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# Foodways of the poor in South Africa

How value-chain consolidation, poverty &  
cultures of consumption feed each other

25 July 2016

Florian Kroll



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## PLAAS Working Paper 36: Foodways of the poor in South Africa: How value-chain consolidation, poverty and cultures of consumption feed each other

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## ABSTRACT

South African food systems are in a dynamic process of transition due to changes in food value chain regimes which have major impacts on the poor. However, these transitions are also shaped by demand-side drivers emerging from the 'foodways of the poor' – the ways poor people access food, what kinds of food they purchase, how they are consumed, and the culturally-conditioned meanings ascribed to food and eating. To explore these demand-side influences, this paper first considers contrasting current understandings of what poverty is, and who and where the poor are in South Africa. The paper then considers recent research findings that cast light on what poor people eat and where they get food, and how this contrasts with the foodways of better-off people. The emerging patterns – a predilection for cheap grain staples, sugar, soft drinks and chicken frequently sourced through informal channels – suggest that, next to structural determinants such as price and convenience, the symbolic and aspirational domain of food aesthetics and the social functions of visible consumption as symbols of wealth are key forces shaping the foodways of the poor. The provisioning strategies and preferences of the poor – about half of the South African population – emerge as powerful forces rippling back up value chains, and contributing to key trends in the food system such as consolidating and concentrating core value chains such as maize, wheat, poultry and dairy, with social, environmental and health impacts. In contrast to a top-down cascade imposing poverty and hunger, this perspective suggests complex feedback loops between the upstream nodes of food value chains, and the culturally conditioned agency of the poor. This exploration highlights a paucity of research on the links between the foodways of poor people and other aspects of the food system, including poverty narratives, food geographies, informality, and feedback loops in specific value chains. Innovative and trans-disciplinary research approaches and inclusive frameworks are needed to address knowledge gaps and inform transitions towards more transparent and equitable food systems.

**Keywords:** foodways, food system, food preferences, food provisioning strategies, South Africa

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## ACRONYMS

ACP	Assets and Capabilities Poverty
AFSUN	African Food Security Urban Network
CPI	Consumer Price Index
CPIF	Consumer Price Index for food
DDS	Dietary Diversity Score
FLOW	Fostering Local Well-being
FPL	Food Poverty Line
GAIN	Global Agricultural Information Network
GEC	global environmental change
GM	genetically modified
HDDS	Household Dietary Diversity Scale
HFIAS	Household Food Insecurity Access Scale
LBPL	Lower-bound Poverty Line
LSM	Life-style Measure
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
NEMS-S	Nutrition environment measures survey in stores
NDA	National Development Agency
NIDS	National Income Dynamics Survey
SALDRU	South African Labour and Development Research Unit
SASPRI	Southern Africa Social Policy Research Institute
SANHANES	South African Nutrition and Health Examination Survey
SASAS	South African Social Attitudes Survey
SEG	Socio-economic group
Stats SA	Statistics South Africa
UCT	University of Cape Town
UBPL	Upper-bound Poverty Line
UNISA	University of South Africa
UWC	University of the Western Cape

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Changing food value chain<sup>1</sup> regimes are transforming relationships between stakeholders throughout the food system and contributing to various challenges affecting the poor, such as jobless de-agrarianisation, urbanisation, food insecurity and malnutrition (Otero et al. 2015; McMichael 2009; du Toit 2009; McMichael 2005). This perspective portrays the poor as passive victims of these 'neo-liberal' transitions, negating their power and agency. This report contradicts this structuralist narrative as it recognises food insecurity as the result of the interplay between food systems structure and the agency of poor people who negotiate this system, albeit from a position of relative powerlessness. Thus on the one hand, the societal structure of the food system variously constrains and enables individuals to access food, and on the other, individuals and groups in turn contest and shape the food system in their own interests by leveraging different degrees of knowledge and power.

While there has been some research on the structural determinants of food insecurity, describing the general outlines and historical evolution of the South African food system, scholarly exploration of how agency shapes the food system is less advanced. The concept of foodways – the culturally and socially constructed ways in which people choose, access, prepare and consume food (Alkon et al 2013) – provides an entry-point to explore poor people's agency in not only navigating this food system, but also in actively shaping it. This paper therefore aims to describe the current state of knowledge relating to the foodways of the poor in South Africa.

To contextualise the discussion, this paper briefly introduces the wider food system and value chains context and then introduces the integral framework to argue for including “emic”<sup>2</sup> dimensions of inquiry. The introduction then leads into a discussion of various conceptions of poverty – what does the term “poor” mean, how is poverty measured, and what is known about the state and distribution of poverty in the South African context? As emerges from this review, poverty is not only extremely widespread in various different geographic and cultural contexts, but notions of poverty and hunger are closely intertwined, vaguely defined and morally ambivalent in the South African social and political discourse.

The paper then explores the foodways term and approach, emerging mainly from research in the US. Some systemic drivers of food choice are discussed before we consider what is known about food consumption among poor South Africans – what poor households are buying and eating and how these patterns appear to be changing in the context of the nutrition transition. The patterns that emerge reveal how food is invested with symbolism, values and identity, and how these are used to constitute community, social networks and entitlements. These patterns shed interesting light on some of the apparent contradictions emerging from the observed food consumption trends, revealing how poor people contest dynamic gender and class identities by consuming prestige foods and respond to the stigma attached to food-related symbols of poverty by emphasising the consumption of red meat, energy-dense staples, street foods, sweets, and carbonated soft drinks.

Food value chain transformation and the nutritional transition must therefore engage with the cultural and psychological processes (symbols, narratives, worldviews) by which use-value is transformed into symbolic value and social capital. The media – as an industry which manufactures and manipulates symbols of desirability and value – can be seen to be playing an increasingly powerful role in shaping foodways. Foodways and their manipulation by the media

<sup>1</sup>Value chains can be understood as the individual strands of which a food system is composed, each spanning several distinct stages from input supply to converge in retail spaces and finally in households' fridges and on kitchen tables.

<sup>2</sup> Studying or describing a particular language or culture in terms of its internal elements and their functioning rather than in terms of any existing external scheme.

should therefore be considered key drivers of food consumption patterns. However, the intersections between food value chains go beyond the co-option of food symbolism by the food marketing industry, as the desires and needs emanating from the foodways of the poor send impulses into upstream value chain nodes, affecting retail, distribution, processing and production. This paper concludes by presenting questions and research opportunities emerging from the review of foodways and value chains as well as suggesting methodologies that could be used to deepen understanding of the subtle concoction of meanings attached to food.

## Food systems and value chains

The food system concept has perhaps most clearly been articulated by Ericksen (2008) and Ingram (2011), whose primary area of interest was to (1) identify opportunities to adapt to global environmental change (GEC), (2) analyse synergies and trade-offs across a range of societal goals, and (3) ensure that planners and practitioners consider a comprehensive range of adaptation outcomes. Food systems can be conceptualised as a set of activities spanning four phases:

- food production
- processing
- packaging and distribution
- retailing and consumption.

Food systems are closely enmeshed with socio-economic, cultural and eco-systemic drivers in a complex set of local and non-local feedback loops. Food system activities give rise to food security outcomes including availability, access, utilisation and stability.

Food systems are incredibly complex as their fabric consists of a dense weave of value chains. Each value chain links various food and non-food commodities (including fuel, energy, water, labour, capital, knowledge) as each activity in the chain requires the consumption of resources and generates waste in order to add use value and derive exchange value from the commodity. Due to the constant interaction of the many different actors in each stage of a value chain, food systems are also dynamically complex, continually shifting and changing as relationships between agents adapt to changing conditions and the agents' activities shape the environment that other agents navigate. These system conditions can be usefully considered through the lens of food environments (Glanz et al 2005; Glanz et al 2007) – the specific cultural, political, social and regulatory framework influencing agents at each phase of a value chain.

Value chains analysis is also specifically interested in the location of power across the different stages of a value chain, which can be understood as the ability of agents to influence other agents in the system and shape the system (i.e. the food environment) to their advantage. Food systems are therefore historically specific, simultaneously reflecting and shaping the history and societal power dynamics of their particular context.

Reviews of the South African food system have revealed several key features including an accelerating trend towards highly concentrated and vertically integrated formal value chains strongly dominated by retail chains alongside pervasive and vibrant informal food systems (Greenberg et al. 2010; Pereira 2014).

## The case for emic perspectives

The systemic perspective – focusing strongly on the relationships between objectively observable and measurable phenomena – risks imposing a materialistic determinism on our understanding of food security. Systemic and value-chain perspectives may therefore remain mired in an amoral and meaningless flatland unless they engage with agency. To do so, they must explore (1) the interiorities and subjectivities which inform and make meaning of behaviour and relationships, (2) the narratives, worldviews and values by which people



navigate and shape the food system's structural and infrastructural dimensions. This realm – fraught with messy complexities and contradictions – corresponds with the left side of the integral map (see *Table 1*), in which Wilber (2000) locates four domains of knowledge. It is a terrain which is more familiar to anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and folklorism.

**Table 1: Wilber's four quadrants applied to aspects of food systems**

	Subjective (“emic”)	Objective (“etic” <sup>3</sup> )
<b>Individual</b>	Attitude, worldview, motivation e.g. personal food preferences; attitudes to foods; aspirations; body image; identity	Behaviour, properties (i.e. characteristics of things) e.g. nutritional content of food; purchasing, preparation and consumption behaviour; income and expenditure
<b>Collective</b>	Culture, language, shared systems of meaning e.g. food symbolism; food narratives; group identities	Networks, systems, environments (i.e. relationships between things) e.g. value chains; production standards; power relationships between value chain agents; food geographies

The integral approach demonstrates that it is important to explore interactions between (1) the objectively measurable, material dimensions of poverty and food insecurity, and (2) the emic perspective: interior, subjective dimensions of identity and culture – the realm of inter-subjective narratives, symbolic interactions and meaning, the bread and butter of anthropological and sociological inquiry.

Key concepts used to explore the emic space include “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973) of human behaviour as symbolic activity. This symbolic activity imbues its artefacts – objects, symbols, art, narratives, ritual or ceremonial events – with multiple layers of meaning. The symbolism embodied in specific actions, objects and artefacts is thought to constitute deeper fields of meaning which can be thought of as systems of core values (what we hold dear), worldviews (the way we believe things are), and identity (who we are: group belonging, age, gender), which are often implicitly held, poorly reflected on, fluid, context-dependent, and contradictory.

At this point it is important to caution against essentialist or functionalist conceptions of culture, especially in South Africa – even pre-colonial cultures were embedded in historical processes of re-invention and change (Hobsbawm&Ranger 1983). In the dynamic context of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, individuals negotiate multiple, fluid, and contested cultural identities, selecting from a broad menu of symbols and behavioural codes to sate the hunger for meaning, identity and belonging. An agent-centric perspective of culture considers culture not as a static, bounded system of meaning that informs thought and behaviour, but as system of societal and ideational assets which individuals use creatively to make meaning, to construct and pursue various agendas while contesting the power relations in their particular context.

However, there also appear to be deeper structures to collective systems of meaning which are persistent and enduring, embedded as they are in language, in our identity constructs and in the social relations from an early age, and likely reflecting the deeper logic of universal stages of societal evolution (Wilber 2000). In this paper, we therefore consider longer-term patterns and dynamic processes of cultural change.

Before we can begin to explore such deeper emic structures, though, we approach the question of the “foodways of the poor” by first getting a sense of what we mean by ‘the poor’ – we are thus making explicit our own emic conceptions of poverty. To do so, we consider both objective and subjective/cultural perspectives on poverty and how this relates to food.

<sup>3</sup>Studying or describing a particular language or culture in a way that is general, non-structural, and objective in its perspective.

## 2. WHO ARE 'THE POOR'?

In order to explore the foodways of the poor in South Africa, it is essential to get to grips with our conceptions of poverty. Therefore, this section briefly engages with several questions which may seem self-evident but are actually more subtle and multi-faceted than we may at first assume: What is poverty? Who are the poor? Where is poverty deepest?

In their handbook on poverty, Haughton and Khandker (2009: 2) define poverty broadly as 'pronounced deprivations in wellbeing'. However, wellbeing itself is a subjective sense, mediated by personal and cultural context. Therefore, a clearer conception of wellbeing is necessary to imbue this definition with meaning and nuance. Sen (1987) considers wellbeing as the capability to function in society, which once again is a vague and fluid notion depending on the type of society and a person's role and position within it. In further qualifying wellbeing, several understandings hold currency, using various proxies to measure and quantify poverty.

In this section, we explore econometric, multidimensional, structural, spatial and emic perspectives on poverty in South Africa. At a meta-level, these perspectives can be framed in the broader societal discourse around poverty, which reveals at least three narrative strands – moral solidarity and desert, bureaucratic and managerial attempts to rationalise, sanitise and manage poverty, and more critical attempts to expose poverty as a necessary outcome of capitalist relations in post-apartheid South Africa (du Toit 2012). Thus, while moral solidarity pervades all of these viewpoints to some extent, econometric, multi-dimensional and spatial perspectives resonate with poverty management, while structural and emic approaches are more closely aligned with critiques of capitalist relations.

### Economic measurements of poverty

Econometric approaches to poverty use income and consumption as proxies for wellbeing to calculate levels of poverty at the population level. Stats SA's measurement of poverty is based on such an approach, and in the following section, we summarise key statistics presented by Stats SA (2014). Econometric poverty research adopts income poverty lines as cut-off values below which people are considered poor. The food poverty line (FPL) is a semi-normative measure, using a food basket based on observed consumption preferences and market prices. The FPL uses a minimum energy intake of 2000kCal as primary reference. However, the FPL approach is questionable because minimum calorie thresholds are contested, do not take account of vast individual variability in needs, and because with rising incomes, individuals tend to select costlier foods based on taste rather than on calories (NDA 2014). Moreover, macronutrient adequacy does not imply adequate micro-nutrient consumption.

The South African poverty lines are based on the cost of a basic basket of food, whose contents we will discuss later. Stats SA (2014) presents three national poverty lines to be used for poverty measurement in the country – the FPL, lower-bound poverty line (LBPL) and upper-bound poverty line (UBPL). The FPL is the level of consumption below which individuals are unable to purchase sufficient food to provide them with an adequate diet. Those below this line are either consuming insufficient calories for their nourishment, or must change their consumption patterns from those preferred by low income households. The LBPL includes non-food items, but requires that individuals sacrifice food or change food consumption habits in order to obtain non-food goods, while individuals at the UBPL can purchase both adequate food and non-food items (Stats SA 2014). The Rand value of each line is updated annually using Consumer Price Index (CPI) price data.

These figures show that the FPL has risen rapidly, from R210 in 2006 to R321 in 2011. Similar increases have occurred in the LBPL (from R300 to R443) and the UBPL (from R431 to R620). It is not clear how this compares with income growth over the same period.

Table 2: Poverty headcounts in South Africa, 2006–2011

Poverty headcounts	2006	2009	2011
Percentage of the population that is poor (below LBPL)	57,2%	56,8%	45,5%
Number of poor persons (millions)	27,1	27,8	23,0
Percentage of the population living in extreme poverty (below FPL)	26,6%	32,4%	20,2%
Number of extremely poor persons (millions)	12,6	15,8	10,2

Source: Stats SA (2014).

It also seems that the prevalence and absolute number of people living in poverty has reduced, according to this measure, with just under half of the population considered poor (LBPL), and about a fifth (10.2 million people) in extreme poverty (i.e. they cannot afford the basic food basket (below FPL)). Stats SA (2014: 22) attribute apparent reductions in poverty to income growth, age increases, decelerating inflation, increased social grants spending (from about 3 million recipients in 2000 to about 15 million in 2012), as well as unsecured and informal credit.

The country still has a very high unemployment rate – about 25% in 2011–2012, an increase from about 22% in 2004–2008 (Stats SA 2014: 14). Nevertheless, there seems to be evidence of an emerging black middle class with 34.5% income increases between 2006 and 2011, albeit from a lower base. Levels of inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient<sup>4</sup> are still very high, although inequality seems to have slightly reduced – down 3% from 0.72 in 2006 to 0.69 in 2011.

Income poverty disproportionately affects female-headed households: 43.9% of female-headed households vs 25.7% male-headed households (about 60% of all households) are considered poor, while 52.6% of poor households are female-headed. Women are often highly productive in livelihood terms, carrying out various unpaid work, which increases their vulnerability to poverty (NDA 2014). Also, even in male-headed households, female individuals may experience poverty due to intra-household power dynamics.

Econometric approaches to poverty profiling are useful up to a point. In the absence of more definitive and representative surveys, such data provide at least a point of departure in understanding poverty. They permit greater clarity in targeting and allocating resources, and in designing policy interventions – which sits well with the managerial elites mandated to manage poverty. The particular location and mandate of Stats SA as an organ of the state whose very legitimacy is measured by its effectiveness in combating poverty may compromise the credibility of some of the findings, while the way it is gathered and analysed may obfuscate important insights and distract from more fundamental inquiry.

It is important to recognise that statistical groups (e.g. elderly unemployed female) are artefacts of analysis and do not necessarily correlate with actual groups or socially recognised categories. Statistical measures of poverty also tend to ignore interactions between and within households, down-playing agency and neglecting alternative forms of wealth such as social network capital. Multiple, locally-specific pathways into and out of poverty are likely and therefore large-scale, national attempts to understand structural poverty dynamics must draw on local meanings and specifics to develop meaningful and accurate explanatory frameworks.

Policy building on such measures alone is, therefore, risky as they do not capture use-value derived from publicly provided goods, commonage, or leisure activities. Its overly economic perception of poverty neglects subjective perceptions and meanings associated with poverty as well as the multiple dimensions in which people experience poverty.

<sup>4</sup> A measure of inequality of a distribution.

## Multi-dimensional poverty measures

Partly in response to the limitations of econometric approaches, alternative conceptions of poverty emphasise the multi-dimensionality of poverty, defining poverty as non-attainment of various dimensions of wellbeing, access to assets, and levels of capabilities. The discussion of poverty in the context of assets, capabilities and entitlements was influenced by Sen's (1981) seminal work on famines (Moser 2006). Assets are understood as stocks of resources which can be acquired, developed and transferred across generations, and that are the basis for people's livelihoods and agency. Different asset types are usually recognised including natural, physical, social, financial and human, although less tangible assets including aspirational, psychological, productive and political are increasingly being recognised (Appadurai 2004; Alsop et al. 2006; Moser&Felton 2006).

Asset and capability constraints expose poor households and individuals to various risks that can erode their well-being and capacity to engage in livelihood activities. Such risks are very context-dependent, but can include natural hazards, global commodity price fluctuations, policy changes, market failures, changing social relations, conflict, illness, and death. Such experiences can cause shocks to households, which can lead to loss of assets and capabilities, and a consequent decline in well-being.

Various composite indices have been devised based on this multi-dimensional understanding. Simelane (2009) developed the assets and capabilities poverty (ACP) measurement using proxy indicators drawn from data commonly collected in censuses and household surveys.<sup>5</sup> This measure notes a decline in relative poverty from about 50% in 1996 to 40% in 2007. African and coloured households were far more likely to experience poverty in terms of the ACP. Female-headed households, young and elderly household heads were also shown to be more likely to experience poverty. Similarly, crowded households and households with rented accommodation were more likely to experience poverty. Poor households were far more likely to use paraffin, charcoal or wood for cooking, and increases in the number using electricity or gas contributed to the modest reduction of ACP index levels.

Afrobarometer presents another multidimensional poverty index based on experiences of deprivation relating to food, water, income, medical care, fuel, and electricity. These various dimensions are scored using the Lived Poverty Index. Scores are allocated to four degrees of severity – none, very low, moderate and severe (Mattes 2008). 46% of South Africans are categorised as experiencing no or very low multidimensional poverty; 40% moderate, and 14% severe. The Afrobarometer poverty bulletin (Afrobarometer 2013) reflects general improvements from 2002 to 2011, with reported deprivation of water at 40%, medical care at 39%, fuel at 38%, and food at 37%. The reported levels of deprivation for income at 56% and electricity at 60% were slightly higher. Relevant from a foodways perspective, only 55% reported access to a market stall locally, which emphasises the importance of physical mobility in South African foodways.

However, multidimensional indices of poverty also face limitations, particularly relevant to policy development: their inter-comparability and specificity prevents targeted allocation of limited resources and provides no indication of resource requirements. Furthermore, the relative weighting of indices may be considered arbitrary.

<sup>5</sup>The classes of assets measured include types of dwelling, ownership of a telephone, source of energy for cooking, heating, and lighting, the main source of domestic water supply, the type of toilet facility, and means of refuse disposal. Simelane (2009) also uses the several proxies to reflect capabilities, including the proportion of adults in each household with high school education and above, and the proportion of employed adults in each household.

## Structural poverty dynamics and vulnerability

In considering the reasons for persistent poverty over time, innovative measures of structural poverty have been developed. Such measures track the degree of economic mobility and the movement of households into and out of poverty as a result of the interplay of various factors including aging, childbirth, capital and skills accumulation, development or loss of assets, and shocks that de-stabilise household livelihoods. Key papers include Leibbrandt et al (2010), Finn and Leibbrandt (2013a; b), and May (2010).

Structural approaches also permit distinctions between chronic poverty and shorter-term experiences of poverty and can be used to reflect and compare the degree to which households are structurally poor, meaning that their assets and capabilities would not allow them to earn adequate income or otherwise sustain their livelihoods. Explorations of structural poverty rely to some extent on income and expenditure statistics, and are thus faced with similar limitations as discussed above and further elaborated below. However, they also utilise multi-dimensional poverty indices, thus considering various assets and capabilities.

Finn and Leibbrandt (2013a; b) analyse three waves of National Income Dynamics Survey (NIDS) data which incorporate econometric and multidimensional poverty indices to show that 63.6% of people who were poor in 2008 remained poor in 2012, while 21.6% of those not poor in 2008 had fallen into poverty by 2012. Although exit rates from severe poverty increased over the study period, 40% of those living in severe poverty in 2008 remained there in 2012. The NIDS data also correlates household type and poverty, showing how households with one or more children were more likely to be poor, and single-parent households especially so. Single-member households and elderly households were least likely to be living in poverty, the latter probably because of social grants, which can ease the household level of well-being despite the lack of other income.

Geographic location (rural households were more likely to transition into poverty than urban ones), demographic changes (additional household members), and gender promoted transitions into poverty. However, access to jobs appeared to outweigh these negative factors, facilitating a transition out of poverty. The NIDS study also shows how two thirds of households transitioning into poverty experienced specific demographic trigger events (e.g. changing household headship or size), while income trigger events contributed to about one third of cases.

Comparing income-based poverty with the multidimensional poverty index (MPI), using NIDS data, shows that many of those who were income-poor were not poor in terms of MPIs. The data comparison also shows that the levels of multidimensional poverty were lower than the levels of income poverty – between 56% and 59% were not poor in terms of the MPI. Poverty dynamics reveal high mobility into and out of poverty but also showed persistent poverty in the lowest quintile (40% remain in this quintile throughout all three waves from 2008 to 2011) (Finn&Leibbrandt 2013b). Almost a third of the NIDS panel reflected increased real incomes, while 15% experienced a fall. However, Gini coefficients at all three waves stayed very high, at about 0.68. Thus, the relatively high degree of mobility in the lower income deciles had only a “mildly palliative” effect on extremely high and persistent levels of inequality.

The NIDS data has also revealed interesting trends in food consumption expenditure, showing that households were better off in 2008 than in 2012, poor households respond very sensitively to income changes by adjusting expenditure, and even middle-class households spend greater proportions of their income on food. The authors attribute this to the high level of food price inflation over the study period (Mhlongo&Daniels 2013).

Poverty trends in the last two decades show an apparent reduction in structural poverty. However, pockets of deep poverty remain, with people who are far beneath the poverty line appearing to stay trapped there. It is still unclear who these severely impoverished people are, although the statistical

data permit the recognition of broad tendencies and in some cases allow spatial mapping of hotspots (Noble et al. 2013). Deeply rooted inequalities throughout the country indicate that the current economic structure poorly translates economic growth into prosperity for people (May 2010).

## Spatial poverty dynamics

To get a sense of where poor people are, both econometric and multi-dimensional poverty data can be correlated with spatial data. In terms of income poverty, Stats SA data shows that KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo have the lion's share of poverty in the country (26%, 18%, and 16% of all income-poor respectively), with the impoverished percentage of the population ranging from 56% to 63%. Although relatively small proportions of the more urbanised provinces like Gauteng and the Western Cape are considered poor by spatial measures, they have extremely large populations, implying that there are many urban and peri-urban poor.

The National Development Agency (NDA) (2014) profiled poverty across the country, including a review by settlement type. The review shows that most people under the poverty line live in traditional (39%), urban informal (28%) and rural (26%) settlements, although the exact meanings and distinction between these categories are unclear. However, there are significant provincial differences: in the Eastern Cape, for example, more poor people live in urban formal (24%) than rural (14%) areas. Stats SA poverty headcount shows that 68.8% of the rural population and 30.9% of the urban population is under the LBPL and that the poverty gap is also greater and increasing in rural areas.

Spatial Deprivation analysis using multiple deprivation indices gleaned from census data permit a fine-grained spatial mapping of poverty down to the ward level, confirming a general consensus that poverty seems most prevalent in rural provinces. The ACP poverty index incorporates spatial data at national, provincial and district levels, showing that (1) more than 95% of households in some municipalities lack basic necessities and (2) there is a spatial clustering of poor households in certain parts of the country (Simelane 2009). These findings concur that Gauteng and the Western Cape are the wealthiest provinces, while the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Mpumalanga are the poorest. However, in densely populated provinces like Gauteng, there are still large concentrations of urban poverty. Similarly, there seems to be a trend towards the urbanisation of rural poverty as farm workers increasingly live in or around rural towns and commute to farms.

This data also reveals how the deepest forms of income and multiple deprivation poverty occur in the rural former homeland areas, with levels almost twice as high there as in other parts of the country, particularly in terms of income poverty, employment, and living environment deprivation (Noble et al. 2014; Noble et al. 2013; Noble&Wright 2012).

However, this rural emphasis on poverty may also be skewed by the definition itself, which is based in part on access to public services. These are generally more remote and difficult to access in rural contexts, where many elements of social support are informal in character, vesting not in the state, but in various forms of social capital.

## Emic perspectives of poverty

Poverty is socially constructed and is understood in different ways across different places and times (Green&Hulme 2005). Anthropological perspectives of poverty emphasise that it is a product of relationships between people rather than an anomalous product of otherwise coherent and functional society (Green 2006). Anthropological critiques of poverty research in Africa (e.g. Booth et al. 2006: 2) argue for the inclusion of qualitative information in poverty analysis, asserting that there is significant value in comparing consumption- and asset-based measures of poverty with 'poor peoples' own perception of who the poor are, what poverty is, what matters about it'.

For the analysis of poverty and value chain transformation to emerge from the conceptual flatland of economics, it must therefore broaden its gaze to encompass the left-hand-side of Wilber's four quadrants. This means that the subjective realms of culture and psyche must also be explored in order to map out foodways of the poor in South Africa.

The South African Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) qualitative study of poverty conducted in 1998 (Everatt 2003) revealed the following emic understandings of poverty:

- alienation from kinship and the community, especially among the elderly and for single mothers;
- food insecurity, particularly among children, and the poor quality of food;
- overcrowded living conditions and poorly-maintained homes;
- using basic forms of energy and the associated burden on women of collecting firewood;
- lack of adequately paid, secure jobs or the situation where nobody in the household is employed;
- fragmentation of the family owing to absent fathers and children living away from their parents (May&Norton 1997)

This is relevant to foodways for several reasons. Firstly, kinship and community is frequently expressed by sharing food, and an individual's role in their social context is often expressed through the kinds of food they are given. Secondly, food insecurity is conflated with poverty, particularly in terms of the quality of food consumed. Thirdly, energy use is often related to food preparation and storage capabilities. Finally, household structure is frequently adapted in order to cope with reduced availability of cash or food. This re-affirms the meshing of subjective experiences of poverty and foodways, which implies that, contrary to econometric or materialist conceptions, poor peoples' foodways cannot be explained by purely rational, goal-oriented decisions and trade-offs. Food choices are influenced by contested social norms, value-systems, and identity constructs which elude conventional statistical analysis.

This paper argues that food and eating constitute a powerful language to contest processes of impoverishment and dis-impoverishment (Booth et al. 2006). Statements about wealth and poverty are embedded and communicated in the ways we talk about food, what food we buy, how, where and with whom we eat, and the cookware, appliances, and other material culture we use to do so. This perspective has important implications for understanding the role of foodways in shaping and responding to value chains, fundamentally shifting and enriching our understanding of how poverty expresses itself in foodways, and how foodways are used to respond to conditions of poverty, not only by making rational choices to maximise value, but also by cultivating social networks and transitioning within those networks from vulnerable, exploited positions to positions of greater wealth, power and influence. The symbolism inherent in foodways relates to two underlying and conflicting narratives around social order:

1. African cultural contexts are characterised by fluid social categories and multiple meanings relating to power, physical health, prosperity, and fertility. Social relationships, kin networks, and place are deeply enmeshed with concepts of wealth and value. In large parts of black South African culture, there is a pervasive underlying worldview which attributes poverty, illness, and misfortune to a cosmological imbalance resulting from inappropriate social relations. The imbalance is closely interwoven with conceptions of jealousy, witchcraft and sorcery, malicious spirits, angry ancestors, etc. as causes of misfortune. This ethos appears to be related to a culture of apparent egalitarianism, reciprocity and deference to seniority and traditional authority with undercurrents of "covert competition" which characterise informal economies, especially in rural areas (Neves et al. 2011; Charman et al. 2008).

2. A contrary narrative of modernisation and urbanisation is based on an individualistic ethos of competitive entrepreneurialism, entitlement, and the accumulation of consumer goods as symbolic and highly visible rewards for successful participation in the mainstream economy. This “bright lights, big city” narrative holds particular currency for young people migrating to urban areas in search of work. As will emerge, the tension between these traditionalist and modernist conceptions of poverty expresses itself in foodways.

## Synopsis: Sketching the poor in South Africa

In summary, several insights emerge from the above considerations of etic and emic dimensions of poverty. Both econometric (income-based) and multidimensional (experiential and asset/capability-based) measures of poverty in South Africa show that a large proportion of people can be considered poor or very poor, the vast majority of these belong to stubbornly persistent racial categories – “black” and “coloured”. Both perspectives also reveal notable reductions in overall poverty levels from 2006 to about 2012. Household expenditure on food has increased across the board, reflecting high food price inflation.

The highest levels of poverty appears to be concentrated in rural and informal urban areas, while the highly urbanised provinces (Western Cape and Gauteng) show the lowest proportion of poor people. Due to the high populations in these areas, the absolute number of people experiencing poverty is still very high. Pockets of deepest poverty correlate with the former homeland areas, reflecting the spatial inequalities that are an apartheid legacy, further entrenched by uneven post-apartheid development and governance. Urban informal areas also have pockets of deep poverty – often accommodating people recently arrived from rural areas.

However, the experience of poverty across the different provinces, districts and municipalities is diverse and uneven, depending on many contextual factors. Specific statistical categories seem to confer particular vulnerability, including female household headship, unemployment, parenting and single status. Despite economic growth, persistent inequalities reveal enduring structural roots of poverty.

Emic understandings of poverty conflate it with social exclusion, isolation, low-quality food, and reliance on firewood or paraffin for cooking, while wealth is correlated with social embeddedness, largesse and conspicuous consumption. Multiple cultural identities and narratives with different worldviews and value systems overlap in South Africa, with different understandings of poverty. Food is deeply imbued with symbolism and cultural values and is used to signify, construct and contest identity, social belonging and poverty.

Having thus sketched ‘the poor’ from various angles and having discerned some general features, we return to the question of foodways, again examining the objective (right-hand) side of Wilber’s quadrants, to (1) consider how systemic drivers are thought to influence food choices, and (2) review several data sources that can shed light on what poor people are eating, where they get their food, and how they adapt their foodways in response to poverty or prosperity.

## 3. SYSTEMIC DRIVERS OF FOOD CHOICE

The food system is thought to shape food choices through an interplay between structural dynamics and local food environments. In this section, we will consider structural influences including price, corporate marketing and expansion, and the spatial manifestations of power and wealth.

### Price

According to the South African Nutrition and Nutrition Examination Survey (SANHANES) (Shisana et al. 2013), for 35.9% of all respondents (of whom 54% were not involved in food purchase),



price appears to be the most decisive factor influencing food choice across all provinces and location types. Reviews of food prices using measures like the consumer price index for food (CPIF) permit the correlation of rising hunger with macro-economic forces, but are based on calculations with major limitations (Vink et al. 2004). The most important limitation may be that they neglect the large volume of food flowing through informal channels and do not accurately reflect the diversity of local contexts, especially in rural and informal areas.

A review of food pricing policy in South Africa reveals that despite the positive impacts of social assistance schemes, there have been no coherent attempts to review or regulate agricultural or food policy. Instead, “second class” interventions predominate, trying to mitigate the negative impacts of food price fluctuations such as food parcels, agricultural starter packs and food gardening projects (Kirsten 2012). The wider poverty discourse in the managerial, political and academic realms has, until recently, not promoted substantive engagement with deeper structural causes of poverty and food insecurity (du Toit 2012), even though global patterns of the nutritional transition have been linked strongly to global neo-liberal hegemony (Otero et al. 2015).

Indeed, food prices and energy density seem to be important drivers and constraints of food choices in South Africa (Temple&Steyn 2011), to the extent that many people simply cannot afford a “healthy” diet (Temple&Steyn 2011). Based on a survey of 21 food stores in towns and rural areas of the Western Cape, Temple and Steyn (2011) conclude that, because a healthy diet is 69% more expensive than unhealthy choices, poor people in South Africa cannot afford a healthy diet. Healthier options are also not easily accessible in many cases, especially in rural towns (Temple&Steyn 2011). Temple and Steyn’s (2011) study was based on a profile of commonly-consumed foods which was compared with a similar profile of healthy options (a hamburger, full-cream milk, corn flakes, brick margarine, white rice, white bread vs lean hamburger, fat-free milk, bran flakes, margarine (or a lower-fat spread) rich in polyunsaturated fats, brown rice, and whole-wheat bread). Healthier choices were available in the most of the stores surveyed. Supermarkets also made additional options available, for example lentils, bran flakes, whole-wheat bread, brown rice, fruit and vegetables, low-fat milk and margarine. Stores in smaller rural towns offer a narrower range of healthy options. However, it could be argued that informally available foods in a rural context could be less intensively processed and offer healthy alternatives.

## Corporate marketing and expansion

Supermarkets expansion is transforming food systems in developing countries globally and in South Africa (Battersby&Peyton 2014; GAIN 2012; GAIN 2011; Reardon&Minten 2011; Ligthelm 2008; Reardon et al. 2007; Reardon et al. 2004). ‘Big Food’<sup>6</sup> – is strongly and actively shaping the consumer food environment in South Africa, making energy-dense, ultra-processed food products more available, accessible and affordable (Igumbor et al. 2012:1). Shisana et al. (2013) found that convenience was mentioned by few respondents as a driver of food choice (6.4%), showing that food seems to be generally available even among the poor. Dixon (2003) shows how the retail sector employs a class of “new professionals” to project an image of authority through media and advertising, which establishes emotional bonds and shapes foodways. In this way, the concentration of power and capital in the retail sector is usurping both the rational-legal authority of state and the traditional authority of women’s roles in choosing and preparing food. In South Africa, the provision of state pension pay-outs by ‘Big Food’ retail chains has led to a shift in expenditure patterns, unlocking a massive revenue stream for ‘Big Food’ (Steyn 2012), while possibly undermining local markets when the bulk of produce is sourced from metropolitan distribution hubs. Further investigation is needed to establish if local markets are indeed undermined.

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<sup>6</sup> Large commercial entities that dominate the food and beverage environment.

## Space and power

Finally, structural power dynamics leave enduring traces in the physical infrastructure and spatial patterning of settlements, which themselves can enable or constrain food choices. From the perspective of households and urban food systems, access to various channels and outlets for the flow of food encourages greater resilience and thus food security (Battersby 2012). Convenience was mentioned as a key factor shaping food choice by a very few respondents from urban and rural informal settlements in SANHANES (Shisana et al. 2013). The question of convenience is strongly linked to spatial patterning of food outlets in relation to where people live and the transit pathways they regularly take, especially in South African cities. Physical food environments and local geographies are believed to influence choices due to the convenience of locally accessible foods, and changing patterns of urban mobility and timing (Drewnowski&Popkin 1997). This recognition has informed the emergence of the food deserts discourse in the US and UK (Bodor et al. 2008; Block&Kouba 2006; Moore&Diez Roux, 2006; Larsen&Gilliland 2008; Zenk et al. 2005; Whelan et al. 2002; Wrigley 2002; Wrigley et al. 2002; Wrigley et al. 2004). Reviews of urban food geographies in South Africa have shown that supermarkets tend to be clustered in wealthier areas and near transit corridors, although supermarket penetration into poorer areas is increasing (Battersby&Peyton 2014). The location of supermarkets and formal food retail outlets is subject to the competitive forces at play in the urban development agenda, and thus reflect broader social disparities in wealth and power. However, local food geography mapping in high-deprivation areas reveals a dense web of diverse informal food processing and retail which makes food locally available and accessible, bridging the often huge spatial divides between affluent and deprived areas that are rooted in apartheid spatial planning, compounded by the contingencies of post-apartheid spatial planning. As we shall see, informal food geographies are a spatial manifestation of poor people's foodways and the economies which arise from them. This ubiquitous presence of diverse food outlets throughout urban and rural informal settlements and along transit routes may explain why convenience appears to play such a small role in food choice among the poor.

## 4. FOODWAYS: VALUES, SYMBOLS AND LIFESTYLE

*Food is a cultural symbol and eating is a symbolic act through which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge, beliefs, feelings and practices towards life, an understanding of cultural influences on eating habits is essential.*

Puoane et al. 2006:94.

After price, one of the key drivers of food choice mentioned by a fifth of respondents in the SANHANES survey (Shisana et al. 2013) was "taste". As mentioned already, this is a subjective category, belonging in the left-hand emic domains of Wilber's integral framework: individual attitudes and shared systems of meaning (see *Table 1*). This is the terrain we will be exploring in the following section, which introduces the concept of foodways.

The discussion of foodways has recently entered the US food security and public health narrative which has been dominated by positivistic sciences and political economy (the right-hand side of Wilber's quadrants). In this section, we consider three recent US studies in order to develop conceptual clarity around the term, identify useful research approaches, and the implications and applicability for the study of value chains in the South African context.

Jones (2007) discusses how the tradition of food studies explores food as fodder for the creation of symbols. Thus, significance is attached to the physical characteristics of food, to the particular events food is consumed at, and to the places in which it is consumed. Due to the emotional investment of food and its associations with comfort and belonging, these symbols can be viscerally powerful persuaders, shaping opinions, beliefs, perceptions and actions. Insofar as each stage of the value

chain is imbued with deeper emic dimensions of meaning, they become part of the narrative accompanying food. In eating, the preparation, service, order of seating, utensils used, of which cuisine it is a part, and table manners all are 'grist for the mill of symbolization' (Jones 2007:10).

Similarly, where food is purchased (i.e. the retail phase of value chains) holds symbolic meaning – thus, some shoppers will use shopping bags from expensive stores to carry home food bought in cheaper stores just because of the prestige value of being thought to have bought from a more up-market retailer (Anonymous informant, 2016). Conversely, purchasing from a local small shop or trader may be invested with values of solidarity, community and the importance of personal relationships. For health- and environmentally-conscious members of the wealthy elite and middle class, positive value attaches to buying from markets and stores which, through marketing, branding, packaging, and sourcing standards, project an image of ecological justice and wholesomeness.

Such symbolic meanings also extend to upstream aspects of the value chain: an emphasis on local foods places value upon short supply chains; a demand for fresh, whole foods values minimal processing while the preference for organic and fair trade produce ascribes value to particular ecologically sustainable and more equitable modes of production as well as low external inputs. For the poor, though, the price-tag attached to such standards makes these foods and the symbolic value they carry generally inaccessible and perhaps irrelevant, though the question of how value is attached to specific aspects of the value chain is under-researched and merits closer consideration.

Symbols are often ambiguous and convey multiple layers of meaning – just what a symbol means typically emerges in the specific context it is used and will be interpreted differently depending on personal histories. For the wealthy, buying food from a local organic market denotes concern for social and ecological issues, while for the poor it may denote an exclusionary expense, identifying the purchaser as belonging to an elite which distinguishes itself through conspicuous consumption of foods unattainable by the most of the population (see Abrahams 2006).

The symbolism infused in food is thus a valuable ideational asset to assert identity and constitute both social belonging and separation. People frequently evaluate others in terms of food eaten and offered in hospitality. Similarly, class and ethnic slurs are frequently linked to food. Food is often used to symbolise belonging to specific classes in social categories such as gender, age, power and wealth. Culturally-constructed gender categories are often projected onto certain foods due to their shape, colour, taste, and so on. Meat is almost universally associated with masculinity, virility, aggression and bloodshed, while eggs, dairy and vegetables signify feminine gender identity. Again owing to shape and texture, roots and tubers are typically masculine signifiers. Food is used to symbolise specific nuances of masculine and feminine gender stereotypes, invoking values with which different groups of people identify (Jones 2007).

Symbolic considerations are important for food value chains analysis in several respects. Firstly, symbolic values suggest that value chain transformation and nutritional transitions cannot be entirely explained in terms of the amoral machinations of capital and 'Big Food', important as these structural drivers are. However, value chains also respond to culturally-produced sets of norms and identities, leveraging food-based symbolism in packaging, labelling, marketing and media, and thus finally also influencing cultural value systems. Therefore, the dialectic between structure and cultural agency needs to be explored.

Secondly, symbolic considerations sharpen the researcher's gaze on how food is used to signify wealth, power and belonging as well as progress towards aspirations. Therefore, in exploring value chains in South Africa, it is necessary to consider how South Africans use specific foods to talk about poverty and about themselves in relation to wealth and poverty. Food should thus be considered a symbolic asset in the process of class formation and the accumulation of capital.

Thirdly, examining symbolism places emphasis on the importance of food in the contestation of gender narratives and conversely, how gender-based disparities in wealth and power may influence food choices. Such gender analysis is important for value chains to the extent that value chains are responding to and contributing to changing gender roles around food, particularly in the context of increased feminisation of workforces and the socialisation of food preparation through consumer food services (albeit market mediated) in food value chains.

Fourthly, the study of food environments can be meaningfully enriched by considering how food as cultural signifier shapes place and how value chains are using public spaces to engage cultural narratives and value systems through advertising, branding, and displaying products. Any analysis of food value chains is impoverished if it fails to digest the role of food as symbol and how symbolism is fundamental to attributing value and contesting identity.

However, the realm of interiorities shapes and is itself continually re-affirmed by concrete foodways – people's provisioning practise. A recent paper by Alkon et al. (2013) explores foodways data collected in poor Oakland and Chicago communities and emphasises agency as a counterweight to approaches which explain nutritional change in terms of structural and environmental forces encapsulated in the "food deserts" concept. They define foodways as 'cultural, social and economic food practices, habits and desires' (Alkon et al. 2013: 126) people have in relation to food. Their understanding of foodways encompasses 'how they eat, where and how they shop, what motivates food choices' (Alkon et al. 2013: 127). The paper explicitly responds to the "food deserts" discourse which emphasises the role of local food environments and highlights the risks of casting poor consumers as passive victims of local conditions (Bodor et al. 2008; Block&Kouba 2006; Moore&Diez Roux, 2006; Larsen&Gilliland 2008; Zenk et al. 2005; Whelan et al. 2002; Wrigley 2002; Wrigley et al. 2002; Wrigley et al. 2004).

Alkon et al. (2013) found that the US urban poor they studied had significant knowledge about healthy food and understood food and eating as a cultural practice. Food deserts were an inconvenience to poor people, but they travelled out of their local areas to access supermarkets to take advantage of better prices. The quality of food, especially freshness, was highly valued. Cost – not lack of knowledge or physical distance – presented the main barrier to food access, though physical distance also translates into higher cost, especially in South African urban contexts where impoverished settlements are often also spatially marginal and poorly connected to transport.

While Alkon et al. (2013) emphasise agency and knowledge, Cannuscio et al. (2010) – exploring the connection between health and foodways in poor communities of Philadelphia – show that foodways and the food environment are closely linked. Their findings reflected that a lack of supermarkets and the inaccessibility of supermarkets to public transport entrenched reliance on corner stores, Stop and Go's, and takeaways. In the surveyed communities, corner stores appeared integral to establishing foodways from an early age as streams of children visit corner stores on the way to school. Visits to corner stores were ritualised as "third places" in which youth interacted with familiar faces, food, and drink. The corner store eating culture coincided with a high intake of calorie-dense foods. Although the convenience of corner stores contributed to the original reason for visits, it was entrenched by the role these stores play as a space for social bonding.

Cannuscio et al. (2010) also revealed the connection between foodways, food environments and cultural dynamics in these communities, particularly in the context of Chinese take-outs. Conversations around food reflected underlying ethnic and racial tensions between these culturally-distinct communities, and foreign traders were seen to be taking advantage of social incoherence and poverty. Although similar instances of xenophobia are not immediately apparent in the wider foodways, there are obvious resonances with recent xenophobic attacks on foreign-owned stores in South Africa which make this observation noteworthy. The study showed how food access was driven by multiple subjective and objective factors including

affordability, transportation options, social harmony or discord, mismatch between availability and expectations, and the perceived safety of outlets and routes.

## Foodways of the poor in South Africa

In the preceding section, we explored several ways in which the foodways narrative can provide insight into how values and systems of meaning inform purchasing and consumption behaviour, which are significant demand-side drivers shaping the structure of value chains and the food system. We have shown how, to avoid structural determinism, emic perspectives can shed light on the question of agency and the systems of meaning that inform food choice, and how food choice and consumption itself are used to make meaning. The symbolic value of food and how it is used to construct identity, assert belonging, and evoke deeply-inscribed values, clearly emerged. The use-value of food thus incorporates a symbolic dimension to the extent that the need for food 'is a product of the circulation of signs and objects at the ideological rather than the economic level' (Dant 1996: 16). In the next section, we consider data about what poor people in South Africa are eating and where they source it, before trying to interpret the emerging consumption patterns in light of food symbolism.

### What are poor South Africans eating?

Several sources of information can be used to derive an impression of the types of food poor South Africans eat. In this section, we consider the basic food basket on which Stats SA base their poverty line as well as household expenditure data collected by Stats SA. We also present sources of data measuring the dietary diversity score (DDS), based on a standardised 24 hour-recall questionnaire recording food consumption in the different food groups. The data sources referenced include the African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN 2008) datasets, published SANHANES findings, and other relevant specific surveys of dietary diversity among poor people.

The per capita food basket which Stats SA (2014) uses to derive its poverty threshold is based on statistical analysis of monthly household food consumption (see *Table 3*). The basket leans heavily towards energy-dense foods and meat, and reflects the central importance of maize and wheat, followed by rice and potatoes as energy-dense staples. The centrality of energy-dense staples, along with oil, margarine, milk and peanut butter, suggests that such a baseline could indeed meet basic energy requirements. However, sugar, frequently consumed in significant volumes, is not recorded at all, and bread is arguably under-represented. Despite inclusion of some fruit and vegetables, the national food basket baseline could well be considered a recipe for non-communicable disease and depressed immunity due to the under-representation of vegetables, fruit and pulses, and the heavy reliance on high-carbohydrate grains, poor-quality oils and meat. Although nutritional guidelines are themselves composed under strong involvement of industry associations (Love et al. 2001; Vorster et al. 2013; Steyn et al. 2002) and therefore inherently contested and problematic, a more balanced food basket could contain far less meat, healthier grains (sorghum, millet), and far more fruit, vegetables and pulses.

Food is the single largest expenditure for poor households (33.5% with a 52% increase from 2006 to 2011); food only made up 10.8% of non-poor household expenditure in 2011, but this increased by 41% between 2006 and 2011 (Stats SA 2014: 52). Poor households, spend more than a third of their money on bread and cereals – mainly maize meal (11.4%), brown bread (8.4%) and rice (5.1%), implying that grain value chains take up a large share of the food expenditure of the poor, including production, storage, handling (and imports), milling, and baking. Poor and non-poor households spent similar amounts on bread and cereals (see *Table 4*).

Table 3: Composition of the Stats SA Poverty Baseline Food Basket

Category	Food	Amount
Fruit	Apples	1kg
	Bananas	1kg
	Oranges	1kg
Vegetables	Cabbage	1kg
	Potatoes	1kg
	Tomatoes	1kg
	Onions	1kg
Animal Protein	Beef chuck	1kg
	Chicken portions fresh	1kg
	Chicken portions frozen	1kg
	Canned fish (excl tuna)	425g
	Eggs	18
Grains	Loaf of brown bread	700g
	Loaf of white bread	700g
	Maize meal super	5kg
	Rice	2kg
Pulses	Peanut butter	400g
	Baked beans – tinned	410g
Oils and Fats	Brick margarine	500g
	Sunflower oil	750ml
Dairy	Full cream milk long life	1ℓ
Other	Ceylon/black tea	62.5g
	Instant coffee	750g

Source: Stats SA (2014).

Table 4: Food expenditure for poor (LBPL) and non-poor households in descending order

Category	% and average annual Rand amounts of food expenditure			
	Poor households		Non-poor households	
Bread and cereals	34.7%	R2,948	21.1%	R2,954
Meat and fish	22.4%	R1,897	28.9%	R4,059
Fruits and vegetables	12.3%	R1,039	12.3%	R1,719
Milk, cheese and eggs	7.4%	R625	10.3%	R1,445
Other food products	7.4%	R629	11.0%	R1,537
Sugar, jam, honey, chocolate and confectionery	6.1%	R514	4.6%	R645
Oils and fats	4.9%	R419	3.8%	R526
Non-alcoholic beverages	4.9%	R414	8.1%	R1,135
Total	100%	R8,485	100%	R14,020

Source: Stats SA (2014).

However, poor households spend less than half of what non-poor households spend on meat and fish than (mainly poultry at 13.2%, beef and boerewors spending was about 25%–33% of that of non-poor households), 7.4% for milk, cheese and eggs. Such expenditures emphasise how important poultry value chains are in the foodways of the poor. Poor households also spend more on white sugar, perhaps to compensate for lack of protein intake. Consumption data suggest that fruit is a luxury for poor households – non-poor households spent almost four times more and bought a greater variety of fruit. Poor people seem to buy mainly apples and bananas. Non-poor households spend almost three times more on aerated cold drinks.

The above data reveal some relevant patterns which are important to record at this point as they will emerge again later: (1), the central importance of maize and brown bread as a staple food for poor and rich alike; (2) conspicuously high expenditure on meat (22.4%), which increases for non-poor households; (3) notably increased dairy intake among the non-poor; (4) the importance of sugar, sweets and aerated cold drinks, where the latter two categories more prevalent among non-poor, and sugar seems to compensate the poor for this reduction; and (5) consumption of a

limited range and quantity of fruit by poor people – only about 10% of total fruit and vegetable expenditure, with non-poor households consuming almost three times more.

These general trends do not provide much insight into actual consumption patterns, but several studies which have recorded the dietary diversity of various poor populations in South Africa, give somewhat more detail. The Household Dietary Diversity Scale (HDDS) measures the degree of dietary diversity in a sample population, and refers to how many of twelve food groups are consumed within the household over the previous 24 hours. The HDDS is a useful food security proxy indicator which permits a broad insight into the nutritional quality of diets (Faber et al. 2008). A set of twelve food groups is usually assessed: cereals; roots and tubers; vegetables; fruits; meat, poultry, offal; fish and seafood; pulses/legumes/nuts; milk and milk products; oil/fats; sugar/honey; eggs; miscellaneous (beverages). Some researchers reduce this to nine categories based on their primary nutritional composition (e.g. grains and tubers provide starch). The dietary diversity score is summed to yield the dietary diversity variable ranging from 0–12. A higher score signifies greater dietary diversity. The broad categories are usually elaborated based on locally available foods. Thus, in a remote rural area, the grains category would likely be maize but might include *madumbi*<sup>7</sup> and sorghum; in an urban informal environment, it would be more likely to encounter maize and brown bread, and typically rural foods like sorghum would be less common.

Labadarios et al. (2011) analyse South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) data collected since 2003 (with 2009 most recently reported on) to explore the degree of dietary diversity in South Africa. Findings show that South Africans consume a diet of low diversity, with low consumption of eggs, legumes and Vitamin-A rich fruit and vegetables. Tribal authority areas and urban informal areas appear to show the lowest aggregate levels of dietary diversity (Labadarios et al. 2011). The findings appear consistent with the more recent SANHANES study (Shisana et al. 2013), ranging between 3.2 and 4.9 – a fairly low score. Labadarios et al (2011) also correlated dietary diversity with a life-style measure (LSM) and found that 73.9% of people in the lower LSM third had a DDS<4. The lower third of LSM reported a mean DDS of 2.93. SASAS DDS findings present an interesting profile of the types of diets consumed by South Africans across all provinces. This profile represents a fairly consistent picture of food consumption, confirming the patterns already noted above: almost ubiquitous consumption of grains (i.e. maize meal and bread), high levels of meat consumption except in the poorest provinces, moderate consumption of vegetables and dairy, and low consumption of vitamin-A rich fruit and vegetables as well as legumes and nuts, and eggs.

This profile is telling because it cannot be convincingly explained simply as the result of poverty or nutritional need: while meat can be nutritious and a valuable part of a balanced diet, legumes, nuts and eggs are quite affordable proteins which are arguably healthier alternatives to meat. Yet meat is evidently preferred – for reasons that are neither nutritional nor economic and must therefore be linked to deeper patterns of motivation and meaning. Poultry and beef value chains cater to this culturally-conditioned need, which is a demand-side driver that ripples upstream into highly concentrated poultry and cattle feed-lot operations clustered especially around big urban centres, and then further upstream to feedstock providers, thereby tapping into soya and maize value chains. Each of these in turn has social, environmental and animal welfare impacts.

Several household factors seemed to be associated with low dietary diversity: most significantly casual employment, disability or chronic illness, usually buying food from a spaza, living in a traditional or informal dwelling, accessing water from a stream, spring, or neighbour's tap, lack of toilet or use of chemical toilets, lack of access to electricity. These factors show that low dietary

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<sup>7</sup> An indigenous starchy vegetable.

diversity is closely linked to other forms of deprivation, and suggest that people in remote rural areas and marginalised informal settlements are most severely affected by low dietary diversity.

Overall, judging by the share of people with  $DDS < 4$  in different locations, it seems that people in tribal areas<sup>8</sup> (59.7%), rural formal (50.7%) and urban informal areas (46.6%) tend to have lower dietary diversity scores than those living in urban formal areas (29.3%). Given the large and growing numbers of people in urban areas, the finding is concerning. Urban informal dietary profiles reflect low consumption of fats, oils and dairy compared with other groups, but still quite regular meat consumption. Urban formal residents reported notably higher levels of meat and dairy consumption. Fruit consumption was low overall slightly higher among formal urban residents. Similar levels of vegetable consumption (40%–50%) were reported by all groups, though the DDS does not permit precise evaluation of the vegetable diversity consumed. Low consumption of Vitamin-A rich fruit and vegetables correlate with widespread micro-nutrient deficiency, especially among women of childbearing age (27%) (Labadarios et al 2011: 157).

Drimie et al. (2013) present relevant findings of a survey of inner-city suburbs in Johannesburg which reflect a similar overall pattern but shows how residents of informal urban areas have especially low dietary diversity (mean DDS 3.2); 68% of these residents had consumed three or less food groups on the previous day. The three most commonly consumed foods reported by residents of informal urban areas were starches (cereals, roots and tubers) (99.5%), meat, poultry and fish (50.8%), and vegetables (43.5%). Residents of informal areas were less likely than residents of formal housing to have eaten food containing fats and oils (41% less), meat (35% less), vegetables and fruit (27% less) and dairy (26% less). By contrast, informal area residents reported slightly higher consumption of legumes. Only when six or more food groups were consumed (highest quintile) did the majority report dairy consumption. This pattern shows that meat – a comparatively expensive food – is apparently considered so important that it is still one of the most widely consumed foods among the very poorest urban residents.

Drimie et al. (2013) also provide some important insights into the conditions of food preparation and consumption. For example, the study revealed an overwhelming (75.4%) reliance on paraffin for cooking in informal settlements, followed by gas 15.4% as opposed to 91.8% using electricity in formal housing. The availability of electricity also impacts on food choice by preventing use of fridges, thus making fresh fruit and vegetables, which are highly perishable, less practical, and imposing similar limitations for the consumption of meat and dairy. It also implies health risks due to poor air quality and fire hazard.

Returning to the SASAS discussed above (Labadarios et al. 2011), a comparison of the dietary diversity profile of low LSM respondents with the other LSM groups reveals some interesting differences. Higher LSM respondents consumed more fruit and vegetables, and consumed almost double the oil and fat, vastly more dairy and far more meat. Wealthier respondents also reported a slightly lower consumption of legumes and nuts. This pattern is corroborated by data from South African cities surveyed in AFSUN (2008) urban food insecurity research project (Frayne et al. 2010). Dietary diversity patterns correlated with income thirds of poor households from Johannesburg, Msunduzi and Cape Town show almost identical dynamics, revealing notably lower levels of meat, fruit and dairy, but high levels of grain, fat, sugar, and condiment consumption among the lower income terciles.

These findings suggest that poor people prioritise certain foods, which could indicate that those emerging from poverty preferentially allocate the additional available income to more costly, less healthy foods – a visible expression of their shifting status. However, more detailed research is

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<sup>8</sup> SANHANES uses “rural informal” category.



needed to validate and explain this emerging pattern. These studies suggest, as one would expect, that consuming a diverse diet itself appears to be a sign of greater wealth.

However, when considering specific food groups, this data shows evidence of a value system which, among other signifiers, expresses wealth through the increasing consumption of meat, dairy, and, to a lesser extent, fruit. Conversely, it reveals that those who are considered more well off, are likely to reduce total consumption of legumes. Such dynamics are most effectively explained by reference to values other than economy or health – they reflect a value-system in which foods are consumed as symbols of wealth and power, but also a food system where greater income makes access to certain foods more convenient.

### **Food access channels of the poor**

The spatial dimension of value chains and their physical footprint in the landscape is explored in greater detail in Kroll (forthcoming). However, food sources reflect the various channels through which poor people access food and are an important dimension of foodways. Again we consider SASAS, SANHANES and AFSUN data.

SANHANES data shows that about half of South Africans have ever consumed food outside of the home, with higher income groupings reporting more frequent consumption of foods outside the home. Most grocery buying is done by women, but men were slightly more likely to have eaten outside the home (Shisana et al. 2013). Similarly, SASAS survey findings suggest that men are slightly more likely than women to often eat street foods or fast foods.

SASAS data has also been analysed to determine the prevalence of sourcing fast foods and street foods (Steyn et al. 2011; Steyn&Labadarios 2011). SASAS data is also correlated with LSM scores, which combine income, asset and geographical indices. According to this data, buying street food was moderate 24% (2–3 times a month) for low-LSM tercile and frequent (two or more times a week) for 10% – clearly higher than the high LSM tercile, which reported 13% moderate and 8% frequent. But street food consumption is dominated by the middle LSM tercile (30% moderate and 15% frequent).

Fruit was the most regularly consumed street food (35.8% of black respondents), but carbonated soft-drinks were also often consumed (16.4%), followed by savoury snacks (14.5%). Unfortunately this data is presented according to racial categories and not according to income or other poverty measures (Steyn et al. 2011; Steyn&Labadarios 2011). Steyn et al (2011) found great differences in the frequency of consumption of street foods across the various provinces: frequent (>2 times/week) street food consumption ranged between 2% in Northern Cape and 21% in Limpopo, and frequent fast food consumption ranged between 1.5% in North West to 15% in Gauteng. The study revealed that fast food consumption was most frequent in the high LSM group, while street food consumption was most frequent in the medium LSM group.

The last finding on fast food and street food consumption is apparently contradicted by a case study on fast food consumption among young people in shopping malls from three areas with different LSM ratings in Johannesburg (van Zyl et al. 2010), which found that fast food consumption was highest in the mall located in the lower socio-economic group (SEG): 48% of people from the low SEG reported having eaten fast food at least twice a week or more often, while only 33% of medium SEG and high SEG did. The top four foods consumed were burger, pizza, fried chicken and fries, with the low SEG showing a particular preference for fried chicken. Obviously this is not a representative sample – it is drawn from one of the most densely urbanised areas in South Africa and the respondents were overwhelmingly employed – but it does reflect very interesting trends relevant to other cities, and reflects the aspirations of sophisticated urban consumer lifestyles. Of particular interest here are the top three reasons for fast food consumption reported by the low SEG: taste (57%), time limitations (52%), and convenience (48%). The last two reflect the impact of urban

environments – long commutes and long workdays. But the most important one – taste – is likely more complex than the label suggests, as it is entangled in the biological, cultural and psychological ambiguities of aesthetics, but revealing how important aesthetics are for value formation.

The AFSUN survey (Battersby 2011; Cooke 2012; Crush&Caesar 2014; Crush&Tawodzera 2012; Rudolph et al. 2012) gathered detailed information on the frequency with which poor urban residents in South Africa access food from different sources, including supermarkets, fresh produce markets, fast food retail, informal vendors, alternative retail channels, feeding schemes, soup kitchens, remittances, and own production.

The findings revealed that most of the urban poor access food via supermarkets about once a month, while between 20% and 30% did so at least once a week. By contrast, informal trade was a key source of food for most people in Johannesburg's large metropolises (over 70% once a week or more) and Cape Town (over 50% once a week or more), while playing a far smaller role in Msunduzi (just less than 30% once a week or more).

The aggregate data cross-tabulated by food security status<sup>9</sup> shows that although market sources (supermarkets, small shop/restaurant, informal market/street food) were the dominant food access channels for survey participants, food secure people purchased from market sources more frequently than food insecure people.

Food insecure respondents were more likely to access food through social networks (roughly a third of food insecure households had shared a meal with neighbours and about 20% had eaten food provided by neighbours or borrowed food). About 10% of food insecure households reported relying on social networks weekly or more often. The overall prevalence and frequency of this strategy is low by comparison with market sources.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that for a small but significant proportion of the urban poor, social networks are an important food access strategy, highlighting the importance of social capital. The data also show that a vanishingly small percentage of poor urban people source food through urban agriculture (about 10%), food aid (<5%), or community food kitchens (<7%).

Data about food access pathways in rural areas is sparser. Evidence from the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu and Limpopo (Louw et al. 2007; D'Haese&van Huylenbroek 2005) suggest that the penetration of formal value chains into rural areas through supermarkets is transforming foodways significantly, as rural households increasingly purchase most of their food from supermarkets, undermining not only local agricultural production and trade but also informal trading networks in rural areas. Reasons cited for switching to supermarkets include lower prices, greater variety, and a sense of exoticism (D'Haese&van Huylenbroek 2005).

Generally, however, market sources of food are fewer and further apart in rural areas, and residents of remote rural areas need to travel long distances to access supermarkets and other food retail outlets in rural towns. Research in rural Eastern Cape shows that most (86%) of rural poor accessed food on foot from local spaza shops, with only 10% being able to afford taxis, and less than 5% able to use their own cars to travel to shops (Ballantine et al. 2008). Access to cars and refrigeration were correlated with food security, reflecting the importance of these assets for food access in rural areas. Studies in Limpopo (Masekoameng&Maliwichi 2014; de Cock et al. 2013) outlined the importance of social grants and cash incomes for food access, although supplemented by food production in some households. School feeding schemes also play an important role in food access among rural households. Gathering a wide variety of locally-growing wild foods is an important supplementary food access strategy in rural areas.

<sup>9</sup> According to Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) score. N food secure=615; N food insecure=1909.

<sup>10</sup> Considering the stigma attached to food insecurity and hunger, these figures may under-report actual prevalence.

The above data make several points that are key to broader considerations of food value chains in South Africa. Firstly, they reveal that while formal retail food sources are patronised almost universally by the urban poor, this is relatively infrequent. Secondly, informal retail appears to be the most regular and frequent channel by which the poor access food, thus playing a vital role in linking rural households to formal value chains. Thirdly, social networks appear to be a small but significant component of informal value chains, whereby the exchange- and use-value of food sourced through market channels are translated into symbolic value and social capital.

### How do knowledge and beliefs shape foodways?

In the preceding sections, we have considered recent data about the kinds of food poor South Africans eat and how they access food. This review revealed several patterns:

- the centrality of maize and brown bread as cereal staples;
- the value apparently attached to consuming meat and dairy, which is often foregone by the poor in order to make ends meet;
- the tendency to move away from pulses with upward economic mobility, and the apparent neglect of eggs as alternative dietary protein sources;
- price and convenience were key stated motivations for food choice;
- even poor people frequently consume meals outside of the home;
- frequent consumption of fast food and street foods, especially among urban poor, including fruit, carbonated soft drinks, and savoury snacks;
- the strong reliance on informal market channels for frequent food access;
- less frequent but almost universal purchasing from formal sector channels; and
- the importance of social networks in providing for especially the urban food insecure.

While socio-economic and spatial determinants may explain some of the patterns noted, we have also pointed out several apparent inconsistencies which cannot be explained without reference to individual and collective systems of meaning and value. In terms of the integral framework, these issues can be mapped into the right-hand quadrants which deal with observable phenomena and systemic configurations. In the next section, based on the insights which emerged from the review of foodways literature, we return to the left-hand side of Wilber's integral map, to explore attitudinal and cultural factors driving food choice.

One of the questions which emerged from the review of Alkon's (2013) work related to the degree of nutritional knowledge of poor people. While much food knowledge is locally-specific and embedded in people's social and physical context, some generalisable dimensions of nutritional knowledge are based on scientific research. The SANHANES (Shisana et al. 2013) study posed ten questions probing awareness of such basic knowledge concerning fats, sugar and fruit in relation to non-communicable diseases. Most people (63%) scored in the medium ranges of nutritional knowledge, with no significant difference between men and women. The study found differences based on location type and province, with higher mean scores in urban formal areas (5.43/10) compared with urban informal (5.05/10) and rural informal (4.97/10). The Western Cape reflected highest level of knowledge while the Northwest reflected the lowest level.

While these findings reflect the link between nutritional knowledge and exposure to education based on a Western nutritional paradigm, this reveals yet another interesting discrepancy which undermines the common assumption that people are rational agents who will maximise (economic or nutritional) benefit: evidently, people's eating patterns contradict the nutritional knowledge they actually hold. This can only be partly explained by economic arguments – as shown above, even poor people spend money to eat comparatively expensive foods (meat and dairy, sweets, carbonated soft drinks, bread and maize porridge); street foods and take-aways which, though containing some nutritional value, are arguably not nutritionally necessary as they could be replaced by other, more affordable, more available foods (oils, nuts and pulses).

To explain the various discrepancies above, we need to consider what specific evidence is available to explore how the symbolic and social values of food already discussed are used to construct and express worldviews. We have shown how food is culturally inscribed with specific meanings which influence dietary norms according to age, gender, ethnicity, religion, race and social class. We will therefore consider how the symbolism of specific foods is used to tell stories by which identities are constructed, pervasive values invoked, and network capital leveraged.

## Consuming symbols: Food as narrative

The dietary patterns above revealed that certain foods are ascribed positive value by poor people (meat, dairy, carbonated soft drinks, sweets and fast food), while others (nuts and pulses, vegetables) appear to hold ambivalent or negative values. We now consider what symbolic value are ascribed to these foods, with the cautionary proviso that these are very general patterns which are likely to gloss over local specificities in the wealth of diverse cultures and places of poor people. It is important in this regard also to point out that South African food cultures mirror the historical emergence and interaction of multiple broad cultural domains, some (Khoisan and SiNtu-speaking cultures, commonly called Bantu) pre-colonial, and others colonial diaspora (Anglo-Germanic, Malay, Portuguese, Indian and Chinese), which themselves are by no means bounded, monolithic or coherent.

Locally, each of these broad cultural domains is represented by unique and internally diverse communities cultivating a wealth of foodways. However, the most poor people in South Africa are identified as “black” or “coloured” in national statistics, which means that the foodways of the poor in South Africa are shaped primarily by the symbolism embedded in Black and Cape Coloured<sup>11</sup> cultures and how these have adopted foodways of the other domains. As will emerge below, the lion’s share of what is considered typical black and coloured food is a creole concoction of foods from around the globe, a clear vindication of historical and constructivist perceptions of culture. Taking into account the diversity and historical specificity of foodways, what follows can only serve to sketch some of the broadest and most pervasive symbolisms which will help to make sense of some of the intriguing patterns noted above.

### *Maize and white bread*

Maize meal is a staple that carries great significance as a traditional, cultural food – no meal is considered complete without it. Even though sorghum and millet were the main indigenous staple grain of southern Africa, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, their consumption has been replaced by maize (first introduced by Portuguese colonists who obtained it from the “new world”). The fineness and whiteness of maize meal is associated with its degree of refinement and purity, and poor people will pay a premium for more refined maize meal, especially when preparing it for special occasions. A particularly important traditional staple food associated with the rural areas but by extension also with tradition and the ancestral realm is *isistambu*, *umngqushu* or *dikgobe*, made of boiled samp (crushed corn kernels) and sugar beans. The term samp itself is derived from the Narragansett (Native American) *naussamp*, mirroring the origin of this food. Samp is increasingly associated with backwardness and poverty, especially by the urban poor and middle class. This stigma, and the long cooking process required, is reducing its popularity among urban poor, although it is regaining some popularity among wealthy African urbanites. For the urban working class, bread has taken on the role of a staple food. Its whiteness is often considered a sign of sophistication, although such perceptions appear to be changing.

Two urban street foods that are based on wheat or bread – the *kota*<sup>12</sup> and the *vetkoek*<sup>13</sup> – are very popular, especially with youth (Feeley 2012), and contain high energy/calories (Feeley et al. 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Here, Islamic concepts and symbolism are especially important (Bangstad 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Sowetan quarter.

The former consists of a quarter loaf of white bread filled with various ingredients, typically polony and fries. The kota appears to have evolved out of the “bunny chow”, a quarter loaf filled with curry which is thought to have originated with Indian food entrepreneurs catering to black workers around Durban. Both kota and bunny chow are typically consumed on-the-go, being an adaptation to the mobility required of poor people traversing the urban footprint of apartheid planning legacies. The brewing of traditional beer, *umnqombothi*, requires malted sorghum or maize, and plays a key role in traditional ceremonies, with many different recipes carefully maintained by women’s lineages. Although still important for specific celebrations in urban areas, traditional beers have largely been replaced with cheap industrial beers easily available in ubiquitous bottle stores and shebeens.

### *Beans and pulses*

As discussed above, beans form part of traditional rural foods like *umngqushu*. The consumption of traditional food is associated with poverty and consequently, as people move to the city, and the lengthy soaking and boiling of beans becomes inconvenient, the consumption of beans has declined (Bourne 1996; Bourne et al. 2002). By contrast, however, the indigenous groundnut *isindlubu*, common in rural areas of Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal, is still available as a steamed snack sold on the streets of major metropolises.

### *Meat*

This food is considered an essential part of any meal, particularly by men (Puoane et al. 2006). Meat is almost universally associated with masculinity (Sobal 2005), and is often a contested food in marriage, sometimes providing a pretext for economic disparities and domestic violence. In ancestral religions still widespread, illness or misfortune is often attributed to the displeasure of the *amadlozi*<sup>14</sup>. To appease them, blood sacrifices are often required. The animals slaughtered are imbued with great significance – their age, health, colour, gender, and even their composure approaching and during sacrifice. All this is part of the food typically consumed in feasts at which the wider community is not only generally welcomed but also expected to attend. This symbolic role reproduces wider societal patterns of patriarchal dominance. In the context of hospitality, serving lean meat is a sign of stinginess, fatty meat a sign of generosity. Daily meat consumption reflects a high socio-economic status, part of early socialisation. Among black urban populations, meat is associated with high socio-economic status and people therefore try to consume it on a daily basis, although the increased cost of living in urban environments forces many to consume cheaper alternatives such as tripe (Puoane et al. 2006) and polony.

A pervasive culture of street-grilled meat, especially chicken and goat, assign humorous names to different parts of the animal, so grilled chicken feet and heads are called “walkie-talkies”, and other terms like “cockroach”, “Brazilian feet” and “chicken dust” (Charman et al. 2008), while sheep heads are called “smileys”. In many townships, informal butcheries offer grilling facilities where friends and families gather to prepare and eat *shesa nyama* – charred meat, which may be a symbolic expression of masculine autonomy away from the hearth, which is traditionally the domain of elder females, wives, mothers and grandmothers. The culture has become so popular that some restaurants and franchises have appropriated the term to brand their ventures. These colloquial names contain vital symbolic clues about the value of the food and those who eat them.

### *Fish*

As we have seen from DDS data, consuming fish is fairly uncommon among rural and urban black poor. In part, this is due to its limited availability, but it may also be linked to beliefs associated with the Ndau spiritual lineage for which the grandmothers and the mysterious realm of pools, rivers and oceans are sacred. For African diaspora communities originating in coastal and littoral regions in Mozambique, Malawi and Congo, fish is valuable, with informal value networks supplying a steady

<sup>13</sup> Fried dumpling.

<sup>14</sup> Ancestors.

demand for dried fish. Among the Cape Coloured communities, fish is also held in high regard and traded widely from harbour quays to roadsides or informal networks. Bokkoms (dried and salted mullet) – a cultural delicacy in parts of the Western Cape – are apparently named for its pungent, goat-like stink.

### *Cheese and dairy*

Though associated with feminine gender stereotypes, cheese and dairy seem to symbolise wealth and prosperity – perhaps a legacy of patriarchal pastoral societies. Milk was traditionally hardly ever drunk fresh, but was allowed to ferment in a calabash or sack to make *amasi*<sup>15</sup>. The import of *amasi* as a symbol of wealth and desirability is reflected by the isiZulu proverb *kwafa igula lamasi*, immortalised by the Mahotella Queens – literally the sour-milk calabash is broken – our hopes are dashed. The link between dairy, prosperity and desire has however been retained in urban food cultures. For example, young black university students from poorer neighbourhoods refer to their wealthier female classmates as “cheese-girls” because, by implication, their households could afford a fridge and cheese – a more expensive, aspirational food<sup>16</sup>. This is an example of a food-based metaphor used to denigrate an elite social class and construct class consciousness.

### *Sugar and sweets*

Sweets, ice cream and cakes are used to signify and celebrate happy occasions, birthdays and weddings. Conversely, failing to offer and prepare cake was traditionally a way for a mother-in-law to express rejection of a marriage (Mabasa 2002). The words *mnanidi* and *monate* are widely used to denote pleasant, (sexually) desirable, and good things. Sweets are also traditionally offered to appease and entice ancestral shades (Tracey, personal communication)<sup>17</sup>. Children are commonly offered sweets as a reward and appeasement, deeply embedding symbolic associations in the process of individual development and socialisation.

### *Vegetables*

The vegetables eaten in South Africa are each associated with unique symbols, often inspired by their physical appearance (e.g. pumpkins and gourds are associated with the womb and fertility) (Mabasa 2002). However, vegetable are usually considered more as a relish – *morogo* – an addition to other food, which tends to be associated with female gender stereotypes. Wild harvesting of indigenous vegetables plays an important role in South African rural households and somewhat less in poor urban households. However, indigenous vegetables are only available in season and are usually not cultivated but harvested from the wild. Gathering and consuming indigenous vegetables is associated with poverty and is declining (Mavengahama 2013; Jansen van Rensburg et al. 2007), while the influence of urban life styles on rural people is altering the species composition of *morogo* in favour of western vegetables, particularly Swiss chard, even though indigenous and indigenised leafy vegetables often offer better nutritional value. The rising popularity of *choumollier* (a hardy, indigenised kale) in the foodways of South Africa's poor is an example of food introduced by Zimbabweans, perhaps to invoke a sense of home-away-from-home in the diaspora community.

### *Eggs*

Eggs symbolise fertility and promiscuity in several African cultures, so consumption by young women and children is considered inappropriate. Therefore, even though eggs are nutritionally valuable, affordable, and as available as meat, they are ascribed far lower value.

### *Fruit*

Although generally recognised as healthy and commonly consumed as a street food, this class of food appears to hold an ambiguous significance, as high consumption of fruit and vegetable is

<sup>15</sup> Fermented milk.

<sup>16</sup> H. Wagener, personal communication.

<sup>17</sup> Tracey G., personal communication.

associated with slimness and the health-conscious diets of people living with HIV/AIDS and TB (Puoane et al. 2010). People who eat “too much” fruit and vegetable are therefore subject to the same spectre of stigmatisation as the dreaded diseases themselves and an example of how collective anxieties and fears are frequently projected onto foods.

### *Fast food*

Access to fast foods is frequently seen as a sign of sophistication and attainment, also evoking the mobility, business and bustle of urban living, and the ability to participate in the urban economy. Carbonated soft drinks, burgers and pizza are especially popular symbols of wealth and participation in the consumer spectacle, the commodification of experience and perception by the marketing and media industry (see Debord 2002; Johns&Pine 2002; Finkelstein 1989).

### **Food, ritual and celebration**

Although people navigate a symbolic landscape with each meal, certain meals carry far greater symbolic value than the largely unconsidered monotony of daily meals. Food symbols are especially densely interwoven during key ceremonies and rituals, infusing these events with significance and values that bind all who partake, reflect fundamental features of the social and cosmic order, and are a conspicuous consumption of costly foods which provide a visceral demonstration of the wealth and influence of the people hosting such events. Such events, weddings, funerals, initiations, baptisms and other religious celebrations, which often mark important transitions in an individual’s social status and role or signify important religious or cosmological events (Easter, Christmas, Rosh Hashanah, Eid, Diwali, etc.), are typically celebrated by the ritual distribution and consumption of special foods and the exclusion of others.

Food distributed at celebrations is a way to demonstrate gratitude for people who offered support to the family. Among the poor in South Africa, weddings and funerals are particularly important events, during which foods are prepared which invoke very specific meanings. It is not uncommon among the urban poor to celebrate two weddings – a “western” and a “traditional” one, each of which involves foods which emphasise this pervasive duality of rural-urban and traditional-modern. During periods of mourning, dairy and meat are ritually excluded from feasting. Who gets what food, which portions, and is served in which order is often also highly significant in terms of relative status within a food community. This is especially relevant to the understanding of diaspora identities, which is an important concept considering the colonial, apartheid and liberation history of this country and the degree to which traditional rural communities were disrupted and displaced through cycles of migrant labour.

Meal sharing is a social event which connects people with their households, peers and communities, and constitutes their sense of identity and belonging. While food may be used among the poor to signify relative power and influence, horizontal transfers of food through borrowing and sharing are at least as important and demonstrate solidarity while constituting an informal safety net which can reduce household vulnerability to hunger (Cooke 2012). In this context, food is used to show love, acceptance and humanity. It is associated with happiness. Therefore, among people throughout South Africa, it is important to show hospitality, welcome guests, and ensure that enough food is prepared in order to accommodate guests. Conversely, guests are obliged to eat food offered during visits in order to show appreciation and not “undermine” a host’s reputation (Puoane et al 2006). In this way, the use value of food is translated into symbolic value and social capital which has a powerful exchange value in a context of poverty, vulnerability and uncertainty.

### **Food symbolism and gender roles**

As emerged from the review of food symbolism, most foods also evoke specific gender stereotypes. Gender-based values attached to food are structured also by age. Thus, while older women in Khayelitsha tended to prioritise the satisfaction of their family’s and spouses’ needs (usually by

ensuring that the appropriate food – meat – is available), younger women are somewhat more concerned about their weight and figure and may reduce eating in order to ameliorate anxiety about clothes no longer fitting. This is linked to their wish to be desirable and to attract and hold a spouse, which appears amplified by media and advertising. Courtship and the choice of sexual partners are often influenced by aesthetics of body size, femininity, portion size, food choices, and appetite. However, it seems that there is a strong ambivalence around weight and body size, and some women appeared not to mind being considered fat (Puoane et al 2006; Puoane et al 2010).

This can be explained to some extent by the tension between modernist paradigms of slimness, health, sophistication and achievement on the one hand, and on the other, the persistent patriarchal paradigm dominating traditional gender relations, where older men feel that their daughters' plumpness reflects their success as "bread-winners" and family heads. The way in which African patriarchal power is inscribed upon the bodies of his wives and daughters reveals the persistence of a deeply-rooted value-system where body size is a visible sign of a person's socio-economic status (Puoane et al 2006) and where bride-price is still reckoned in symbolic heads of cattle. In this context, appetite and plumpness are signs of happiness, health and wealth, while women's body size is ascribed a very real exchange value. Meat is a core expression of the power and privileges due a patriarch and its absence can provide a pretext for domestic violence. Younger men, perhaps more strongly exposed to cultural diversity and urbanising lifestyles, feel very flexible and able to indulge as much food as they are able to when the opportunity presents itself, associating food with parties and celebrations. Eating their mother's food typically evokes feelings of being cared for and nurtured.

### **Changing value systems and value chain transformation**

One theme that repeatedly emerged throughout the review of poverty and foodways is a narrative of transition from rural, traditional settings and foodways towards urban, modernised settings and foodways. This narrative reflects the adverse incorporation of people in both rural and urban areas into global value chains. This process is evidently also accompanied by a shift in values and worldviews as people negotiate the tensions of two very different ideologies invoked to legitimise competing regimes of power and authority.

Traditional rural ideology, vested in diverse cultural idioms, emphasises respect for seniority and patriarchal tradition, vertical patronage networks of resource distribution, loyalty and obligation, and horizontal networks promoted by an egalitarian ethos of sharing, reciprocity and covert competition. This narrative is expressed through food symbolism densely invoked during ceremonies and more generally reproduced in daily food preparation and sharing.

The modernist urban ideology contests traditional rural ideology, emphasising competitiveness, individualistic entrepreneurialism, social mobility through a blend of opportunism and effort, subordination to more formalised power relations to pursue apparent opportunities for economic advancement and success. Success is symbolised by participating in an ostentatious urban consumer culture projected by a powerful and sophisticated media apparatus. This propaganda apparatus persuasively promotes the conspicuous consumption of its food symbols – fast foods, street foods, carbonated beverages, ultra-processed snacks and sweets. This symbolic economy contributes significantly to the extraction of economic value from the people and its accumulation by global finance and local elites. Simultaneously, it serves to legitimise and re-produce the structural drivers of poverty while concealing the inequality, exploitation and ecological devastation on which these value chains rely.

Informal urban areas are a dynamic frontier where traditional and modernist food cultures overlap and intermesh densely. The tension between the two ideologies is experienced as emphasising budgeting, counting and economising, while undermining the ethos of hospitality. Poverty, in this context, is experienced as being unable to meet hospitality and reciprocal sharing obligations, and



the stigma of needing to borrow from others. Borrowing can erode long term social capital. At the same time, the need to participate in the consumer economy encourages poor people to resort to various forms of credit, with repayments further reducing the money available for household provisions. Individualistic eating habits like eating out can be seen as an indulgence which erodes the traditional sharing ethos (Puoane et al. 2006).

## Why value systems are important for value chains analysis

Although the relevance to value chains analysis has been consistently emphasised throughout this paper, critical readers may still ask what all the song and dance about culture and symbolic capital is about, whether the tidbits of food symbolism are anything more than trivia – how is this relevant to understanding value chains?

One relevant area lies with the power of the media industry, which fabricates symbols of desire, imbuing the mass-produced commodities of industrial food systems with value. Advertising plays an increasingly powerful role in shaping eating behaviour and identity. To the extent that people buy into the media spectacle, people are what advertising makes them. An analysis of value chains must explore how and to what extent media and advertising engage with underlying food symbolism and narratives.

The intersection between foodways and value chain frameworks reveals how food symbolism, underlying values, and the coping strategies of the poor, create demand-side forces that ripple back up food value chains. This intersection is most evident in the food value chains on which the poor most depend (maize, wheat, sugar, poultry) and the food they aspire to (dairy, beef, cold drinks and fast food). Thus, the poor do not just passively receive what value chains have to offer, but value chains also cater to the desires and aspirations of poor consumers. It would be interesting to investigate how and to what extent key trends in food value chains (such as the strong informal retail economy, consolidation and concentration of formal value chains, and formal retail expansion into former township areas) are responses to the foodways of the poor, their coping strategies and value systems.

Finally, from the perspective of power dynamics, it would be useful to consider if the poor are unduly affected by power shifts, standards and regulations governing value chains, and thus how much they are exposed to potential adverse health impacts, e.g. from consuming GM maize and wheat, or from countries like the US and Brazil dumping cheap poultry on South Africa. From a values perspective, it is also interesting to consider to what extent themes around standards and regulations are entering the food narratives of the poor and providing rallying points for food systems change.

It would be easy to replace a structural determinism with an ideological determinism – have we just changed the puppet masters, while the puppets are still dancing their powerless dance on the end of invisible strings? Or have we just glimpsed a new set of strings? Raising the question of agency once again, it is important to consider that multiple food symbols and sources of information are available in various settings. Individuals use these resources to construct a self-image and social role, and to pursue their own particular agenda. What this agenda is, how it is conceptualised, expressed and legitimised, and the degree to which this is consciously reflected depends to a large extent on people's social embeddedness, the cultural repertoire they can access, and their personal identity and attitudes. Although this report has explored some of the cultural frameworks around food symbolism and identity, it has not explored in any detail the individual motivations, knowledge, or aspirations which constitute the upper left quadrant of Wilber's integral. This is an important area which requires further exploration.

The impact of individual motivations, knowledge and aspirations also raises questions about the extent to which food system marketing, media and branding apparatuses employ industrial psychology and market research to profile and cater to the aspirations of poor people.

Again it is important to recognise that, despite unequal power relations, this relationship between diverse consumer profiles and the media apparatus of food value chains is a reciprocal feedback loop whereby cultural values create a demand for certain types of products, branding, marketing and distribution strategies, and value chains influence these values and create demand by imbuing their products with relevant symbolic value while responding to the pragmatic needs of the poor for food that is cheap, accessible and convenient in the context of multiple dimensions of deprivation. Simultaneously, this system drives the very processes of dispossession and jobless de-agrarianisation that deepen poverty. The cultural values of poor consumers thus constitute a demand-side domain of value-chain governance which is in a dynamic relationship with governance domains shaping upstream value-chain nodes. It is a key contention of this paper that value chain analysis will remain inadequate unless it takes account of the value and centrality of culture and attitude in ascribing symbolic and social domains of value which include and transcend use-value or exchange value.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined the relationship between foodways, poverty and value chains in general terms, revealing that hunger is one of the central deprivations by which poverty is understood. Foodways are not only about making ends meet financially, but are essential parts of how poverty and wealth are expressed and contested. Patterns emerging from food purchasing and consumption data can only be adequately interpreted with reference to pervasive cultural symbols and narratives, and the specific strategies by which the poor manage to feed themselves, construct collective identities and cultivate social networks.

Food consumption data has shown a central reliance on cheap grain staples along with high consumption of sugar and a preference for chicken, with very little fruit, vegetables or pulses. The data has also shown how, for wealthier people, the consuming red meat and dairy – especially cheese – increases, as, to a lesser extent, does the consumption of fruit, while the pulses are eaten even less. We have demonstrated how these preferences, while driven by the need to access cheap, energy-dense foods (the “neo-liberal diet” of Otero et al. 2015), they are also informed by symbolic and social values attached to these food categories. Considering that poor people constitute almost half of the South African population, this represents a powerful and valuable market segment for formal and informal retail alike.

At the retail node of value chains, the poor rely greatly on informal trade and street foods, because this meets their need for locally accessible food in affordable quantities, and because some of this can be bought on informal credit. The formal supermarket sector is patronised less frequently, primarily for bulk staples purchases (maize meal, sugar, oil). This ripples upwards into the distribution phase of food value chains, as the informal trade strongly relies on informal transport enterprises which span the often substantial divide between formal-sector distribution nodes and the spatially-marginalised and poor. With increasing wealth and commuter participation in urban and peri-urban economies, consumption of fast foods seems to have become more pervasive and accessible, responding not only to the need for convenience, but also to aspirations for visible participation in the consumer economy, the status this confers and the identities it expresses through consuming powerful symbols invoked by fast food branding.

Further upstream at the processing nodes of food value chains, poor peoples' preferences for cheap foods in appropriate quantities can arguably contribute to concentration, consolidation and mechanisation due to (1) the high volumes and low margins this market segment prefers, and (2) the stringent quality standards necessary when industrially processing and packaging massive volumes of food. Resultant collusion and cartelism can disadvantage consumers directly, as price-fixing scandals in the bread value chain have shown. Arguably the immediacy

of poor consumers' needs, corporate concentration, and limited consumer awareness makes other concerns such as health, social justice, and environmental impact less relevant. Since effective labelling and packaging may not be in the immediate interests of retailers or food processors, health, social justice and environmental impacts are not effectively communicated, creating a powerful information asymmetry which entrenches current demand-side drivers. Instead, food retail and processing industries employ powerful and sophisticated advertising and branding to manipulate food symbolism and narratives to promote their products. This information asymmetry also means that health, social and sustainability concerns may not be adequately reflected in the standards governing production.

Poor standards, in turn, ripple upstream into the production phase, contributing to the trend towards industrial monocultures and animal feedlots which can produce the vast quantities of cheap grains, sugar, poultry and dairy desired by poor people and required by the food processing and retailing nodes of value chains. This mode of mass production in turn sends ripples further up and back down value chains: downstream, food quality is affected by production systems and standards, with potentially massive negative impacts on the health of poor consumers (evident in the reliance on GM maize and soya, which have not been shown conclusively to be safe and which are potentially carcinogenic (Fagan et al 2014). Both maize and soya are produced using highly toxic herbicides and pesticides which leave residues in food products, while commercial food production methods provide less key micro-nutrients and increase heavy metal presence (Baranski et al. 2014). Both commodities are essential ingredients in poultry and cattle feed, so the harmful impacts of residues flow back down several food value chains (grains, meat and dairy), exposing those who can least afford it to the risk of long-term illness.

Yet further upstream, commercial production and processing erode the very elements (soil, water, air, biodiversity) of the ecosystems and landscapes which sustain agriculture and in which human settlements are embedded. Recognising the food-water-energy nexus implies that negative impacts of current production, processing, and waste management radiate into other key systems – such as water affected by fertiliser run-off and crumbling sewage infrastructure, or an energy mix that relies on archaic coal (and impending nuclear) to process and refrigerate food. As both energy and water are key inputs into each node of food value chains, negative impacts feed back into the food system, cascading back downstream to the poor.

## **Opportunities to enrich value-chain analysis**

This brief review sketches how the foodways of the poor set powerful impulses which ripple up along food value chains into the wider food-water-energy-transport systems complex, and how the resulting trends cascade back down these same value chains in ways which ultimately compromise well-being, entrench deprivation and deepen vulnerability. Outlines of a complex vicious cycle emerge where poverty and hunger, and people's ways of coping with these, elicit systemic feedback which ultimately reinforces poverty and hunger while feeding corporate concentration and consolidation. Conversely, the foodways analysis suggests that poor consumers are a powerful force shaping food value chains, and thus hold significant influence if their needs and interests are more powerfully voiced and appropriately heard.

However, the review also reveals a dearth of research on foodways and has raised far more questions than it has answered – in terms of understanding the foodways of the poor, and how the impulses set are interpreted at each upstream node of food value chains. The unanswered questions cover four broad domains, including: (1) the impact of poverty narratives on foodways, (2) the relationship between food geographies and foodways, (3) the role of informal food retail, and (4) the impact of the foodways of the poor on upstream value chains.

### *Poverty narratives*

- How do specific vulnerable groups adapt their foodways to respond to livelihood stresses or shocks?
- How do the poor change foodways when income increases?
- What are the symbolic nuances of food and foodways as signifiers of poverty and wealth in different communities?
- To what extent are social movements organised around food (e.g. the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign) influencing food narratives among the poor to include social, health and ecological concerns?

### *Food geographies*

- How are foodways of the rural poor different from those of the urban and peri-urban poor?
- How is formal value chain expansion into rural areas affecting foodways in rural areas?
- How do the foodways of the poor shape local food geographies?
- How do poor people interpret the lack of supermarkets in poorer neighbourhoods?
- To what extent do South Africa's poor travel beyond their local food environment to take advantage of better prices?
- What is the role of food environments in different impoverished settings for socialisation, symbolisation and value formation, especially *en route* to schools and work?
- How do food environments and foodways affect health – besides obesity and diet-related diseases – for example stress, mental health, quality of life, safety or exposure to violence?

### *Informal food retail and processing*

- What is the symbolic significance of street foods in South Africa – are they considered a desperate survival strategy or do they reflect independence, economic “success” and participation? To what extent does fast food purchase symbolise autonomy, independence and peer-group inclusion for youths, while “healthy” food is seen as a domain of the family?
- What is the nature of interactions between poor communities and foreign retailers and food distributors?

### *Value chain ramifications*

- How do macro-economic shifts, environmental stresses and food value chain governance transitions ripple down value chains to shape, constrain or enable peoples' food choices?
- How do key food value chains (e.g. wheat, maize, poultry, cheese, selected vegetables) respond to market demands emanating from the foodways of the poor?
- How do media and marketing understand, respond to and influence the foodways of the poor?
- Are the media subverting and co-opting food symbolism, passively responding to it, or displacing it? How are the symbolic meanings of food evolving in response to the influence of media and marketing? How are food symbols being used in processes of class formation? To what extent is the expansion of global value chains enabling people to access a broader symbolic repertoire, and to what extent is this repertoire being appropriated, while culturally marginalising traditional foodways?

Innovative trans-disciplinary research methodologies and conceptual frameworks are needed to explore above questions. Due to the apparent paucity of published academic work on the subject, a systematic literature review would be complemented by a far broader conception of what types of knowledge are considered legitimate and who generates such knowledge. Innovations in information and communication technologies could enable attempts to democratise the documentation, representation and sharing of foodways knowledge. Action-research teams

collaborating in the Fostering Local Well-being (FLOW) project<sup>18</sup> in Kokstad and Bergriver municipalities offer promising approaches, using aspects of photo-voice, leveraging the multimedia capabilities of smartphones.

Trans-disciplinary research into symbolic value chains could draw upon the insights of divergent academic disciplines including anthropology, media studies, sociology, industrial psychology, and marketing. Integrating the paradigms, approaches and findings of such teams meaningfully would require flexible and inclusive conceptual frameworks. To this end, this paper attempted to infuse the value chains approach (itself a flexible and accommodating framework with the meanings emerging from the study of foodways. However, regardless of the theoretical framing, broader approaches require great mental flexibility among researchers, which may challenge those overly comfortable in their own field of expertise and unfamiliar with the conceptual landscape of other disciplines.

Moreover, researchers are challenged to find ways to make findings useful, not only to academia and government agencies tasked with managing poverty, but also to social movements representing the interests of the poor. Although this is a tall order, the potential rewards of trans-disciplinary enquiry are enticing. The trans-disciplinary approach offers to fulfil the need (1) to understand value chain transformation, (2) to offer more powerful explanatory frameworks and effective food policies, and (3) to satisfy the need for more transparent and democratic value-chain governance which can respond more fully to the needs and foodways of the poor.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://flowafrica.org/>

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