POLICY BRIEF ON Establishing Alternative Food Systems in South Africa

By Laurel Oettle









Introduction

This policy brief summarises key lessons from a project to connect small-scale farmers with food relief efforts as an immediate response to the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on food security in resource-poor communities.

The project was implemented by GenderCC Southern Africa in Gauteng and the Land Network National Engagement Strategy of South Africa (LandNNES) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) from May to November 2020, with support from Heinrich-Boll Stiftung (HBF) Southern Africa.

The policy brief provides an overview of the current South African food system, including the impacts of Covid-19, insights from project work on the ground, and actionable policy recommendations for diversifying and promoting greater agency in the food system.

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The South African food system and Covid-19

Covid-19 presented societies across the globe with unprecedented disruption whose socio-economic impacts are still unfolding. However, as with many significant crises, it also nurtures the seeds for new opportunities, and opens new pathways to think about how to mitigate the impacts of future system shocks such as the escalating climate crisis. In South Africa, the 'hard lockdown' from the end of March severely restricted options for resource poor households to access income, food, or health care, without offering adequate alternatives.

Although the lockdown has gradually eased it has resulted in disruptions in the food system, with rising levels of child malnutrition as school food programmes were stopped, loss of formal and informal employment, food price increases creating even greater affordability constraints for the poor, the closure of spaza shops and street traders in communities reducing access to food, and the disruption of the usual informal markets predominantly used by small-scale farmers.¹

The commercial sector continued to get food to those with effective access, but there are clear limits to the market as the sole mechanism for ensuring access to food every day (as a right enshrined in the South African Constitution) to those who do not have the means to purchase it. Corporate concentration has not been effective in responding to the food security and nutrition needs of the population. The Department of Social Development (DSD) has noted that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic 24 per cent of the South African population were food insecure. This had increased to 50 per cent during the lockdown period, with only slight improvements as the lockdown has eased².

² Rogan & Skinner "Covid-19 crisis and the informal economy", p.9. See also Human Sciences Research Council 2020. "HSRC responds to the Covid-19 outbreak", presentation slide *http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/11529/COVID-19%20MASTER%20SLIDES%2026%20APRIL%202020%20FOR%20MEDIA%20BRIEFING%20FINAL.pdf*, p.18; Spaull, N. et al. 2020 "Synthesis report NIDS-CRAM Wave 2" *https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/1.-Spaull-et-al.-NIDS-CRAM-Wave-2-Synthesis-Report.pdf*

¹ Mtero, F. with Hornby, D. and de Satgé, R. 2020. The Structure and Dynamics of South Africa's Food System - the COVID-19 Context. Report produced for the Land National Network Engagement Strategy (LandNNES); Spaull, N. et al 2020. "Overview and Findings: NIDS-CRAM Synthesis Report Wave 1" *https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Spaull-et-al.-NIDS-CRAM-Wave-1-Synthesis-Report-Overview-and-Findings-1.pdf*

The pandemic has dramatically exposed the existing vulnerabilities and exclusions in the commercial food system, including the risks posed by large, centralised food production and processing facilities, and long-distance supply chains in the context of the pandemic and climate crisis.

Shelves in supermarkets remained full, but many people remained desperately hungry, and unable to access that food. Prices of farm products dropped as surpluses mounted, yet at the same time retail prices rose because those surpluses are not being effectively channelled to places where people can access them directly. These are structural vulnerabilities, premised on just-intime, specialised supply chains with a high degree of centralised coordination. On the other hand, the pandemic has also made visible the previously under-recognised roles of informal sector and small traders in food distribution, local agricultural and food production, and local provisioning networks³.

The effects of the pandemic will be long-lasting, and new epidemics and pandemics can be expected in the coming years. The unfolding climate crisis requires urgent mitigation measures. The necessary response to both of these reinforces the need for greater local agency in food systems, shorter supply lines to reduce transport emissions, and healthy fresh produce rather than highly processed foods.



³ Concept note for a Policy Roundtable Session on COVID-19 and implications for South Africa's food system, including how to address the needs of women and youth, and to create sustainable and inclusive local food systems. Part of a Policy Roundtable Series on Securing Democratic Land Governance, Recalibrated Local Food Systems and Agrarian Change; An activity of the National Multi-stakeholder Platform (MSP). 2020.



Photograph: Farmer Mildred Myeza in her fields during lockdown. Photography by Catherine Hornby

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Insights emerging from practice

Government and private sector interventions in response to Covid-19, including provision of food parcels, personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing, were limited in their reach in practice. State efforts were also heavily reliant on entrenched corporate production and distribution, reinforcing the economic and social marginalisation of small-scale producers, whose produce often went to waste. These top-down processes further cast the majority of the population as passive recipients of charity from above.

In response to the immediate escalation of extreme hunger and lack of access to food under lockdown, civil society organisations and small enterprises worked on developing alternative food provisioning systems in localities in Gauteng and KZN. This aimed to draw on and strengthen the agency of communities to organise food provisioning themselves, and to identify pathways to longer lasting forms of social and economic organisation rooted in social solidarity and mutual aid that bypass the corporate food system and enable shorter supply chains.

The project connected food system actors affected by lockdown, in particular small-scale farmers whose markets were disrupted, bakkie traders whose customers were locked down, and households vulnerable to hunger. Although it was an emergency response, the project established some working principles and lessons that could be developed further to restructure and democratise the food system.



Photograph: You Reap What You Sow cooperative, 2020. Photography by Claire Rousell.

These are:

- Collaboration with a wide range of partners, including communities, NGOs and different spheres of government to understand food flows and to gather and collate the necessary information for effective and coordinated implementation of food production, procurement and supply to meet real demand is a critical success factor.
- Homestead, collective and smallholder producers still lack the essentials of support including appropriate training and ongoing technical support, diverse input supply for sustainable and ecologically sound farming practices, and basic infrastructure (notably fencing/security, water infrastructure, and on farm storage and other structures).
- Consistency of supply and quality of fresh produce from small-scale farmers are key issues for further work.
- Production specialisation is increasingly common, with monoculture becoming the norm. This results in inflexibility, heightened risk to fluctuating production conditions, and limited adaptability or sustainability in times of crisis.
- Efforts to use information and communications technologies (ICT) to facilitate links between farmers, intermediaries and consumers are hampered by structural constraints, in particular inconsistent or lacking connectivity in many areas, data costs and unfamiliarity with technologies.
- Challenges in organising local supply lines include communication, invoicing, transportation, and general business skills.

The longer-term recalibration and democratisation of the food system, including integrating factors such as resilience and being able to withstand shocks - like Covid-19, climate change or economic recession - requires further testing and interventions that can be sustained in the longer term. This will have to be an adaptive and experimental process.



Photograph: Farmer training, 2020. Photography by Brittany Kesselman

Recommendations on establishing alternative food systems

- The starting point for decisions on food production and distribution is skewed towards global markets, instead of the **right to food** every day, for every person. To make this right real, practical strategies for effective access to socially and nutritionally appropriate food for everyone, every day are required. Realising this right should be the organising principle for food systems.
- Coordination and partnership with multiple actors are required rather than topdown actions by government without effective engagement with civil society organisations and diverse food system actors in specific contexts.
- Programmes and activities should be oriented towards increasing local agency in food systems to enable greater participation in decisions and implementation on what is produced, how is it delivered and to whom in the locality. This requires organised formations amongst producers, traders and consumers/communities.
- Municipalities should take responsibility for engaging with local food system actors and civil society to organise meetings of diverse food system actors to deliberate on the structure of the local food system, challenges for transformation and democratisation, and to identify concrete opportunities and priorities for collaborative practical actions. In this way, the food and nutrition councils as outlined in the Food and Nutrition Security Plan can be built from communities upwards, rather than top down as envisaged in the plan.
- Further experimentation can be done through multi-actor pilots, with local and district municipalities, with flexible analysis based on food flows and territorial markets. This can be based on the practical work of linking producers with multiple market channels and identifying and supporting those in need of food relief (beyond the market) both during the immediate crisis and in the aftermath.
- Small, decentralised agri-hubs located close to farmers and tasked with procurement, quality control, packaging and aggregation can contribute to strengthening local producer-consumer linkages.



- The development of shorter supply chains and cultivation of direct links between producers and consumers are key for developing localised food systems. This requires support to practical efforts to identify local opportunities and facilitate sustainable connections.
- There are numerous opportunities to support smallholder production, including through **public procurement** and public sector supported **fresh produce markets** close to end users, in particular in informal settlements and townships.
- An effective response to the climate crisis will include a shift in production methods towards local, integrated production (crops, trees, livestock), with soil and water conserving methods of production in conditions where drought and drier conditions will be the norm. Agroecological practices that focus on organic soil fertility, water conservation, seed banks, and local producer-to-consumer markets together with amendments to land reform legislation, can address climate resilience at the same time as household tenure and food security.

Specific policies and legislative amendments:

- Land reform processes must be accelerated and focus on redistribution of subdivided land to small-scale agroecological farmers rather than large monoculture farms that replicate current unsustainable agricultural practices. Undocumented land rights of small-scale farmers should be recorded.
- Defined budgets and programmes are required for homestead and small-scale farmers who produce to supplement household food consumption and to sell surpluses in local markets.
- Policies and strategies on agroecology and organic production should be revived with active multi-actor participation, including homestead, collective and smallholder farmers, informal traders, small enterprises and organised community formations. Without explicit and defined policies and programming on agroecology, it will be difficult to promote environmentally sustainable approaches to farming and ensure that these methods are widely adopted. Funding and prioritisation of these key areas is key.



















Photograph: 2020 UCL Mnini Mildred Myeza (L), Samke Mkhize Afra (R). Photography by Catherine Hornby

Resources

https://landnnes.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Smallholder-Agriculture-Policy-Brief_Hornby_D.pdf

https://landnnes.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Final-30-June-2020-Draft-on-the-structure-and-dynamics-of-South-Africas-food-system-1.pdf





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