

**Submission by the South African Chapter of the Rural Women’s Assembly (RWA) to the Un Rapporteur on the Right to Food – overall comments and recommendations on some of the questions proposed for restructuring the SA food system chain.**

**10 May 2023**

RWA’s constituency includes small-scale farmers and fishers, farm workers and the rural poor who, collectively, are an essential and vulnerable part of the food supply chain. Thus, they are the main concern and focus of RWA’s submission.

During C-19 the SA government put in place a range of programmes that contributed to putting SOME food on the table for some people, although these did NOT provide GOOD food, nor did they provide food for all who needed it. It was up to some civil society organizations to step in and try to alleviate but did not eliminate hunger:

* In May 2020, it introduced the Social Distress Relief (SDR) Grant with a value of R350 per month.[[1]](#endnote-1) Originally intended for 6 months, after civil society appeals it has been extended twice and is meant to remain until March 2024. About 7.5 million people receive the SDR monthly. The SDR contributed to millions putting some food on the table. However, given: the official levels of unemployment (33.9% or 7.9 million people)[[2]](#endnote-2); the pre-Covid high household unemployment[[3]](#endnote-3) (female headed households being the most affected – almost half did not have an employed person in 2020 - ibid), poverty levels and the already pre-Covid food insecurity in SA[[4]](#endnote-4), the SDR did NOT provide access to GOOD nor sufficient food. Some members of RWA report that some did not know how/ where to apply for the SDR, it arrived months later (September/ October), only a few received it and there are allegations of corruption. A national survey indicated that 67% of households reported running out of money to buy food since C-19[[5]](#endnote-5), as cost of living continues to increase. Amongst this deprivation SA witnessed a ‘pandemic’ of violence against women and children.
* The National School Feeding Programme (regularly feeding 9 million school children daily during the school year) was suspended when schools were closed under strict lockdowns. Partial reinstatement was only achieved though civil society action.
* The Unemployment Insurance fund through the TERS programme (Temporary Employer-Employee Relief Scheme) disbursed, by April 2022, R64-billion to 5.7-million workers over two years[[6]](#endnote-6), to provide some income to those who did have jobs and were losing income, support business and try to save jobs. Many irregularities were reported including employers not paying out benefits to workers. Given the high levels of unemployment and casual employment this had a low level of reach.
* The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DRDLRRD) set up a relief fund to mitigate the impact of C-19. However, it was criticised by smallholder farmers as the strict criteria[[7]](#endnote-7) disqualified many and vouchers were only retrievable at commercial agro-business suppliers.
* The Solidarity Fund (contributions by government and non-government role players) had a Farming Input Voucher Relief Programme for rural subsistence farmers and rural and peri-urban backyard food gardeners (for women with children under 10, with R2000 vouchers for purchasing gardening tools).

**COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

* **On the SDR:** Reassess the strict criteria to access the SDR and improve communication to deal with applicants. Extend the SDR to caregivers, 95% of whom are women, regardless of whether they are receiving the Child Support Grant on behalf of their children. Extend SDR until the government provides permanent social assistance to those aged between 18 and 59 as a Universal Basic Income Grant (BIG) of R1500 per month per person. These grants must be adjusted until they meet the prevalent Upper-Bound Poverty Line.
* **School Feeding Schemes:**  Reinforce and ensure that these provide healthy and nutritious food as a minimum contribution to addressing the national tragedy that 27% of our (black) children are stunted (30% of boys), and 25% of girls, with rural areas having higher stunting rates (29%) than urban areas (26%). UNICEF refers to this as the “slow violence of malnutrition in South Africa”.[[8]](#endnote-8) In some provinces there are current signs of collapse of these schemes.

* **On small-scale food producers:** Government has to urgently implement meaningful land reform and secure land tenure and water rights. Instead, we have witnessed land consolidation. Covid-19 exposed the failure to resolve the land question and implement land, agrarian and water reforms, at the centre of vast inequalities and poverty in both urban and rural areas, including farm workers on commercial farms. Even where some land redistribution has been effected lack of water and infrastructure often hampers production by emerging and smallholder farmers. Women’s and youth access to and secured land rights need to be addressed in all land reform programmes.

Government must stop promoting (agricultural and mining) extractivism as a model of development: this prioritises industrial farming, links smallholder producers to contract farming and incorporates them into corporate supply chains oriented towards export (often through its own extension officers), and incentivises agri-business agricultural investment, leading to communities and farmers to lose their land and livelihoods and to urban migration. 2/3 (63.4%) of those who reported experiencing hunger in 2017 were in urban areas[[9]](#endnote-9) and, for some analysts, the violent protest in Durban in July 2021 were to some extent driven by hunger. This absurdity – a crime against SA’s citizens - is that while hunger increased during C-19 SA commercial farmers reported bumper grain and fruit harvests and high export levels illustrating the impact of trading food as a commodity. In communal areas (former bantustans) government is further disempowering communities by legislating in favour of often unaccountable traditional leadership who continue the marginalisation of women and negotiating land grabs and sales with investors.

**Stimulating and supporting agroecology (AE) and UNDROP:**  Government must prioritise food production for national and regional food security and provide support for the expansion of agroecology. **SA** Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development is currently engaging with civil society for an AE Policy. This is long overdue as the drafting of an AE Strategy initiated in 2012-2013 was abandoned. The SA government voted in favour of UNDROP, which includes the adoption of agroecology as one of the measures for “*conservation and sustainable use of land and other natural resources”* and proclaims the right to save, use, exchange and sell farm manged saved seeds (FMSS).

However, the SA Plant Improvement Act of 2018 and the Plant Breeders’ Rights Act of 2018 primarily protect and promote the interest of industrial agriculture and prioritise profit over food security. While we welcome that the 2022 Regulations to these Acts provide some exceptions to assure that FMSS can continue to exist in SA, RWA submits that there was not enough consultation with smallholder farmers and that the exceptions provided are too limiting to fully realise their seed rights, an essential component of the practice and implementation of AE. RWA has started monitoring the implementation of UNDROP and made formal submissions to the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the UN Human Rights Council, focussing on Article 19, essential to meet Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The DALRRD must create a platform for wide consultation involving smallholder producers in policy and decision-making in agriculture and AE and in the seed sub-sector and support the establishment of seed banks. Since women play a key role in seed saving, seed policies must be gender sensitive. Women must be included in decisions on research priorities to serve the needs of smallholder producers – they face new challenges related to climate change**.**

**Better connections between small, local food producers and consumers:** SA’s food system is organised and caught in vertical, highly hierarchical structures and institutions at both production and food retailing levels, a model inherited from colonial and apartheid that became more pronounced and entrenched post-independence in 1994.[[10]](#endnote-10) Black small food producers (from farmers to fishers) and food traders remain structurally and institutionally marginalised by inherited and newly imported food chain models. Nevertheless, throughout the years many did succeed in creating their own markets and link to consumers in their communities as “informal” traders (selling to or becoming street vendors, delivering by small vehicles *(bakkies*) or in small community shops). Some have also managed to be included in supplying some of the dominant large-scale retailers but these unequal relationships lead to feelings of unfairness and being exploited, as small producers are unable to produce in volumes and frequency of delivery of certain (often off-season) produce nor of satisfying packaging requirements. This is the experience of some of the RWA members and fellow smallholder producers.

Both national and local governments have failed to support “informal” traders by not creating serviced adequate market venues and by criminalising their initiatives and evicting them from spaces these traders identify as productive. On the other hand, there is evidence that during C-19, for example, some small-scale black farmers increased local sales by turning to local markets and ‘informal traders’ – getting better prices than by supplying corporate controlled markets, getting paid in cash and saving transport costs.[[11]](#endnote-11) The SA government needs to take lessons from other African countries where small-scale producers and “informal” traders continue contributing to food production, processing, distribution and marketing, contributing to livelihoods and job creation.

**On workers:** Hunger affects most workers in SA. 33.9% or 7.9 million of working age are unemployed and most of those employed earn below what is considered a living wage and are employed as seasonal or contract workers. Government must end the retrenchment of public sector workers, essential to deliver basic services. Besides a living wage, existing labour rights must be protected with equal rights and payment for women and men. End the use of labour brokers. Farm workers’ wages have to be increased and they must be protected from current levels of exposure to dangerous pesticides, given tenure security and protected from illegal evictions.

* **Holding corporations in the food system accountable requires major changes at national and global levels.** The impacts of disruption in the global supply chains by C-19 and the Ukraine- USSR conflict have also been felt in SA where in 2022 we saw food inflation increasing to 14%, well above the core inflation rate (6.9% - SATS SA)[[12]](#endnote-12). The SA Competition Commission has launched a commission of inquiry[[13]](#endnote-13) - to try to understand what happens along the supply chain and in the formal retail sector. Despite the challenges posed by electricity load shedding, fuel price increases, etc, major food players in SA have recorded record profits according to their latest financial reports[[14]](#endnote-14). While wholesale prices increased, retailers’ prices rose much higher. Poor consumers, the largest size of the population and their market, creates opportunity for large profits to be made.

Major shifts in the global economy and trade rules are required, changes unlikely to happen soon. As an indebted country and with high levels of financialisation, capital penetration and investments in primary agriculture and retailers, SA does not have the power to challenge the dominant rule[[15]](#endnote-15)s unless and until emerging alternatives and alliances strengthen. Nevertheless, the SA government could adopt some national measures along our food chain: make changes in agriculture and food policies and stop considering corporate supply chains and partnerships with the private sector as the solutions to hunger and food insecurity; start building food reserves[[16]](#endnote-16), provide subsidies in basic foods; ban some actors and financial instruments from dealing in food; join tax justice network initiatives to “*pursue systemic changes that address global and national inequalities and that promote progressive tax policies and effective financial regulation*”.

**Reference:**

Wegerif, M., 2022. South Africa After COVID-19: Identifying the Overlooked Economic Actors Needed for a Just and Equitable Food System. In *Food and Agriculture in Urbanized Societies* (Vol. 26, pp. 107-128). Emerald Publishing Limited.

1. Qualification criteria included the person being 18-60 years of age, not receiving any other social grant, or not contributing to or be eligible to the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) or have any financial support from any other source. The person needed access to a mobile cell phone number and banking account. This disqualified people without these. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. STATS SA Quarterly Labour Survey Force Survey, August 2022 - <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15685> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. i.e. Where no member of the household is employed - e.g. 47.8% in Limpopo, 47.3% in Eastern Cape, 45.3% in Free State, 43% in North West provinces. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Estimates are that 44.9% of the SA population was moderately to severely food insecure before the impact of C-19 (Wegerif 2022, quoting FAO et al 2021). How COVID-19 affected food security in SA, referring to [Measuring Food Security in South Africa: Applying the Food Insecurity Experience Scale](https://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1854&PPN=Report-03-00-19&SCH=73280) - almost 23,6 % of SA in 2020 were affected by moderate to severe food insecurity, while almost 14,9% experienced severe food insecurity. Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) has since 2019 introduced the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) recommended by the United Nations in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals 2 (SDG 2- ending hunger and achieving food for all people by 2030). The FIES indicates that “the proportion of the population affected by moderate food insecurity plus the population classified as severely food insecure was 17,3% (10,1 million) in South Africa in 2019, while those classified with severe food insecurity was 7% (4,1 million)”, with the female population being the worst affected by both moderate to severe food insecurity and severe food insecurity when compared to males - <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15273>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Wegerif, 2022, quoting PMBEJD, 2021; Spaul et al, 2021 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/two-years-of-ters-disbursements-to-preserve-employment-sees-initial-budget-topped-2022-04-04> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.google.com/search?q=what+were+the+criteria+to+receive+the+r5%2C000+grant+from+the+department+of+agriculture+to+farmers+during+covid+in+south+africa%3F&rlz=1C1CHZN_enZA966ZA966&oq=wh&aqs=chrome.0.69i59j69i57j69i59l2j35i39j0i433i512l2j0i131i433i512j0i433i512j0i131i433i650.3963j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> Available to poultry, livestock and vegetable farmers , they had to be actively farming for a minimum of 12 months and in the production cycle or season at the time, be registered and with an annual turnover between R50 000 and R1 million, prioritising women, youth and people with disabilities. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. http://childrencount.uct.ac.za/indicator.php?domain=4&indicator=95#:~:text=The%20prevalence%20of%20stunting%20is,%2C%20than%20girls%20(25%25).

   UNICEF: https://southafrica.un.org/en/123531-slow-violence-malnutrition-south-africa

   The latest Global Nutrition Report states that SA has made as far as stunting is concerned no progress has been registered or is even worsening.

   <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/africa/southern-africa/south-africa/>); [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. STAS SA 2019 – <https://www.google.com/search?q=2%2F3+of+those+who+reported+experiencing+hunger+in+2017+in+urban+areas&rlz=1C1CHZN_enZA966ZA966&oq=2%2F3+of+those+who+reported+experiencing+hunger+in+2017+in+urban+areas&aqs=chrome..69i57.9922j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This is linked to increased land consolidation (current estimates are that 0.28% of the farms account for about 80% of the value of the food produced) and financialisation of primary agriculture (e.g*.*the *Farmsecure* investment fund has acquired 140,000 hectares which account for 7% of SA grain production - Wagerif 2022, P. 110). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Wegerif, 2022, p. 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. - The following are some of examples of price increases in food items that are critical for the most impoverished: maize meal (23% / 34%??); samp (28%)’ cooking oil: (30%); white bread (18%); brown bread (16%). In addition, the price of some vegetables also rose by astronomical rates: onions (99%); tomatoes (23%); carrots (23%); spinach (26%Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity, Household Affordability Index, December 2022 - <https://pmbejd.org.za/index.php/advocacy/> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. (<https://www.google.com/search?q=competiton+commission+launches+commission+of+enquiry+into+rising+food+prices&rlz=1C1CHZN_enZA966ZA966&oq=competiton+commission+launches+commission+of+enquiry+into+rising+food+prices&aqs=chrome..69i57.26918j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. - e.g. Tiger Brands showed 88% increase in pre-tax profits and increase of 54% in earning per share. Shoprite (the largest supermarket in SA) increase pre-tax profits by 19% in last financial year and dividends paid to shareholders were 40% higher than the previous year (Wegerif, 2022) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. **The** WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture and regional and free trade agreements force developing countries to open up economies to cheap and dumped imports, and limit support to their own farmers. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Similarly to other countries (such as China and India), despite WTO arguments that these and export bans distort trade. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)