

COVID-19

Food security

concerns

Prof Julian May



Image: Ashraf Hendricks, Sigalo informal settlement near Mitchell's Plain in Cape Town, GroundUp

It might just be Covid-19 fatigue, but it's to be expected that many are fed up with 2020, ready to sign off on it and restart 2021 with a clean slate.

And there were glimmers of hope that we would be able to do so soon; "normal" seemed to be within reach. There has been news of a number of promising vaccines in the works around the world and, locally, government has eased lockdown restrictions in the hope of jump-starting a stuttering economy with an adrenalin shot of traveller dollars and euros. But there are questions as to when a vaccine will get here and if we'll be able to afford it. And, in the light of resurgent infections in North America and Europe, and new lockdowns, holidaying might not be on the cards for them.

South Africa hasn't turned the corner, either. By end of November, as the Covid-19 pandemic flared up again in provinces such as the Western Cape, there was speculation that there would be "mini-lockdowns" in hotspots.

The lives-versus-livelihood debate will rage once more as the economy keeps bleeding jobs. Not great news for a country where, ahead of the pandemic, nearly a third of job-seeking South Africans were already unemployed.

We're not yet at that stage where we can look back on the pandemic and take stock of its aftermath. But we do have a sense of its ongoing impact on, for our purposes, food insecurity.

As unemployment deepened, so did food insecurity

It's not as if South Africa started 2020 on the right foot. The latest available numbers suggest that about 11% of the country's population (or around 6.5-million people) suffer from hunger every year.

We should not lose sight of the impact of unemployment on men – hunger can be said to breed social discontent and instability. But it's now widely accepted that it is women who bear the brunt of crises. Not only does the gender wage gap persist, but women also shoulder the overwhelming share of the caring responsibility in households. If they are without work, it's likely that others – children included – will suffer, too.

Their predicament worsened during the lockdown. According to the National Income Dynamics Study-Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM), of the three million jobs lost over the initial months of lockdown, two million had been held by women. Job opportunities also dried up, including in the agricultural sector, where the work is largely seasonal. And, if they were employed in the informal sector, as many are, workers could not initially tap into the relief funding made available to those who had lost their jobs during the pandemic.

Not surprisingly, household food security came under greater threat during the lockdown. The NIDS-CRAM survey found that, in the initial months of the lockdown, 22% of surveyed households reported that someone in the household had gone hungry, and 15% of households reported cases of child hunger. Over that period, 47% of households also reported that money for food had run out. By September, the situation had improved across those measures, but problems persisted – 37% of households, for instance, reported that they had no money for food.

When women suffer, children do too. Scholars such as Dr Gareth Haysom, a researcher with the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town and affiliated to the Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS), has sought to introduce the concept of "slow violence" – a form of violence that is incipient and intergenerational – into discourse on child hunger, arguing that children are, before even being born, disenfranchised as a result of dietary deficiencies in the first 1 000 days. For these children, food insecurity and deprivation spell long-term physical, psychological and social development challenges, many of which will haunt them into adulthood.

The take-home message

As if we needed reminding, 2020 illustrated again that, in South Africa at least, food insecurity is not really a consequence of sluggish food production. Not even over the harshest lockdown did we come even close to running out of food. Agriculture had been declared a critical industry and as such was exempt from the restrictions that other sectors, including some of its own sub-sectors such as wine and floriculture, suffered.

Yes, shops ran out of hand sanitiser and toilet paper prices spiked, but if you could afford it you could still find almost any food product you needed or wanted – except maybe alcohol (assuming we count it as a food). The South African Competition Tribunal kept a sharp eye out for incidences of price gouging, and cracked the whip when offenders were identified.

But we saw again that those with a bit of wealth or savings can weather a crisis much better than the lower-income groups. South Africans didn't stop shopping, after all: one estimate suggests that online retail grew by some 40% over the lockdown, and experienced a year-on-year growth of around 100%.

But for those without back-up resources, the social safety net was also found wanting. When schools were closed, for example, millions of children were cut off from the meals provided through the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). In October 2020, the social distress grant (of a mere R350 per person per month) was extended to the end of January 2021, but the caregiver grant was withdrawn.

And, closer to home ...

Universities have their own food insecurity worries. Although no system-wide studies have yet been conducted, university-specific research has pointed out that at some institutions as many 65% of students experience some level of hunger. Campus-initiated food banks and initiatives can only scratch the surface of that need, and are unsustainable.

What's more, the burden of feeding students has now been shifted on to universities, organisations that are not designed to do so. It also places on them the responsibility to divert sparse resources from their primary mandate, which is to educate.

South Africa is not yet out of the Covid-19 woods. We are currently experiencing what some consider to be a second wave of infections. The introduction of mini-lockdowns will further impact livelihoods and decide whether families will have food on the table. We are still losing lives, which, beyond the human tragedy, will also have economic consequences for those households that lose breadwinners.

In time we will have to see if we can recover our economy to pre-pandemic levels. Even if we do – and it seems unlikely – we will have to recognise that those levels were far from optimal.

We need to come up with sustainable solutions to the problems of food insecurity, be it in households or on university campuses. There is no one silver bullet; even a universal basic income – and it would have to be a generous one – can only be one part of a larger response. Civil society and the private sector will, alongside government, for the sake of the country, be obliged to play its part.

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Children waiting to be fed. Image: Ashraf Hendricks, GroundUp