

Why is food insecurity a problem in a country that produces enough food: South Africa?

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ABSTRACT

Food insecurity (FI) has traditionally been considered a rural problem and policy solutions have typically targeted these regions – particularly focusing on increasing production. However, increasing levels of urbanization driven largely by environmental factors are increasing the prevalence of FI in urban areas as many move to bigger cities seeking opportunity. Moreover, it is increasingly recognized that the *availability* of food is only one dimension of the FI challenge, and that issues of *access* and *utility* must be addressed to achieve food security. A holistic and solution-driven approach must therefore consider urban food systems in all their complexity.

This research focuses on Cape Town, South Africa's second-largest metropolis, which grew from 3.5 million inhabitants in 2009 to 4.4 million in 2019. Despite being among the more affluent regions in South Africa, the number of hungry and malnourished people has risen with the increasing population. Motivated by the desire to address this humanitarian crisis, the study adopts a qualitative approach involving expert interviews with a diversity of stakeholders to better understand 1) how FI manifests in Cape Town, 2) the main drivers, 3) potential solutions, and 4) the appropriateness of existing policies.

Despite South Africa's Constitution recognizing a right to food, and the existence of numerous plans and strategies at various governance levels, their effectiveness in mitigating FI has been hindered by policy incoherence and implementation failures. Policies continue to emphasize production, even though South Africa produces more than enough food to feed its people. Less is being done to address *accessibility*, which is closely related to one's economic status and hindered by the practices of increasingly dominant private enterprises in the formal food industry. In the absence of governmental controls, pricing strategies (and even price-fixing) leave many unable to buy enough calories to support an active and healthy lifestyle and drive many more towards cheaper, nutrient-poor, and calorie-rich foods. Poverty also affects physical access to adequate and high-quality food through limited access to efficient transportation, refrigeration, storage space, and cooking facilities. Alongside these factors, limited education and nutritional knowledge also reduce the effective *utilization* of the food that is accessible.

The expert testimony corroborates findings from the literature that the physical availability of food is not the issue in Cape Town, and that the policy focus on production is misguided – reflecting an economic growth paradigm. Health-centric perspectives suggest more action targeted at ensuring accessibility by ameliorating poverty and promoting inclusive and sustainable urban food systems. This implies greater regulation of the increasingly centralized and corporatized formal food sector.