

A quarter of South Africans regularly go hungry

Thabo Seseane Jr.
27 October 2014

A report released by Oxfam South Africa on October 16, World Food Day, found that 25 percent of the country's 53 million people regularly go hungry. An additional 28.3 percent are at risk of hunger. The study, "Hidden Hunger in South Africa", was undertaken in the provinces of Limpopo, Western Cape and Eastern Cape.

Speaking at its release at an event at Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, Oxfam South Africa economic justice campaign manager Rashmi Mistry said, "South Africa is supposed to be a food-secure nation, producing enough food to adequately feed everyone."

The supposed food security of South Africans is a point of pride for owners of the country's estimated 35,000 commercial farms. These social layers protest against any mooted reorganisation of the agricultural sector, ominously pointing to the experience of Zimbabwe as what awaits South Africa should market forces in the rural belt be interfered with. Commercial farmers own the majority of 110 million hectares, worth some R155 billion (US\$14.4 billion).

This cultivated and grazing land supplies export markets, as well as a domestic food industry dominated by large companies controlling pricing and distribution of products. One result is that women and children, who have less means of getting such products, suffer disproportionately from hunger.

"Women in the communities covered by this study are still largely responsible for feeding their families," reads the report. "[They] are further burdened when family members are suffering from diseases such as HIV or AIDS, with time and money needed for food spent on caring for the sick."

Unemployment is estimated at a minimum 25 percent nationally, excluding discouraged jobseekers. More than 15 million people, including some with HIV,

receive some kind of social grant. The amount received by unemployed parents, guardians and caregivers amounts to R310 (\$28) per child per month. The old-age grant totals a maximum R1,350 (\$122) per senior citizen per month.

This pittance severely limits the foods accessible to the 28.25 million South Africans who suffer from food insecurity. Having a job does not improve prospects much either. "People in [permanent] employment or who have casual jobs indicated that they are food-secure in the first week after their wages are paid", reads the report, "but are ... food-insecure for the remaining three weeks in the month."

Chronic hunger can have far-reaching psychological effects, especially among children. The report quotes Elzetta, from a youth-headed household in Bloemendal, Eastern Cape, saying, "We have to buy the cheapest of the cheapest. We are rated as the cheapest of the cheapest."

Child- or youth-headed households in South Africa are home to 20 percent of all children, according to Statistics SA. In 2011, children younger than 14 accounted for 40 percent of the population. Assuming a roughly comparable proportion in 2014, this means some 4.24 million children live in homes unsupervised by adults, thanks largely to the numbers of couples who have succumbed to HIV or AIDS.

For child-headed households in Bloemendal, the upshot is a staple regimen of white bread and sugared water or cheap juice. Afrikaans-speaking locals call it the "poppie water diet".

The Oxfam report expands on poor communities having "good access to bad food but bad access to good food".

Malnutrition is especially severe among women and children, with the researchers saying that childhood

stunting “has increased to 26.5 percent”. They add that obesity levels are amongst the highest in the world, at 42 percent for women.

South Africa's ill-fed masses, the report notes, increasingly include those engaged in subsistence farming. This is due to factors like climate change, and lack of water, tools, manpower or knowledge.

Seafaring communities fare little better. As a possible reason, Oxfam cites tenuous or restricted fishing rights. Cases of corruption and maladministration have also curtailed the size of catches brought in by subsistence anglers.

The South African Commercial Linefish Association instituted court action against then-Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Tina Joemat-Pettersson, last year. As a result, for the first time in South African history she had to scrap the entire fishing rights allocation process (FRAP) for 2013. Under the FRAP, hundreds of small commercial fishermen had inexplicably lost their rights to go to sea for a living.

Shaheen Moolla, legal adviser to the fishermen, said the minister had not supplied answering papers to the association's court action. “She knew she could not go on oath and defend this process,” Moolla added.

In September, the member of the provincial cabinet for education in Gauteng, Panyaza Lesufi, announced that his department would cancel feeding schemes for quintile four and quintile five schools. South African schools are subdivided into five socioeconomic bands, with quintiles one and two containing the poorest 40 percent of schools.

Educators and observers objected to Lesufi's announcement. They argue that even the most privileged student bodies have among them pupils from indigent homes. Many of these children eat only once a day—at school.

The Oxfam report holds out the hope of eliminating widespread hunger through legislation. “A National Food Act should be developed”, it states, “in a bottom-up process with communities who are facing hunger. It should be adequately resourced and should include mechanisms for accountability.”

Speaking as an Oxfam guest on Constitution Hill, SA Human Rights Commission Deputy Chair Pregs Govender maintained that the African National Congress (ANC) government is aware of the issue of endemic hunger. It was a question, she claimed, of

those in government “being moved to use their power to change this reality”.

The ANC government is the problem, not the solution. It helps no one to propose new legislation or invoke the constitution as a means of inspiring those in power to act in the interests of the poor. The constitution that Govender held up as the noblest guide to government action is repeatedly lauded, as she knows, as the best in the world. But it is a bourgeois constitution, sanctifying capitalist property relations.

The right to adequate nutrition is meaningless so long as the means to produce food remains the property of agribusinesses working, not for human need, but for private profit. The constitution cannot oblige “the State to take reasonable and other legislative measures” to realise each citizen's right to adequate nutrition.

That is because this same elitist document holds up as a higher good, the “right” of an employer to exploit his employees. The owners of production are thus legally obligated to take food out of the mouths of workers to pay interest to bankers and dividends to investors. The right to food for all can only be secured with the removal of the ANC from power, through the struggle for a workers' government based on a socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact