

FOODWAYS OF THE POOR IN SOUTH AFRICA: HOW POOR PEOPLE GET FOOD, WHAT THEY EAT, AND HOW THIS SHAPES OUR FOOD SYSTEM

KEY ISSUES:

- How do poor people in South Africa feed themselves – what food do they get, how and where do they access it?
- What influences the choices poor people make in terms of food preference, access and consumption?
- How does the rise of Big Food affect these foodways?
- What are the health impacts of these foodways?
- How are the provisioning strategies of the poor shaping food economies from retail to production?

BACKGROUND

Foodways are the set of strategies shaping what food people choose as well as how and where they access and consume it. Informed by culture and social context, the foodways of the poor simultaneously respond to and influence food systems change.

South African food systems are in a process of change. These changes are caused by many factors, including urbanisation, consolidation and concentration in food value chains, and changing dietary patterns. These transitions have important consequences for the nature of poverty and food insecurity.

However, poor people are not simply passive victims of food systems transition. They make concrete and deliberate decisions about what foods they eat, where they get the food they want and need, and how to deal with the difficulties this involves. These strategies are often complex and are informed by local knowledge, cultural preference, economic considerations and many other factors. In addition to responding to price and convenience, foodways express peoples' aspirations, their sense of identity and belonging. These foodways play a role in influencing the strategies of 'Big Food' - powerful food corporations which are transforming food environments.

This is particularly important because the foodways of the poor and the values they express can promote non-communicable diseases and undermine immunity. While they embody rational and understandable responses to poverty, they can also entrench processes of impoverishment and poor health. This policy brief explores these links between the foodways of the poor and food system transition in South Africa.

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FOOD INSECURITY, POVERTY AND FOODWAYS

Every day, the poor in South Africa face the challenge of nourishing themselves in the context of rapid urbanisation, unemployment, stagnating incomes and steep food price increases. They adopt various strategies to make ends meet. These include reducing the quality and quantity of food, and choosing to consume cheap, energy-dense foods (*pap*, bread, sugary drinks and snacks), that are easily accessible but nutritionally poor.

This contributes towards the triple burden of malnutrition – the simultaneous existence of hunger, obesity, and micronutrient deficiency. To cope with the threat of immediate hunger, poor South Africans therefore make choices that erode their long-term health, employment and development prospects.

The cost of treating diet-related illness is compounded by a loss of earnings and assets which can trap households in poverty. In addition to the personal suffering this entails, it has severe implications for public healthcare and the economy alike with health costs and productivity losses amounting to billions each year.

Effective policy responses are hindered by blurred notions of poverty and food insecurity. Official poverty statistics are based on an income poverty line derived from the cost of a standard food basket. The basket is calculated from consumption data. This is problematic because it assumes that these foods are available and accessible throughout the country at similar prices without taking into account the many different ways poor people access food.

In addition, this food basket is energy-dense and micro-nutrient deficient. Accordingly, many people are not officially regarded as poor when in reality their income enables access to a basket of food that may provide barely enough calories, but undermines their health in the long term.

Such poverty lines thus under-estimate poverty and food insecurity, limiting the attention and resources directed towards poverty relief.

Without addressing structural poverty which makes healthy options simply unaffordable for most, health education initiatives exhorting the poor to adopt healthier lifestyles are misdirected.

Access to food is influenced not only by money, but also by geography. Multidimensional and spatial measures of deprivation show that the depth and experience of poverty and food insecurity vary spatially, and that poverty is particularly severe in former homeland areas and in dense informal settlements around cities. Longitudinal studies reveal that a large proportion of South Africa's poor cycle in and out of poverty and hunger. This means that they are particularly vulnerable to price increases and income losses.

However, the poor are not helpless victims. In negotiating often hostile food environments, poor people actively leverage knowledge, social networks and meagre cash resources in ways that shape local food environments and influence the wider food system. To promote sustainable and just food systems governance, policy makers, change agents and researchers need to understand these foodways as well as the values, identities and aspirations they express.

It is therefore important to understand not only how poor people in different settings change their foodways to adapt to shocks as well as to the specific constraints of their different food environments, but also how these foodways influence the food system.

Household purchasing and consumption

What food poor households are buying and eating emerges from a review of expenditure (Statistics SA) and dietary diversity data (SASAS; SANHANES; AFSUN). Although maize and bread are essential, high-energy staple foods of the poor, sugar and sweets as well as soft drinks are also prevalent. Despite poverty, expenditure on meat is conspicuously high and increases for non-poor households.

When people manage to escape poverty, dairy intake is significantly increased. By contrast, the

poor consume a limited range and quantity of fruit, legumes, nuts and eggs, even though these represent affordable and healthy alternatives providing essential micro-nutrients and proteins. This dietary profile drives the rise in obesity, hypertension, diabetes and heart disease alongside compromised immunity to infectious illness.

Strategies employed by the poor to source food

Food sourcing strategies of the poor are diverse and rely heavily on the informal market. Although most poor people rely on occasional visits to supermarkets to source bulk foods cheaply, most rely on the informal food trade for their more frequent provisioning.

The consumption of street foods like “kota”, “vetkoek”, chips and “walkie-talkies” reflects the need for convenient, affordable foods that can be eaten on the go by poor urbanites commuting across the spatial divides that fragment South African cities. Eating outside of the home is very common, and includes the consumption of street foods and to a lesser extent fast foods.

For the food insecure, social networks are an important food channel, enabling them to buy food on credit, borrow food or eat with neighbours when times are tough. In rural and peri-urban areas, the gathering of seasonal wild foods plays an important supplementary role.

However, urban agriculture, food aid, or community food kitchens appear to play a minor role despite consistent emphasis in food security programming.

Foodways tell stories about poverty, status and wealth. At first glance, the foodways of the South African poor may seem irrational: although bread, pap and sugar are cheap ways to ensure dietary energy, it seems strange that soft drinks, meat and dairy are so popular.

Why choose them rather than affordable and health promoting options such as fruit, vegetables and pulses? These patterns only

begin to make sense in light of the symbolic values and identity narratives communicated by food:

While **pap** (maize) represents the foundational food constituting a shared African identity, consumption of meat is seen not only as a mark of wealth, but also specifically of power and autonomy. Various chicken snacks, being the most affordable meat, are therefore especially popular among the poor urban men.

Chesanyama shops where people grill their own meat on the street are popular social spaces among men. Consumption of dairy, particularly cheese and fermented milk, also signifies wealth and affluence.



Image credit: Leif Petersen

By contrast, vegetables are seen as women's food and of secondary value, reflecting subordinate female gender stereotypes. Beans, samp and wild greens invoke images of backwardness and rural poverty.

Branded soft drinks and fast food are a conspicuous sign of participating in the mainstream economy. Visible consumption of food at work and in the street demonstrates social status while sharing at home or in celebrations nurtures social networks and constitutes community.

In summary, while poor people avoid hunger by relying on energy-dense staples, they also express gender and class identities, cultivate social capital and respond to the stigma of

poverty and exclusion attached to vegetables, pulses and wild foods by consuming meat, dairy, street foods, sweets and carbonated soft drinks.

POOR PEOPLE'S STRATEGIES SHAPE FOOD VALUE CHAINS

Demands driven by the foodways of the poor send messages upstream into formal and informal value chains, affecting retail, distribution, processing and production. Informal trade responds to these demands, providing affordable and convenient access to food in impoverished and spatially-dislocated rural, peri-urban and informal urban settlements. Formal value chains also respond to these demands as Big Food makes ultra-processed, energy-dense food more available, accessible and appealing to the poor through retail brands, packaging and labelling and by extending retail outlets into poorer areas.

Advertising and media employ sophisticated market research, advertising and branding strategies that respond to the values and aspirations attached to food. The messaging projected by media to sell Big Food invokes, exploits and manipulates the aspirations of the poor, amplifying and distorting their foodways. This legitimises and entrenches consumption of maize meal, bread, sugar, soft drinks, dairy, meat and fast foods as symbols of tradition, power, success, and the good life.

By fuelling demand for high-volume, low-value processed commodities, Big Food and media reinforce consolidation and concentration in these value chains. These processes in turn feed back into social and economic transitions which drive poverty, urbanisation, and environmental degradation, nurturing a vicious cycle accelerating food system transition and malnutrition.

While Big Food reaps big profits, it is the poor who shoulder the growing burden of poor health, stunted development, reduced educational attainment and productivity, and ultimately it is they and the state who foot the bill for cheap food.

GLOSSARY/ACRONYMS

AFSUN: African Food Security Urban Network

Big Food: The powerful network of corporations controlling regional and global food value chains.

Chesanyama: Meat grilled at a roadside grill.

Food System: The coherent set of processes and interactions linking stakeholders operating along multiple food value chains.

Kota: A quarter-loaf of bread hollowed and filled with various garnishes.

SANHANES: South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey

SASAS: South African Social Attitudes Survey

Food value chain: The activities, agents and relationships by which value is added to and derived from food, from production via processing, packaging, distribution, retail, to consumption and waste.

Vetkoek: A dumpling fried in oil.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Revise food poverty line:** Poverty lines need to take into account how the poor access food in different settings and raise the bar to accommodate the real costs of healthy diets.
2. **Establish pro-poor value chain standards:** Incentivise Big Food to develop and enforce appropriate and transparent environmental, social, nutritional and pricing standards for priority value chains serving the poor, especially maize, wheat, poultry, fresh fruit and vegetables. This should be communicated through labelling that responds to the values and symbolism embedded in food. Improved access to relevant information can empower poor people to optimise food choice, sourcing and bargaining power.
3. **Enhance Informal Trade:** As informal trade and street food are among the most

important sources of food for poor people, policies should protect, capacitate and support informal food economies, particularly traders providing access to dietary staples, fresh fruit and vegetables. Subsidised market facilities for fresh produce could improve local access and reduce costs. Collaborating with traders to enhance the accessibility and safety of trading facilities and develop appropriate standards can leverage valuable economic and public health benefits. Focus on what is really actionable.

- 4. Improve governance of media and communication in local food environments:** Monitor, regulate and tax food promotion, advertisements and communication in the media, public institutions and in public spaces like transport facilities, schools and clinics. Penalise the advertising of unhealthy, highly-processed foods high in sugar and salt and include health risk advice. Use media tax revenue to fund health messaging that responds to cultural values and stereotypes and engages with the institutions, organisations and role-models which shape culture and identity, such as faith-based alliances, universities, sports celebrities, musicians and TV personalities.
- 5. Validate diverse, healthy foodways:** Incentivise media to cultivate narratives that promote healthy foodways responsive to the capabilities of the poor and derived from inclusive and sustainable food value chains. Promote critical interrogation of food-based gender, race, class and ethnic stereotypes. Encourage researchers and media to explore foodways that challenge dominant food narratives

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