2004 and 2014. Achieving household food security is a critical component in meeting that objective. Access to food and water is perhaps unlike other areas of delivery, since they are *essential* to well-being and human development.

The link between poverty, incomes and household food security is not at all clear. While South Africa may be food secure as a country, large numbers of households within the country are food insecure. To understand household food security status in this country, it is necessary to investigate how the workings of the food distribution system and resources of a household determine its access to food. There are distributional and accessibility problems that need to be understood. Ideally, poverty and food insecurity would be addressed by *expanding employment* opportunities, thereby enhancing household incomes. Employment has expanded substantially since the mid-1990s, but not enough to address income poverty meaningfully. And income security is an essential ingredient to address food insecurity. The evidence shows that *social grants* have played an important role in improving

¹ *Respectively Executive Director, Senior Research Manager and Chief Research Specialist at the Centre for Poverty Employment and Growth, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria.*

household food security since 2001, but that improvements in employment status are also important (see Van der Berg, 2006; Aliber, 2009). In the context of large-scale poverty and unemployment, as well as the present economic downturn, it is probable that reliance on grants will continue, if not increase. In a highly unequal society with high unemployment, this redistribution through income transfers is essential. However, it makes poor households vulnerable to national policy choices and politics. It is essential that creative and meaningful solutions are found to drawing marginalised work-seekers into economic participation as part of a long term poverty reduction and food security strategy. As part of this effort, a third potential contributor to food security might be *small-scale agricultural production*. It seems counter-intuitive to promote subsistence or small-scale agricultural production in a semi-industrialised economy like South Africa. However, many countries have successfully supported small-scale production in Europe and in Japan and Indonesia, often as partial contributors to household food baskets and livelihoods. Because South Africa has invested so little in this area, it deserves investigation. However, the potential contribution of small-scale farming to household food security is the subject of some controversy.

The meaning of food security (or insecurity) is not as obvious as it may seem. There is no specific and accepted measure of food security in South Africa, and currently there are no regularised ways of monitoring it. This is not an acceptable state of affairs in a middle income country that has such a high proportion of food insecure households.

There are numerous challenges in identifying targets and strategies for household food security. Food security is multidimensional in nature, making accurate measurement and policy targeting a challenge. There is sometimes confusion between national food security and the actual experience of households of obtaining food. Access to adequate food at a household level increasingly depends on how food markets and distribution systems function rather than only on total agro-food output. Moreover, there is no clear composite measure that defines food security to enable the setting of food security goals and monitoring systems.

As stated above, food security cannot be understood in isolation from other developmental questions such as social protection, sources of income, rural and urban development, changing household structures, health, access to land, water and inputs, retail markets, or education and nutritional knowledge. The multiple factors that influence access to food are not well understood, and this impacts negatively on the ability to identify appropriate policies to improve their access.

These gaps restrict the ability of policy makers to address food insecurity. Policy makers are constrained in their ability to identify interventions appropriate to different situations and needs. There are also deep institutional barriers to successfully translating policy into implementable programmes. This is exacerbated by weak links between government, the private sector and civil society organisations.

The problem of household food insecurity is further exacerbated by a range of additional factors that have recently come into play and drive the cost of food. Domestic electricity supply constraints and rising oil prices are examples of important factors in this regard. The price of electricity is set to rise by at least 100% between 2008 and 2011. Even if the oil price declines for a period, the advent of peak oil is expected to cause a long term rise in prices. This will affect the supply of fertiliser because petroleum is an input for chemical fertiliser, and agro-food transport costs. Other factors that are increasingly affecting food prices are bio-fuel production (which results in the reallocation of resources and outputs to the supply of feedstock), speculation in commodity markets and the power of agents within the agro-food chain, namely supermarkets, processors and distributors.

Rising food prices, particularly of maize and wheat which are the staple diet of the poor in South Africa, pose serious problems for the urban and rural poor as most are net buyers of food. Recent information from the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO, 2009) supported by independent sources (Heady & Fan, 2008) suggest that food prices will increase steadily over the next decade even if there are some fluctuations and the occasional drop in prices (Evans, 2009). Given increasingly strong linkages between the local level and national and international commodity chains and economic networks, even remote rural households in South Africa are affected by changes in these networks. Unless there are new policy directions, poor households will increasingly be forced to allocate a greater proportion of their expenditure to food, with the result that diets will become less diverse, lower in quality, and energy intake (calories consumed) will drop as people try to cope with the situation. Most severely affected will be the urban and rural poor, the landless and female-headed households (FAO, 2009).

The Centre for Poverty, Employment and Growth (CPEG) at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) was established to identify approaches to halving unemployment and poverty between 2004 and 2014 on a sustainable basis. Achieving household food security is a critical focus area as part of this contribution.

South Africa faces a structural household food insecurity problem, the prime causes of which are widespread chronic poverty and unemployment (HSRC, 2007). Numerous underlying causes have been explored in the body of research produced by CPEG and others. Real solutions to household food insecurity lie in growth and structural change, the population cannot wait for that to happen. People are hungry today and must eat today, they cannot wait until tomorrow. The future growth and development trajectory depends on an inclusive path based on effective human development. Access to sufficient nutritious food and clean water underpins human development.

In 2008 and 2009, Centre for Poverty Employment and Growth drew together a team of researchers to frame a research and policy agenda on household food security. This follows earlier work by the HSRC which focused on land, agriculture, poverty reduction and food security predominantly at the macro-level. The current project has a specific focus on household food insecurity. The first step in this project was to identify what is already known and available data to enable monitoring and evaluation. The purpose was to look at what has been done and what still needs to be done to ensure that it is possible to design effective policy, and to monitor and evaluate the food security situation. This initial project was funded by the HSRC and the ComMark Trust.

2. Overview of this special edition

This special edition of *Agrekon* offers a representative selection of articles from the Human Sciences Research Council's review of household food security in South Africa. The first set of articles focus on the meaning and measurement of food security in South Africa. Tim Hart highlights the challenges associated with the diverse understandings and assumptions underpinning the concepts of food insecurity and vulnerability. Michael Aliber analyses the official data to show what is known about food expenditure and hunger, making particular use of Statistics South Africa's Income and Expenditure Survey (IES) and the General Household Survey (GHS). Then Peter Jacobs deepens this analysis of food expenditure and hunger, with a greater emphasis on under-nutrition. He explores what different data sources reveal about the access households have to a nutritionally adequate diet.

The second set of articles considers the possible role that smallholder production might play in addressing food insecurity in South Africa. This is an unusual question in the context of a middle-income country. However, smallholder and particularly subsistence producers have largely been neglected by South African policy makers. The authors explore whether there

might be untapped potential to support livelihoods of low-income households. Michael Aliber and Tim Hart consider how smallholder production currently contributes to food security in South Africa. They raise concerns about weak policy attention to existing small producers and the complexities involved in supporting them. After analysing recent Statistics South Africa's Labour Force Survey (LFS) data relating to reasons for participation in this sector, a case study on the significance of traditional food crop production in Limpopo provides one practical example about the experience of smallholder production. Mompoti Baiphethi and Peter Jacobs look at the links between smallholder production, market access and food security. Innocent Matshe considers regional experiences in promoting smallholder production in sub-Saharan Africa and identifies a number of important lessons.

3. Insights

What can be said about the food security status of South Africans?

We would like to draw the reader's attention to seven key insights on the food security status of households in South Africa that emerge from these articles on household food security.

There is little certainty about household food security status in South Africa

We can say with some certainty that a large proportion of South African households are food insecure. But we cannot precisely determine a baseline estimate, and therefore it is currently not possible to monitor progress towards greater food security. Despite numerous indicators of food security status evident in various national datasets, sampling and methodological constraints render cross-dataset comparisons unworkable. The same constraints prevent any determination of household level food security. This is an unacceptable state of affairs, since sufficient, nutritionally adequate food is a core basic human need, and a critical success factor for human development of any kind.

As an example, the General Household Survey indicates that, in 2007, 10.6% and 12.2% of adults and children respectively were sometimes or always hungry. In stark contrast, the National Food Consumption Survey (NFCS) of 2005 found that 52% of households experience hunger (Labadarios *et al.*, 2008). It further reports that another 33% of households are at risk of hunger, which means that food inflation and the loss of income might push them into hunger. The GHS is a large household survey accorded official status, while the NFCS is a much smaller survey, not accorded official status. Nevertheless, the

findings of the NFCS require further exploration. The GHS asks a very basic question about whether household members were hungry. The NFCS collects deeper information about nutrition, height and weight, as well as household choices made in a context of limited income. How the respective surveys define hunger (or food insecurity and poor nutritional intake) and then translate this into information-gathering questions therefore formed a major focus of the articles brought together in this issue.

Jacobs considers whether the level of household food security is more accurately represented by the statistics of the GHS or those of the NFCS. He uses a number of composite measures to determine what proportion of the population could afford a very basic nutritionally adequate food basket.

There has been a dramatic fall in the experience of hunger since 2002

Aliber, in this edition, uses the General Household Survey to trace the incidence of child hunger from 1994 to 2007. For the period 1994 to 1998, there seems to have been an increase in the share of children-inclusive households whose children experienced hunger. However, during the period 2002 to 2007, there was a striking decrease in child hunger in the same households. It echoes – or perhaps rather amplifies – post-2001 trends in poverty reduction detected in the work of Van der Berg (2006).

Aliber offers more nuanced information about the experience of hunger for children under the age of 17, and adults aged 18 and above, between 2002 and 2007. The experiences of both groups were essentially the same. All four ‘intensities’ of hunger (i.e. ‘never’, ‘seldom’, ‘sometimes’, ‘often’ and ‘always’, but excluding ‘not applicable’) appear to be shrinking simultaneously. However, at the same time, while the number of households that experience hunger ‘often’ or ‘always’ is declining, hunger appears to be enduring, especially as the improvements recorded between 2006 and 2007 have been less impressive than those in preceding years. Some reversal can be expected in 2009 as result of the economic downturn.

While the experience of hunger has fallen, under-nutrition remains a serious problem

Hunger and under-nutrition are both outcomes of inadequate food intake but their meanings differ. Hunger is commonly associated with ‘not eating enough food’. Under-nutrition, on the other hand, refers to the lack of sufficient micro-nutrients- such as key vitamins, iron, and zinc. In children, a severe and/or chronic lack of adequate nutrition can manifest in underweight and stunting.

Outcomes can include irreversible changes in child development: poor cognitive development, weak educational performance, increased risk of morbidity and impaired immune functions. The 2005 NFCS revealed that one out of every five children aged 1-9 years is stunted. This is only marginally better than the 1999 survey findings (Labadarios *et al.*, 2008). Frequent tiredness among adults might also be symptomatic of under-nutrition, such as iron deficiency. More importantly, visible signs of micro-nutrient deficiencies usually appear after a considerable period of inadequate food intake (food insecurity). Faber and Wenhold (2007) emphasise the way micro-nutrient deficiencies interact. It is worth paying closer attention to poor nutrition, which results from the lack of well-balanced or diversified diets. However, Jacobs's analysis indicates that few people would be able to afford a food basket that is diverse and high in essential macro- and micronutrients.

The distinction between the feeling of hunger and under-nutrition appears to be the main explanation for the wide gap between the statistics of the GHS and the NFCS. Jacobs finds that approximately 80% of households could not afford to buy a basic nutritional basket of food costing an average of R262 per person per month (at 2005 prices), at current prices and levels of fortification. This finding is least surprising if it is compared to the NFCS finding, that only 20% of South Africans can be considered food secure (Labadarios *et al.*, 2008). Unexpectedly, as incomes fall a rising proportion of households are unable to afford the average nutritionally adequate food basket. Of this 80%, one in every four additional households would achieve an acceptable level of nutrition with R200 more expenditure on nutritious food per month.

Food insecurity can be chronic or transitory, and both can be experienced at a great intensity

The depth of food insecurity varies within and between households. The food security status of a household and its members is very sensitive to livelihood stressors, and thus changes over time. Rapid food price inflation during 2007-2008, for instance, considerably increased the number of food insecure people globally - from 900 million to more than 1 billion (FAO, 2009). Chronically food insecure and low-income households are more vulnerable to food price shocks because they spend a higher share of their incomes on food. In this context, households which might be marginally food secure before a shock might fall into severe transitory or severe chronic food insecurity afterwards, placing increased pressure on social protection regimes to counter the spread of hunger (Hart, this edition).

Although there has been a general reduction in national food insecurity measured in terms of food availability in recent years (Labadarios *et al.*, 2008, Aliber, this edition), there is more flux into and out of hunger than might have been expected. Many households which are not hungry in one year may well experience hunger in the next. Aliber's analysis of the GHS shows that key determinants of households whose situation diminished from not being hungry in 2006 to being hungry in 2007 included: an increase in the average number of children per household, a decline in the average number of elderly, a decrease in the average number of adults in employment per household; and a moderate increase in grant income per capita (that did not cover costs of additional dependents). Household food expenditure per capita in this group fell by 7.6%.

Rural households spend more on food but less per person than their urban counterparts, by expenditure decile

From his analysis of the Income and Expenditure Survey of 2005/2006, Aliber shows that poor rural households spend a larger share of their total expenditure on food than their urban counterparts, with the exception of the poorest deciles. One possible interpretation is that rural households tend to pay higher prices so they must spend more to acquire a comparable food basket. However, rural households spend 15% less in Rand terms on each household member than their urban counterparts. Higher food prices typically point to the direct expenditure on food. But this excludes transport costs rural households need to cover if they shop at supermarkets in nearby metros where food prices are presumably relatively lower.

Jacobs uses the IES 2005/2006 to deepen the analysis and asks whether existing levels of household food expenditures enable them to cover the cost of nutritionally adequate food baskets. This is done by costing average and below average dietary energy costs. Nationally, one in five households spends enough on food to afford a nutritionally adequate food basket. However, a rural-urban breakdown shows that a substantially smaller number of rural households can afford such a food basket: one in ten rural households compared to one in four urban households.

There are a number of ways of making sense of why rural households in the same expenditure group spend less on food per adult equivalent (ADEQ). The first and most obvious reason is that there are more people in the average rural household. It is also possible that own production partly explains lower ADEQ expenditure in rural areas, although this hypothesis would need to be tested. In principle, the IES was meant to capture information about own

production. In reality however the IES captures far too little own production information to be credible. Palmer and Sender (2006) suggest that perhaps the best way to appreciate the significance of production for own consumption in South Africa might be to measure the difference in ADEQ expenditure between farming and non-farming households. However, given that the IES of 2005/2006 does not distinguish between farming and non-farming households, the distinction between rural and urban households serves as a sort of proxy. If own production accounted for the 15% gap in ADEQ spending, this would ascribe to small-scale agricultural production a gross imputed value of about R2 billion. Given that this emanates from less than half of rural black households (i.e. those involved in farming as elicited from the analysis of the LFS), this is significant. If one quarter of this value was consumed by the higher income groups, and two households were engaged in own production, it would mean that poor households saved an average of R750 per annum (or R 62.50 per month), accounting for an in-kind contribution to their budget. This is not completely implausible, but further research would shed more light on this important issue.

The differences between urban and rural food expenditure patterns can also be traced to particular food types. It is surprising that rural households spend a larger share of their food budget on grain products, fruit and vegetables and a lower share on meat, than urban households in the same decile. Tentatively, these differences could be explained by the fact that, in recent decades, arable land resources in former homeland areas have been increasingly under-utilised, effectively allowing more space for livestock. Had this not been the case, the situation in respect of food shares between urban and rural households might be reversed. Another, complementary, explanation is that, to the extent some rural households are net suppliers of meat, much of this tends to be marketed locally through informal abattoirs, and the impact may be that rural dwellers who would otherwise have to purchase meat in town are able to buy it locally at a lower price. In the worst-case scenario, this may simply reflect that higher rural food prices force poor households to reduce consumption of meat to make it possible to buy staples.

It is critical that an understanding be reached about why rural households spend less per adult equivalent on food than their urban counterparts in each decile. If this is the result of own production, it may free up money for spending on other items. If it is due to higher prices or higher dependency ratios, there are serious negative welfare implications.

Policies that focus on poverty nodes will not necessarily reach the largest number of food insecure. This poses challenges for policy aiming to immediately lift households out of deep food insecurity

There is often a policy tension between focusing on poor people or on poor areas. It is sometimes assumed that low-income households are concentrated in generally poor municipalities. Michael Aliber shows why such assumptions can be contradictory. Data from the 2007 GHS shows that serious hunger is widespread and is found in similar proportions in rural districts and metros. While the worst districts in 2007 were Umzinyathi in KwaZulu-Natal and OR Tambo in Eastern Cape, this may change over time. It is also important to remember that an assessment of what constitutes the very worst-affected districts depends in part on which year's data is under consideration. In an HSRC working paper, Aliber (2009) shows that had one looked at the 2006 and 2005 datasets, Zululand in KwaZulu-Natal and Bophirima in North West would have had the highest proportions of seriously hungry people. This can vary a little from time to time, partly because of changing conditions, but also because the estimates are random variables that are not completely accurate at this scale of analysis.

Furthermore, a very large proportion of seriously hungry households live in a few urban districts. Counter-intuitively, more than 30% of all seriously hungry households lived in Cape Town, Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg in 2007. Over 50% of the seriously hungry could be reached by focusing intervention in these three densely populated urban areas, plus an additional five district municipalities mostly located in the same vicinities.

About half of households that are often or always hungry are eligible but do not receive grants

Social grants appear to have been the most important contributor to reducing poverty and food insecurity in the poorest households (see Van der Berg, 2006). By 2007, 12 million people were receiving grants, rising from 4 million people in 2002. Using the 2007 GHS, Aliber's analysis shows that 51% of seriously hungry households appear to be eligible for social grants that they do not receive. Of these, about two-thirds receive some grants, but in principle are eligible to receive more than they do, while the other third are not receiving any grants at all, despite apparent eligibility for at least one.

Aliber further proposes that if eligible age of children to receive the child support grant was immediately raised to 18, then a further 13% of seriously hungry households would not be receiving grants for which they are eligible.

This modification of the child support grant has been introduced into policy since the writing of Aliber's article.

Therefore, improving access to social grants for those who are eligible could dramatically reduce the experience of serious hunger that still remains.

Greater economic participation will be an essential part of sustaining and building on those gains. But for now, job creation is too slow to reach the millions of people in need. More intense strategies to strengthen non-grant livelihoods are needed to transition marginalised work-seekers into economic activity.

Can small-scale agriculture production contribute meaningfully to household food security in South Africa?

We asked whether small-scale agricultural production might potentially offer a sustainable strategy to addressing food insecurity and hunger. Six key insights emerge from the study.

Home production does not necessarily imply improved food security. There are very different outcomes across the country. We need to learn why.

Poor households that engage in own production are not necessarily more food secure. Households may engage in own production as an additional livelihood strategy, or even for recreation. Alternatively, it may indicate deep poverty and the implementation of a survival strategy. For example, Aliber and Hart look at two equally poor but otherwise contrasting district municipalities, namely Vhembe in Limpopo and OR Tambo in the Eastern Cape. Both districts have a high concentration of people who engage in agricultural activity. However, Vhembe has a very low incidence of hunger, and OR Tambo very high. While household food production is an extremely important activity for residents of a village in Limpopo, Aliber and Hart show that 49% experience hunger during a twelve-month period. Access to appropriate extension and research support availability, access to input and output markets and the quality of natural resources available can be important contributors to outcomes.

Increasingly, small household producers do so for extra food

There was a marked increase in black households that practiced agriculture between 2001 and 2004, and thereafter a modest tapering off. There was an absolute and relative increase up to around 2004 in the number of households

for whom agriculture represented an 'extra source of food', and at the same time a decline in the number of those relying on agriculture as a 'main source of food'. These would need further exploration to determine the reasons for the changes.

Aliber and Hart show that there is considerable movement into and out of agriculture, suggesting that many households treat agriculture as a sort of residual activity from which they can seek benefit when it suits them, but abandon when it is inconvenient. We imagine this might especially arise when more remunerative opportunities surface. Unemployment or underemployment, and therefore the availability of labour in the household, seems to be a key factor, as is changing household sizes, although this cannot be confirmed by the existing datasets. Transitions out of agriculture are clearly associated with declines in household size, while transitions into agriculture are associated with increases in household size. It is possible that increased household size and the associated demand for more food requires engagement in subsistence production as a way of feeding a larger group of dependants. However, it is more likely that household food production depends on the presence of an able-bodied member.

Policy tends to focus on commercially oriented production, but there are millions of active households that could benefit from appropriate support

Already, about four million people (or about 2.5 million households) are engaged in some kind of own production, of which approximately 300 000 to 400 000 are full-time subsistence farmers, sometimes with helpers with whom they exchange foodstuffs for labour services. For the others, the predominant reason for engaging in agriculture is to procure an 'extra source of food'. In this edition, Aliber and Hart suggest strong continuity of household participation in farming, notwithstanding some flux of individual household members.

Lessons from elsewhere in Africa suggest input support targeting smallholders can boost production and food security (see Baiphethi & Jacobs, this edition; Matshe, this edition). In Malawi, as Baiphethi and Jacobs show, the Agricultural Input Support Programme (AISP) has raised yields across a large number of staple foods produced by smallholder farmers. Higher yields further enabled more households to withstand or cope with food price shocks. Farming on urban food gardens appears to be on the increase, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Based on the available evidence, which is incomplete, the addition of urban agriculture to household food security could be as low as 33% and as high as 80%. In South Africa, the pace of urbanisation is not

expected to slow down. How this rising population of city dwellers accesses nutritionally adequate food is bound to become a major concern. Investigating the potential of urban farming to address food insecurity around the cities must be on the food policy agenda.

All three of the papers on smallholder and subsistence production in this edition argue that appropriate support is required to improve the current levels of small-scale production. Appropriate support is dependent on the specific contexts under which small-scale farming is practised.

The neglect of existing small-scale farmers has a serious gender bias

Women make up 61% of all those involved in farming. They mostly have the same reasons for participating in agriculture, except for the 'extra source of food' reason, in which case they exceed men by two thirds. Insofar as women outnumber men as subsistence producers, this is consistent with the prevalent stereotype of homeland agriculture; what is perhaps surprising is that commercially-oriented black farmers are equally likely to be women as men. The high prevalence of women in agriculture, particularly in terms of those engaged in semi-subsistence production (as an extra source of household food) to supplement household food requirements, demands an increased focus on this group and the specific and often gender-determined constraints they face.

The majority of small-scale farmers are young people

There is a perception that young people are not interested in farming, and that small-scale production is mostly the preserve of older people. However, Aliber and Hart show that the majority of small farmers are young. It is true that a larger proportion of older people farm; however, they are a smaller section of the population.

For example, 12% of 15- to 19-year-olds are involved in subsistence farming as compared to 24% of 55- to 59-year-olds, according to the March 2007 Labour Force Survey. However, there are twice as many 15- to 19-year-olds (more than 500 000) involved in subsistence agriculture than there are 55- to 59-year-olds. Approximately 1.9 million subsistence farmers are aged 15 to 29 years.

Most small black farmers are concentrated in few areas located in former homelands

Most black farmers are located within district municipalities which encompass territories belonging to former homelands, meaning of course that most black

farmers are located within former homelands themselves. If the aim of policy is to reach large numbers of small black farmers, it is worth noting that they are highly concentrated. For example, a quarter of all black small farmers can be found in the Vhembe, OR Tambo and Amathole municipalities.

Aliber (2009) reveals that, in four district municipalities, 57% to 72% of black households are engaged in farming at some level: Vhembe in Limpopo, Umkhanyakude in KwaZulu-Natal, and both Alfred Nzo and OR Tambo in Eastern Cape. However, there are a further eight district municipalities in which the share is between 43% and 56%. In other words, although the 2.5 million black households that practice at least some agriculture represent a fifth of the 11 million black households in the country, in a number of predominantly rural municipalities – especially those incorporating former homeland areas – the share is very much higher. Therefore this activity is very important to people living in those areas.

Access to land is often considered a determinant of people's involvement in agriculture and this is explored by Aliber and Hart. The GHS reports that 7% to 13% of black households have some access to land for agricultural purposes. This corresponds closely to the proportions of people involved in own production reported by the Labour Force Survey. The Rural Survey of 1997 focusing only on the former homelands estimated that 71% of black households had access to land for agricultural purposes. Again, this corresponds to the concentration of own-producers in the former homelands. However, this information does not communicate what sort of access there is, the quality of the land, or how it is used. Almost nothing is really known about own production in any of these respects, nor do we know how much more own production there might be if resources and access to these were improved.

4. Conclusion

The articles in this special issue review what is known about household food security status nationally. Some clear directions for further research emerge.

Given the seeming depth of household food insecurity, it is urgent that a food security target be identified within the overall objective of reducing poverty, with clear policy directions in support. The future development path depends considerably on the achievement of an acceptable level of human development.

It is urgent that an affordable and regular national system be set up to monitor food security status. There is a need for more reliable nationally representative data to monitor and evaluate household food security status at the national level. There is also a need for more localised studies to interpret the causes and implications of household food insecurity in different contexts and at different levels. Such studies will contribute to a better understanding of the national data and permit evidence-based policy decisions. The most efficient immediate approach would involve the inclusion of a special food security module in the General Household Survey. This would offer a low-cost approach to drawing together data on food consumption, consumer choice, aligned to other household information in a large annual population survey.

Very little is known about household food producers. While the Quarterly Labour Force Survey offers information on the number of producers, it does not offer information that would contribute to an understanding of why producers succeed or fail, what policies are assisting, and whether it makes a meaningful contribution to household nutrition and/or cost savings. Opportunities and threats need to be better understood and appropriate interventions should be developed to support household-level production.

Some preliminary policy ideas emerge from this initial work, with implications for future research.

An improved system of social protection that stabilises food consumption is needed. Deep chronic hunger must be eradicated, and we believe this is mostly experienced by households without any wage earner. However, under-nutrition is a very serious, widespread but under-recognised national challenge. This can be chronic, or temporary. A large proportion of the population lives in poverty, even working families. The loss of a job or financial pressures from funerals and other family commitments can easily throw a family that is near the poverty line to a position that is on the breadline. Some aspects of a social protection system involve ensuring receipt of social grants where households qualify, strategies to reduce and/or stabilise food prices, education for poor families to better plan their food purchases, and food gardens and 'soup kitchens'.

Lowering the cost of food and better consumer education should enable households to consume more diverse and nutritionally adequate foods. Households evidently purchase 70 to 90% of their food supplies from supermarkets and major retailers. While supermarkets dominate agro-food value chains, some of their practices might be sustaining high food prices rather than ensuring food is affordable. A clearer understanding of food value

chains and other structural constraints is required in order to formulate appropriate interventions. This could involve a political-economic analysis of the systems involved in ensuring food access at multiple scales.

Extending social grants to eligible households is likely to improve the food security status of hungry adults and children considerably. This might reduce distress in the medium term, but the underlying issues can only be addressed through longer term sustainable solutions based on enhancing the prospects of employment and strengthening livelihoods. The present context of economic recession and uncertainty about the future may reduce the potential impact of market-based solutions.

Small-scale and subsistence agriculture might be one option to contribute to incomes and/or savings, as well as to encourage food diversification. Although 2.5 million households engage in this activity, they do not receive much attention from policy makers. More context-specific support is required to strengthen own production of food, ideally low-cost, low-input and of high nutritional value.

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