

Politics of food and hunger

Food is a health and social justice issue before it is business, and we need to find a way to provide nutritious food for the poor



OPINION

Themba Mthembu

IT'S ironic that the people who work on the land to grow food in South Africa are least able to afford nutritious meals to feed their families.

In fact, rural people who live in wide-open spaces where food can be grown, remain the poorest of the poor and among the most undernourished citizens of our country.

These ironies come to mind with the approach of World Food Day, which is commemorated on October 16 each

year. The day marks the founding of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FOA). It was also declared to raise public awareness of the struggle against hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

This is a complex struggle tied to the political economy of food, which is marked by collusions and cartels. There is economic concentration in the entire food value chain.

It is said that three percent of South African farms produce 90% of our food.

Agro-processing is dominated by a few large entities and, so too, is the retail sector. A report by trade union federation Cosatu noted that five major retailers have a joint share of 60% of the market.

The result is ever-rising food prices. This, coupled with job losses, low minimum wages and the casualisation of labour means that household incomes are falling and a growing number of families can no longer afford to buy a nutritionally balanced basket of food.

Worst affected are farm workers who are among the lowest-paid workers in South Africa.

The Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy based at Stellenbosch University found that farm workers and their families cannot afford a daily balanced diet — the irony I referred to earlier that the

people who help produce our food can least afford it.

The battle to end food insecurity and address poverty eradication begins with addressing the exploitation of rural workers.

The current drought has seen food prices soar and who knows what we will be paying by Christmas. Currently, more than 13,8 million South Africans go to bed hungry and 46% are classified as food insecure.

The number of families facing food insecurity is growing. This has been pointed out by the work being done by the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action (Pacsa).

The organisation looks at food inflation and affordability, and how this affects working-class households.

By August, Pacsa had found that the price of a food basket had increased by 19,6% over last year's prices. According to Pacsa, a nutritionally complete basket for a family of five would cost R3 125,87, while the minimum wage in South Africa languishes at around R2 300.

Already poor families spend over 60% of their income on food and as such are most affected by food inflation.

All of this points to yet another irony in the politics of food — the high cost of nutritious food which is essential for the health and wellbeing of the population. Health researchers say that poor-quality diets are linked to rising rates of obesity in our country.

As a result of poor nutrition, one in five children suffers from malnutrition and learning disabilities.

The school feeding schemes feed over eight million children, but experts say a shaky foundation was laid long before that and that pregnant mothers who cannot afford adequate diets give birth to premature babies and babies with a low birth weight.

These are factors that can hamper a child's future growth and development. This is why the National Development Plan states that by 2030, feeding schemes in schools should cover all children in need and provide food that is high in nutrition and rich in vitamins.

In the same vein, the KZN Department of Agriculture is looking at how to deal with access to nutritious and affordable food for the poor.

If the health and wellbeing of our citizens are paramount, then we must talk

about nutrients and how this determines the type of food we produce.

We have begun a process of consultation to review our policies and practices around food security.

Key to this consultation is finding ways to provide nutrient-rich food within the context of climate change.

This is in keeping with the theme for World Food Day, which is: "The climate is changing: food and agriculture must too".

As a department, we aim to contribute a massive programme on food security. This trajectory gets under way with the 2016 World Food Day, which is being commemorated in the Umlalazi Local Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal today. • Themba Mthembu is the KZN MEC for Agriculture and Rural Development.