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Growing currency rather than carrots – Why are SA poor still hungry?

While vulnerability to hunger has halved in South Africa over the last decade, households are becoming increasingly dependent on social wages to purchase rather than grow their own food. This is according to the latest report on food security and agriculture by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). Article compiled by Lani van Vuuren.

The right of every South African to food is not only captured as a basic human right in the Constitution; the eradication of hunger and poverty remains at the top of government's development agenda. This is particularly important as good nutrition is vital to ensure the improvements in health and human capital needed to achieve most of the country's other development goals.

Achieving food security requires that households have adequate

resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet; that the aggregate availability of physical supplies of food is sufficient; and that households are able to utilise food. The latter requires that households have access to essential nutrients, potable water, adequate sanitation and the appropriate knowledge about optimum food utilisation.

According to the *Food Security and Agriculture 202-2011* report, published earlier this year South

Africa has managed to maintain its ability to meet national food requirements, yet large numbers of households still do not enjoy food security. While families' vulnerability to hunger has decreased from around 24% in 2002 to around 12% in 2011, one in five South African households still experience difficulty to access food (the latter being the focus of the Stats SA report).

Households in rural areas are more likely to experience difficulty to access food. Around a quarter of households in rural areas experience inadequate and/or severely inadequate access to food, compared to a fifth of urban households. Thus the provinces with the highest percentages of households that experience severe inadequate access to food are Mpumalanga, Northern Cape and North West. Interestingly, Limpopo, itself a relatively poor province compared to others, reports better access to food in comparison to any other provinces, including largely urbanised provinces such as Gauteng and the Western Cape.

Nearly 38% of households in South Africa are headed by women. According to the survey these households are more likely to be poor and thus more likely to experience inadequate access to food. Poorer households are also less likely to consume a diet that is sufficiently diverse to allow for adequate nutrition.

WAGE ECONOMY

The survey confirmed that access to food generally improves with income. Urbanisation and declining agrarian activities have transformed the South Africa economy into one which is wage based. Household income and employment are the main drivers of better food access, dietary diversity and, per implication, food security.

While almost two thirds of households reported receiving salaries or wages, it is disconcerting to note that around 22% of South African households list social grants as their

main source of income. The latter is particularly pertinent in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. The report notes that "social grants have become an indispensable safety net for poor households" and that "this current high level of dependence on social grants is arguably not sustainable."

It is interesting to note that households headed by elderly individuals are less likely to experience inadequate access to food. This is certainly linked to the availability of old age grants to qualifying individuals over the age of 60. This observation is supported by the finding that households with a larger percentage of elderly members are less likely to lack access to food than households with fewer or no elderly members.

The importance of social grants in terms of food security is also underlined by the fact that poor households who receive social grants are less likely to experience inadequate access to food than poor households without social grants. The latter set of households are usually smaller families located in urban areas, often living in informal dwellings and headed by younger males, who are dependent on remittances for survival. Often, they are labour migrants who seek work in

the city to send money home to their rural families.

THE LINK BETWEEN FOOD AND SERVICES

The survey noted a strong correlation between access to services and access to adequate food. "Access to some basic services can be associated with higher socio-economic status, and particularly income." For example, households with access to piped or tap water on site or off-site were found to be less likely to have inadequate access to

"Even households with sufficient access to food may become caught in the food insecurity cycle as a result of the risks of diarrhoea and malnutrition associated with the use of unsafe water."

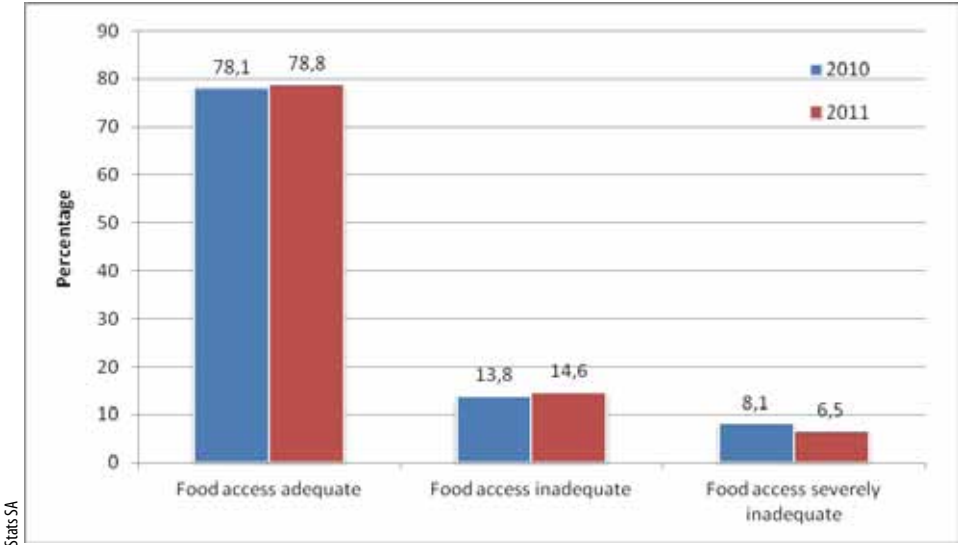
food while households that still use unsafe sources of water are more likely to be food insecure.

The lack of basic services in some areas locks households with inadequate access to food in a vicious cycle. "The use of unsafe water increases the risk of diarrhoea and infectious diseases, lowering

Households headed by elderly individuals are less likely to experience problems with access to food, indicating a strong dependence of households on old age grants.



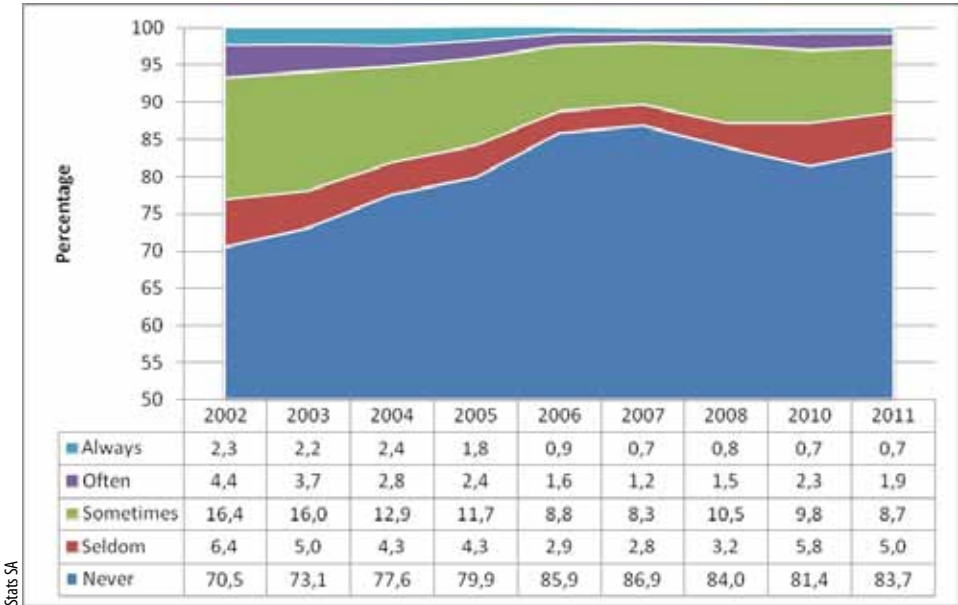
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resistance and reducing nutritional status, which in turn impacts food security status negatively,” the report notes. “Even households with sufficient access to food may become caught in the food insecurity cycle as a result of the risks of diarrhoea and malnutrition associated with the use of unsafe water.”

BUYING FOOD VERSUS GROWING FOOD

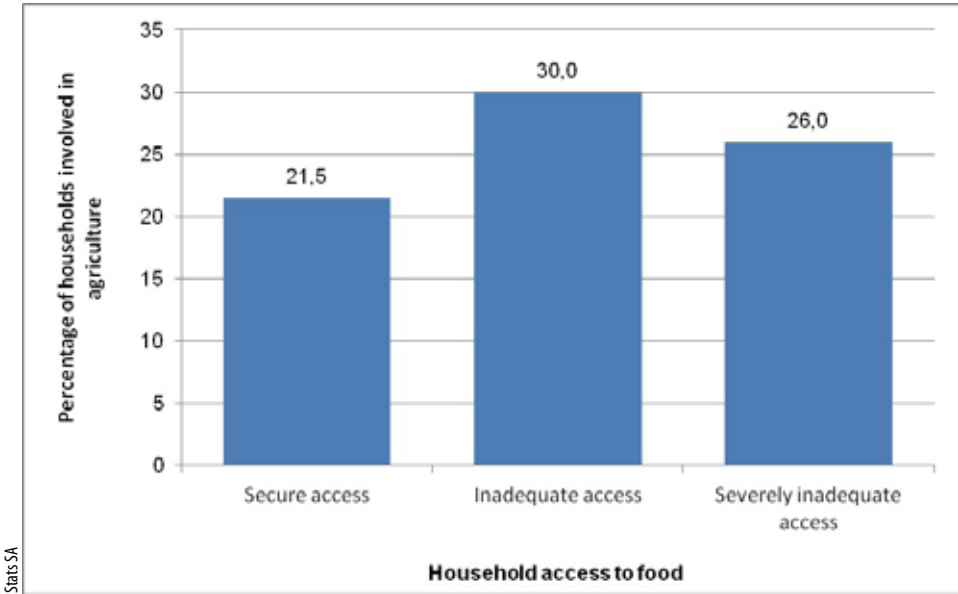
While household food production is widely considered to be a potentially important approach to promote household food security, a major finding of the Stats SA report is that agriculture has apparently ceased to be an important component of household food security as households are far more likely to buy food than to grow their own. Ironically, one of the reasons could be the increased access to social grants, which is reducing the incentive to



“Around a quarter of households in rural areas experience inadequate and/or severely inadequate access to food.”

households to use available land for food production. Less than a quarter of households in South Africa were found to be involved in agricultural activities, including doing agriculture as a hobby.

Unlike their counterparts in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa rural households were found to only grow their own food as a last resort to stave off hunger. “Households that say their agricultural activities serve as the main source of food are most likely to be food insecure. It might very well be that these households



Top left: Comparison of food adequacy status of households for 2010 and 2011.
Middle left: Household experiences of hunger, 2002-2011.
Bottom left: Household access to food by participation in agriculture, 2011.

start practising agriculture only once their access to non-agricultural sources of income area already limited.”

Nationally, more than 84% of households that are engaged in agriculture do so to produce extra food

“Agriculture has apparently ceased to be an important component of household food security as households are far more likely to buy food than to grow their own.”

for the family, while only 4% use agriculture to produce the majority of their food. While less than 2% of South African households practise agriculture as smallholders, subsistence farming is far more prevalent, with 18% of households practising this form of agriculture. Households in the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Limpopo are most likely to engage in agriculture, with the latter province reporting that 53% of its households practice some sort of farming.

The report recommends that where there is access to land, it is vital that the opportunities provided by such access are exploited as much as possible in order to ensure advancement on the zero hunger and reduction of poverty agendas. “More households should make use of available land as a livelihood and income generation asset. This has the potential to reduce the current high dependence of households in especially rural areas on social grants. However, indications are that the sector needs to be significantly revitalised as those currently engaged in production have significantly poorer food access than the population as a whole.”

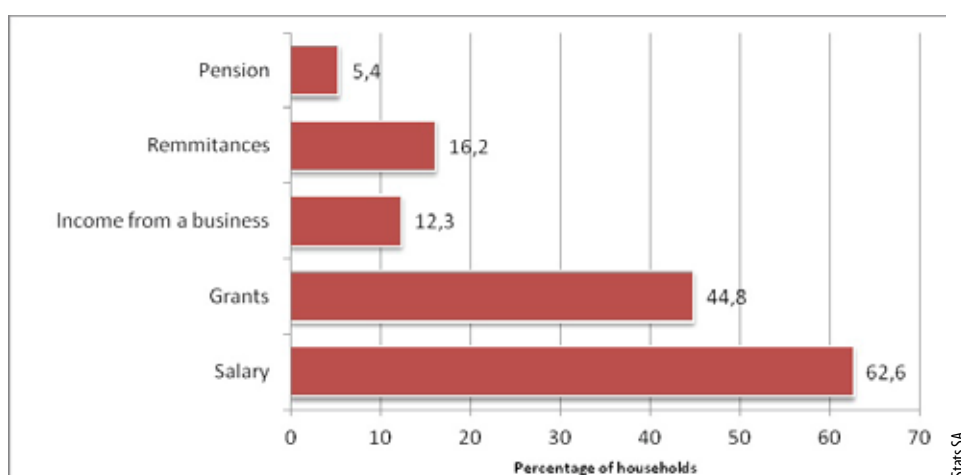
Structural constraints such as the costs of agricultural inputs and problems with access to land, markets and so forth will have to be dealt with before such a strategy



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Above: Women are increasingly taking responsibility for subsistence farming as an additional livelihood strategy.

Below: Percentage distribution of sources of household income, 2011.



will translate into reducing hunger, poverty and inequality. Stats SA also sees room for improvement in urban agriculture, which is only practiced to a very limited extent at present. “A greater involvement in and focus on local municipal developing planning and programmes on

the part of the national Department of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries may help to give greater impetus to this agenda.”

- To access to report, *Food Security and Agriculture 202-2011*, Visit: www.statssa.gov.za 