Revised food security policy
needed to reshape SA food system

By Jane Battersby

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There is an urgent need to address hunger in South Africa – and the consequences of inadequate diets, where people eat the wrong food. South Africa's policy on food and nutrition is poorly framed and badly implemented. JANE BATTERSBY outlines a way forward that is partly an appeal to government to do its job better and partly an appreciation of how emergent civil society networks are working to increase agency in the food system.

In South Africa the right to food is recognised in the Constitution and the country has had a National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security since 2014. Yet the country struggles with persistently high levels of food insecurity and the triple burden of malnutrition (undernutrition, obesity and micro-nutrient deficiencies). Even before COVID-19 and before the current cost of living crisis, more than 60% of households in Cape Town were unable to afford a basic, nutritious diet. COVID-related job losses combined with rapidly increasing food, transport and energy costs have pushed ever-increasing numbers of people in South Africa into food insecurity.

More than a quarter of children under the age of five are stunted, meaning that they are too short for their age and are unlikely to meet their developmental potential (May *et al*, 2020). At the same time more than 40% of South Africa's women and 18% of men over the age of 18 live with obesity (GNR, 2021). We have high levels of diet-related non-communicable diseases. This increasing burden of malnutrition in South Africa should be understood as a manifestation of food insecurity.

This article argues that the failure to improve food and nutrition security in South Africa is in part the outcome of poorly framed and implemented policy. Drawing on research on food security in South Africa and engagement with international policy frameworks, this article proposes four foundations for a more comprehensive approach to food security policy in South Africa, namely: data-driven governance, transversal governance, multi-level governance and inclusive governance.

FRAMING

Food security has been defined by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) as a state that exists "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 1996). This definition highlights the fact that food insecurity is not simply about the availability of foods, but about the means by which people are able to access and use those foods. It also stresses the importance of diet quality and choice. The FAO argues that the achievement of food security rests on a number of dimensions (sometimes termed pillars).[1] It initially identified four dimensions in 2004: Availability, Accessibility, Utilisation and Stability (FAO, 2005:5). In 2020, the High Level Panel of Experts of the FAO proposed adding two further dimensions: Agency and Sustainability (discussed below). The panel argues that without due attention being paid to all six of these dimensions, food security cannot be achieved.

While the current South African Food and Nutrition Security Policy acknowledges the FAO definition of food security, its recommended areas of programmatic focus suggest that it has failed to engage with the fullness of the definition or the dimensions upon which food security must be built.

The 2014 policy proposed five pillars of action: improved nutritional safety nets; improved nutrition education; the

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> The framing of sustainability insists on moving beyond sustainability as maintenance of existing conditions, towards regenerative systems.

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alignment of investment in agriculture towards local economic development, particularly in rural areas; improved market participation of the emerging agricultural sector; and Food and Nutrition Security Risk Management (RSA, 2013:7).

These priority areas are inadequate. They treat food security as an acute crisis to be met by safety nets, poor diets as a problem of poor knowledge, and poor access as a supply chain issue. This is illustrated by the policy's discussion of the four dimensions of food security, which applies a narrow interpretation of the FAO-defined dimensions (RSA, 2013:11). Within the policy, there is no acknowledgement of urban food insecurity or of access issues beyond economic affordability. Poor dietary diversity is viewed as a knowledge problem. It is to be solved by improving access to indigenous foods rather than by addressing the structure of a food system which makes unhealthy diets more affordable and accessible than healthy diets. These issues have all been identified as important aspects of food security by researchers working on food security and were raised well before the drafting of the policy.

I, together with colleagues at UCT,

the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and Stellenbosch University, have been conducting research on urban food insecurity in South Africa and across the African continent since 2007, in an effort to develop an understanding of the problem and work towards novel solutions. What has been clear from our work is that food insecurity is not simply the outcome of income poverty or high food prices (as suggested within the access section of the policy). It isn't just that people's incomes (wages or grants) are too low to afford adequate food supplies, although that is an important component. Food insecurity is driven by multi-dimensional poverty and the intersection of the food system with other systems. Food security and dietary practices are shaped by things like the cost and reliability of energy for cooking, long commutes that make the cooking of meals challenging, problems of rodents and high temperature gradients that make it hard to store perishable foods and make highly processed foods safer choices, and the kinds of foods that are being made available and marketed (Battersby and Haysom, 2019). These complex interactions between food security and other systems are not recognised

in the current policy frameworks. In recognising these wider determinants of food security, it is clear that there are potential entry points for government and civil society to address food insecurity that have yet to be engaged within policy.

And so, while the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy aims to be comprehensive, the government has arguably taken quite a minimalist approach to addressing food insecurity. The policy frameworks tend to take what Johan Kirsten has framed as "second class" interventions that aim to mitigate the impacts of food system problems rather than address the structural determinants of food insecurity (Kirsten, 2012). In this the new dimensions proposed by the FAO's High Level Panel of Experts – Agency and Sustainability – become crucially important. Agency is defined as "the capacity of individuals and groups to exercise a degree of control over their own circumstances and to provide meaningful input into governance processes" (Clapp *et al*, 2022). Sustainability is defined as "food system practices that contribute to long-term regeneration of natural, social, and economic systems, ensuring the food ❯❯

needs of the present generations are met without compromising food needs of future generations" (HLPE, 2020:10).

These new dimensions fundamentally re-frame food security. By including Agency, each of the existing dimension are enriched and repoliticised. The Accessibility dimension has been dominant in food security discourse and policy locally and globally and has been widely critiqued as enabling the dominance of corporate food sectors (Canfield *et al,* 2021). The Food and Nutrition Security Policy focuses on Accessibility as being determined by the cost of food. This framing therefore leads to two sets of responses: Firstly the cost of food should be as low as possible. This enables large-scale food producers, processors and retailers to position themselves as agents of food security – despite the fact that the food they champion may not promote nutritional wellbeing. Secondly, it means that the provision of grants becomes an important entry point to ensure food security. The addition of the Agency dimension challenges the neoliberal developmentalist approach to food security that has dominated national and global food security policy.

Similarly, the inclusion of the Sustainability dimension insists that the conditions under which food is produced and distributed are central to the achievement of current and future food security. The framing of Sustainability insists on moving beyond Sustainability as maintenance of existing conditions, towards regenerative systems. Sustainability in this framing is transformative. This explicitly challenges the policy and programmatic responses that are framed simply on producing and distributing more food by whatever means possible. It emphasises the need for transformation of the environmental, social and economic conditions that shape the food system.

PROCESS

In addition to the weaknesses of the framing of the policy, there have been considerable critiques of the process of policy development and implementation. When the policy was introduced, a number of organisations argued that the government had failed to adequately consult civil society and called for meaningful consultations (Section27, 2014.). The policy states that a National Food and Nutrition Advisory Committee (chaired by the Deputy President) would be established, and that similar structures would be established at the provincial and local levels. As of 2022 this advisory committee has yet to be formed, and it seems to have fallen off the policy agenda (Olivier and Hendricks, 2020).

While the research suggests that many of the factors shaping food security outcomes fall under the mandate of local government (such as zoning for retail, transport planning, fresh produce markets, and solid waste management, for example), there is no recognition of this mandate within the policy (De Visser, 2019). Provincial and local government are viewed as implementers of national policy, rather than entities that inform policy direction.

Additionally, the policy and its implementation strategy view food insecure individuals as recipients of food security programming, rather than citizens with Agency who are to be engaged in decision-making or food system transformation.

The processes by which the policy was developed and is being implemented have been insufficiently participatory and this has undermined food security further.

TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE FOOD SECURITY POLICY

In the wake of this critique, what then might a comprehensive policy on food security for South Africa look like? I believe there are four principles that need to be the foundation of a comprehensive food security policy for South Africa.

Firstly, *policy must be informed by a wider range of data types and data sets.* I was recently in a policy dialogue session hosted by ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability, an international non-governmental organisation) in which a representative from the South African national government stated that only official statistics should be used to inform policy. While there are of course concerns about the quality of data from other sources, we need to be critical about the kinds of data that are being produced by national government and the kinds of questions it can help us to answer.

Data are generated to answer particular questions, but what if the wrong questions are being asked? The official statistics tell us little about the lived experience of people as they navigate food insecurity. They do not tell us about how households navigate different food sources to maximise their food security. They do not tell us about the critical choices that households make in their attempts to balance the budgets and the ways in which food insecurity is the outworking of multi-dimensional poverty. Official statistics categorise, aggregate and disaggregate and can lead to dis-located and siloed policies and programmes. In order to generate food security policies that are responsive to food insecurity and its drivers, there is a need to be more inclusive about the kinds of data and knowledge that inform policy. The data sets produced by the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Project on food prices and the cost of living, for example, provide rich data that can inform policy (see article on page 36). The incorporation of lived experience research findings into food policy discussions in the Western Cape

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Food insecurity is driven by multi-dimensional poverty and the intersection of the food system with other systems.

provides a new entry point for thinking about the role of qualitative data in shaping policy decisions.

Secondly, *food policy should be genuinely multi-level in governance*. There is a strong tendency for policy to be developed at the national level and to view provincial, district and local government merely as implementers of policy. This approach leads to poorly informed policy and programmes which then have little impact. It also fails to harness the many powers of local government to address food security. This is partly informed by the narrow, minimalist framing of food security by national government described above. In 2020 the City of Cape Town conducted a mapping of all of the programmes and policies across all departments of the city and found over 40 that directly or indirectly shaped the food system and food security. Many of the tools available to the state to address food security are simply not being leveraged. Failure of national government to engage all the spheres of government when developing food security policy has led to narrowly constructed and weakly implemented policy, poorly informed by lived experience and political potential. A comprehensive food security strategy for South Africa should be inclusive of all spheres of government and informed by all spheres of government.

Thirdly, *food security policy should be transversal*. The drivers of food insecurity

extend well beyond the remit of any single department. In addition, drivers of food insecurity interact, meaning that an intervention at one point in the system will impact other parts of the system. Failure to act transversely may mean that the potential impact of any policy or programme is dulled. For example, breast feeding promotion may be undermined by a failure to understand how women's choices are shaped by workplace conditions or by issues of water and sanitation. A transversal approach can help amplify the impact of existing policies and programmes. Additionally, a transversal approach can open new policy and programmatic entry points. The mandates mapping work for the city of Cape Town has already created new understanding of potential entry points. The provincial government of the Western Cape has been taking a place-based approach to test out the whole of government food security strategies. It has conducted a series of learning journeys in the town of Worcester outside Cape Town in which officials from a range of departments engage with residents and key actors in the food system to develop a shared understanding and work towards transversal approaches to addressing food insecurity (Sebopetsa, 2022).

Finally, *a comprehensive food security policy needs to be inclusive of extra-governmental voices*. There has been a wave of interest in multi-stakeholder approaches to food security globally. There is already an appetite for this within government, or at least an indicator of an appetite for this. As indicated earlier, the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy envisaged an advisory committee that informs policy and programmatic decisions, but this has yet to materialise. However, there is a need for caution in the embrace of multi-stakeholder governance. Within global food security discussions, there has been a concern that uncritical multi-stakeholder inclusion has led

to a blinkeredness about the role of the private sector in shaping the food system (Yates *et al*, 2021). This has led to a failure of the state to hold the private sector accountable. The re-framing of the dimensions of food security to include Agency provides an impetus for a wider set of non-governmental actors to be involved in food security policy.

There have been a number of local efforts to increase community dialogue and action around food security. For example, Food Agency Cape Town (FACT) has been conducting a series of food dialogues in different communities to generate local-level strategies to address food insecurity and to create a stronger understanding about the right to food in South Africa (Buthelezi and Metelerkamp, 2022).

In Cape Town, a new programme has emerged – The Masi Ambassadors. These ambassadors have received training in nutrition and also in community activism (Southern Africa Food Lab, 2022). While seeking to mainstream nutrition awareness and programming in the Masiphumelele township, they have actively sought engagement with the ward councillor, the City of Cape Town's Environmental Health Department and with spatial planning officials to ensure the community perspectives inform local government action. These seeds of local engagement suggest a new pathway for multi-stakeholder approaches that takes seriously power inequities in the food system and food security policy (Drimie and Eichinger, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The four proposed elements that should be built on to develop a comprehensive national food security policy for South Africa (data diversification, multi-level governance, transversal governance and inclusive governance) are informed by the six dimensions that underpin food security. What is being proposed here is ambitious. We have previously seen efforts to work transversely fall ▸▸

away in the wake of limited capacity and the complexity of working across government departments. A prime example of this was the Integrated Nutrition Programme which initially included a programme of multi-sectoral government support which was omitted in later versions of the programmes due to unrealistic objectives and lack of resources (Battersby *et al*, 2014: 24).

However, it is essential to develop new responses to food and nutrition insecurity. In the wake of COVID-19 the extent of South Africa's existing food security challenge became apparent not just to government but to civil society, and now the food price crisis and the emergent questions about the stability and sustainability of the national and global food system are forcing the urgency of addressing food and security.

There is increasing demand from civil society for the State to act on food security. The need for change is therefore pressing. The good news is that many of the building blocks for this new inclusive food security approach are already in place. Extensive data are being collected and analysed by civil society organisations and academia which these actors are willing to share and engage with government. Pockets of transversal analysis and action are being developed. Civil society networks are emerging and working to increase agency in the food system and there are entities connecting these civil society actors to each other and to government at different levels. The kind of integrated policy and integrated action platform being proposed is already there within the national food security policy – it simply requires political will and action.

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ENDNOTE

1   When the High Level Panel of Experts of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation added Agency and Sustainability as two further pillars (HLPE, 2020:xv and 7), it stated "While these aspects of food security are sometimes referred to as 'pillars' in the literature, the term 'dimensions' is a better fit. Pillars might imply separate elements of equal weight in all situations, while dimensions allow for an appreciation of more complex interactions between them and also different emphasis in importance in different situations." (HLPE, 2020:11). **NA**