



**Covid-19**  
**Are we asking the right questions about...**

**Food supplies and poverty alleviation in the former homelands?**

## **Introduction**

Most South Africans have limited awareness of events outside of the major metros. This myopia has been exacerbated during the Covid-19 lockdown by restrictions on travel. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that, although the society is undergoing rapid urbanisation, approximately 30 per cent of the population (17 million) continue to live in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> The territories that once fell under the homelands contain the majority of this population and are relatively densely settled.

Although we have not been able to visit these areas in lockdown, reports suggest that they are being hit especially hard by the social and economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic and associated government response. In the longer term, these areas will face even greater challenges. Relatively high levels of poverty and undernutrition already prevail and may turn into serious episodes of malnutrition. Deep-seated processes of economic decline are likely to intensify.

We need a much clearer understanding of the conditions that prevail at present. The glimpses we get suggest widespread joblessness, hunger, and desperation, and that current forms of assistance are profoundly inadequate. Further socioeconomic collapse in these regions may accelerate urbanisation and some of those who join this desperate trek will end up on the margins of urban society, poorly equipped to fend for themselves.

## **Apartheid's grim legacy**

An especially pernicious legacy of the Apartheid system was the disproportionately high levels of unemployment, disease, infant mortality, and undernutrition that existed in the homelands before 1994. Along with these economic disadvantages went limitations on political and legal rights. The foundations of government were an unelected, increasingly co-opted system of chieftainship and tribal councils, which by the 1980s suffered from pervasive corruption and inability to deliver basic services to local communities.

Tragically, after 26 years of democracy, many of these features remain intact. The ANC government has increasingly put its weight behind largely unreformed systems of chieftainship. While there is also a local council system, these have struggled to



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During the Covid-19 pandemic, CDE will release a new series of publications titled: 'Are we asking the right questions about...'. These will be short reports that contribute to public discussion about the crisis and how the country is responding.

The authors of this publication are **William Beinart**, emeritus professor, Oxford University and **Peter Delius**, emeritus professor, University of the Witwatersrand.

establish their authority and to manage income streams. They are routinely placed at the bottom of rankings in terms of capacity, liquidity, and delivery, but feature at the top of the charts of economic and social disadvantage. One positive development has been the expansion of social transfers, especially pensions and child support grants, which have reduced the incidence of extreme poverty, but this improvement has been offset by increasing levels of unemployment in recent years. In most rural areas about 50 per cent of people were unemployed (on the expanded definition) prior to Covid-19, compared to 38 per cent nationally.<sup>2</sup> These levels of joblessness are certain to have grown exponentially in this crisis and remittances from migrant workers, which have long been of declining significance, will plummet further.

Despite ambitious programmes, the delivery of sustainable water and sanitation programmes has been far from adequate for everyday life, much less for a pandemic. In recent years, the sector has been disabled by corruption.<sup>3</sup> These areas, in addition, have relatively high levels of female- and child-headed households, and child mortality rates below the age of five. There are shocking levels of stunted growth as a result of undernutrition, which affect more than a quarter of children nationally. Childhood undernutrition has been shown to diminish children's educational capabilities and achievements. Food security was already fragile in these areas before the pandemic. Aside from the suffering involved, the country is squandering vast quantities of human capital. To make matters worse, these regions also have the lowest levels of health services, the worst performing schools, and high levels of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and silicosis.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence attesting to disadvantage and vulnerability tends to be clouded by tenacious stereotypes about self-sufficient rural life. Most of these areas are rural in relation to the distance from cities, but not in the sense that communities derive their livelihoods from agriculture. Although the government does not collect adequate statistics, village surveys suggest that income from farming has declined over the last 50 years.<sup>5</sup> In rural villages, households on average produce about 25 percent of their food, and the great majority of households do not derive a significant return from their land. They depend on local spaza shops and more distant supermarkets for their food supplies.

In the large dense settlements within the former homelands, such as those north of Pretoria in North West Province, or around Acornhoek in Mpumalanga, on the edges of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, or on the roads to Thohoyandou in Limpopo, dependence on purchased food is even higher. Villages have been displaced by sprawling peri-urban zones – one merging with the other. People have flocked towards areas with good transport links, employment, and retail outlets. Food prices are lower in these centres, but reaching them involves heavy transport costs for people living in more remote villages.

## **Food security**

Journalists have reported incidents of acute food shortages, especially in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that the government imposed the lockdown before it had adequately prepared for the distribution of food. There are also widespread allegations of political favouritism in who receives food parcels and of significant areas which are not being reached by government food distribution programmes.<sup>7</sup> While there is a comprehensive network of local stores across these communities, their prices are high and their supplies erratic, especially at present. High levels of unemployment have meant that households do not have sufficient cash to buy food and other essential goods. Recent attempts to lock down street traders have exacerbated food supply problems, especially of fresh fruit and vegetables, and have had damaging impacts on smallholder farmers, who supply some of the produce.<sup>8</sup>

The shutting down of schools and school feeding schemes during lockdown has deprived children from poor families of this secure meal to get through the day.<sup>9</sup> Access to food parcels, pensions, and other social grants sometimes requires long hours in congested queues that heightens the risks of infection. Extraordinary footage shows huge crowds of people in Bizana and Lusikisiki, towns in the former Transkei, Eastern Cape, in search of food parcels with no capacity to distance themselves. Similar scenes have played out in the major shopping areas serving Mpumalanga and Limpopo. The fact that a disproportionate number of rural people are older men and women adds to the levels of vulnerability. Grandparents have played an increasing role in caring for children and their loss, tragic in itself, will damage the social fabric for children.<sup>10</sup> Tens of thousands of non-South Africans are being excluded from most of the available support systems supplied by the government. There are also alarming indications of heightened xenophobia.<sup>11</sup>

In the medium term, it will be vital to create monitoring systems that are able to generate regular and credible reports. For this to be effective, it will be essential to draw on, develop, and integrate existing monitoring capacity.

One important step would be to create a basic monitoring template, which will make it easier to evaluate and compare reports and create an overview of the processes at work.<sup>12</sup>

South Africans should be asking tough questions about how to ensure that supplies of food reach the neediest households. It appears unlikely that either local councils or traditional authorities will play a sufficiently effective role. There is therefore a need to explore additional delivery systems that can operate at the required scale, including churches, charities, NGOs, and businesses.<sup>13</sup> Increases in social transfers should help in the short term but SASSA has been woefully tardy at initiating delivery.<sup>14</sup> These payments are also by no means comprehensive and the special additional payments are due to be scaled back within a few months. While strong arguments have been made for a universal basic income grant, our deteriorating fiscal position makes it unlikely that it will be introduced any time soon, or that it would be sustainable in the longer term.

Fortunately there are already public works programmes in place, which could be expanded. But both the Expanded and Community Public Works Programmes have promised much more than they have delivered. Hard questions need to be asked about if and how current weaknesses can be rapidly overcome. The government should differentiate between programmes that can be rapidly expanded and those that will only yield significant results if they are built on a more incremental basis. In both instances, we need to be especially careful to use simple targeting methods – such as queuing – and not to overload programmes with multiple objectives, which dissipate their impact and expand opportunities for corruption.<sup>15</sup>

### **Boosting food production in former homeland areas**

An obvious question to ask in the face of a crisis that affects food security is the potential for local farmers to step into the gap. Suggestions along these lines are often made on the basis of a somewhat romanticised view of farming in these areas. Agricultural production in the former homelands has probably been declining over many decades, but a significant proportion of households have gardens on their residential plots, which in most rural villages are at least 0.1 ha., and which provide sufficient space for some maize and vegetables.<sup>16</sup> In some rural districts, such as Bizana in the former Transkei, garden production seems to be expanding.

There has been rhetoric for many years both at the national and provincial level about expanding smallholder agriculture. President Ramaphosa has recently reiterated it as a priority area.<sup>17</sup> But relatively little has been done. One striking aspect of the land reform programme hitherto has been its failure to stimulate smallholder production on any major scale.<sup>18</sup>

Now is the time to confront this challenge head-on, while food is so scarce and food prices are rising. There is plenty of land available for agriculture. Village surveys suggest that about 15 per cent of former arable lands are used. Agricultural economist Wandile Sihlobo estimates that there is at least one million ha. of arable land available at present.<sup>19</sup>

It is a paradox that labour has not been available for small-scale agriculture in areas of high unemployment in the country. Many people do not see farming as worthwhile. But the recent surge of job losses and strangulation of the informal economy, coupled with some movement back from urban to rural areas, may result in new thinking by households, at least in the short-to-medium term. Access to seed, fertiliser, water, and affordable ploughing are key bottlenecks, partly because many families lack the funds to buy these key inputs or they prioritise other investments such as housing and education. Long-term strategies have been debated and tried for many years. We should think inventively about a few short-term interventions that can make a difference over the next year or two.

In most of the rural areas that experience summer rainfall, it will be difficult to start production until rains begin again in October, or even later. However, if adequate water supplies are available, it is possible to plant winter vegetables, salads, and some varieties of imifino/marogo now. The government is already distributing Jojo tanks and Minister of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation, Lindiwe Sisulu, is reported as saying that the state will purchase all the available supplies. One crucial role of the public works programme could be repairing and restoring irrigation schemes in these areas – many of which have fallen into disuse and disrepair.<sup>20</sup> Fencing materials around gardens are also essential to protect plants against livestock and wild animals.

Summer is only four months away. This time should be used to organise pilot projects and interventions, such as the distribution of starter packs of seed and fertiliser. These input subsidies have been successful in stimulating smallholder production in other southern African countries, particularly Malawi, where there are

many smallholder farms on relatively small residential stands. Following the serious food shortages in Malawi between 2002 and 2005, input subsidies starting in 2006 resulted in a doubling of maize production within a few years. We do not know that this will work in South Africa but it does not seem that such strategies, which can be implemented quickly, have been adequately tested.

The diversification of vegetables and crops could be encouraged by distribution of a wide variety of seeds. Sihlobo and others have advocated legalisation and promotion of dagga production. People will experiment with seeds and seedlings, which are not the major cost of these packages. There is a system of agricultural and veterinary extension that could be mobilised to help with advice on summer planting.

Livestock production has probably not declined on the same scale, although relatively few families own significant herds. Livestock are still often slaughtered locally for ceremonies, from weddings to funerals, but the meat is cooked and consumed. The most immediate benefit of cattle for nutrition may be in local milk supplies, but this is less common. In the Eastern Cape, Amadlelo dairies have expanded commercial production with partnerships in former homeland areas, including on irrigation projects. There are also new smaller-scale commercial producers. Finding and assisting these enterprises could be done quickly. Much of the livestock farming in the areas where grazing is communal is still free range, although cattle owners have to buy supplementary feeds to sustain their herds in the winter months. Effectively targeted and distributed livestock feeds, especially in the cold, bleak winter months, could help to diminish livestock losses.

Another key factor has been the collapse of the tick control measures that once helped to protect herds. Dipping, which was once the dominant measure, has been discontinued in many places, so livestock owners cater for themselves, using sprays.<sup>21</sup> Dipping and injectables are too expensive for most rural livestock owners, and it would be important to know what the cost of bulk supplies to livestock owners would be.

Finally, large-scale farming and agribusinesses also have an important role. Smallholder production has been relatively successful in partnerships and joint ventures with commercial enterprises and experienced producers. For example, the national woolgrowers' scheme has resulted in rapidly expanding smallholder wool production over the last 20 years, supported by a network of skilled demonstrators. This brings income into villages over a wide area. Projects now cover a wide range of sectors from sugar and forestry to maize, dairy, and tomatoes. Because commercial producers already have knowledge and experience, some projects focussing on food could be expanded quickly.

Commercial agriculture is a major source of employment where it is located close to old homeland areas. The social impact of this form of employment is enhanced by the fact that significant numbers of the employees are women. This means that a relatively high proportion of earnings are fed back into households, where it is more likely to be used for expenditure on food, children's clothing, and education. An urgent review should be undertaken to identify and remove any impediments to employment in these enterprises. This should include a consideration of the impact of minimum wages.

## **Conclusion**

The transition from level 4 to level 3 of the lockdown should help to ameliorate conditions in these areas, but heightened unemployment and reduced income streams are likely to have long-term impacts. A range of interventions, some already developing, should be considered and implemented to provide more opportunities for the residents of these regions. What is abundantly clear is that urgent steps are required to provide food support in rural areas. Improving nutrition could be an effective organising and mobilising idea. Business, NGOs, and the government need to collaborate to create a credible overview of what is happening in these regions and to develop and pioneer innovative solutions which can operate at scale.

## Notes

- 1 This is an estimate. The DPME reported that in 1994 "the majority of the South African population called rural areas their home, with some 17 million people living mainly in the areas of the former homelands." DPME, Twenty Year Review South Africa: 1994-2014, p. 5. "Between 1995 and 2008, the population of the former homelands grew by only 9 percent", p. 11.
- 2 Free Facts, No 7/2019 / July 2019 / Issue 15, [www.irr.org.za](http://www.irr.org.za)
- 3 M Muller and B Schreiner <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/we-have-to-make-the-water-sector-an-island-of-integrity/>, 25 May 2020; M Steytler, Give women safe water now so that future generations have a chance to thrive. *Maverick Citizen*, 29 May 2020.
- 4 For a detailed discussion and statistics see: World Bank, *Overcoming poverty and inequality in South Africa: An assessment of drivers, constraints and opportunities*, World Bank, March 2018
- 5 W. Beinart and P. Delius, *Smallholders and Land Reform: A Realistic Perspective*, CDE, 25 October 2018.
- 6 Mark Heywood, *Malnutrition, health services and democracy: The responsibility to speak out*, *Daily Maverick*, 26 May 2020; S. Hendriks and N. Olivier, *How South Africa can feed its hungry children during the lockdown*, *Daily Maverick*, 2 April 2020. Anon, *Not enough Covid-19 food parcels*, *Mail and Guardian*, 16 Apr 2020; T. Mahlakoana, *Lockdown forces rural poor in SA to risk well being to survive*, *Eye Witness News*, 18 April 2020
- 7 See *Daily Maverick* 17 April 2020 ; *City Press*, 19 April 2020.
- 8 <https://www.plaas.org.za/plaas-webinar-how-to-change-the-food-system-perspectives-from-consumer-cooperatives/>
- 9 S Hendriks and N Olivier, *How South Africa can feed its hungry children during the lockdown*, *Daily Maverick*, 2 April 2020.
- 10 P Delius Family, *young people, and the social fabric*, in Ann Bernstein and Sandy Johnston (eds) *The Next Decade: Perspectives on South Africa's growth and development*, CDE, 2010.
- 11 'As the number of coronavirus cases rise, the stereotyping against people of Asian descent continues to spread.' *Cape Talk*, 5 February 2020; "Proposed rules on waste reclaimers are xenophobic and exclusionary", *Maverick Citizen*, 29 May 2020
- 12 Heywood, *Malnutrition, health services and democracy*
- 13 Hendriks and Olivier, *How South Africa can feed its hungry children*.
- 14 Anon, *SASSA pathetic in performing a really essential service*, *Business Day*, 1 June 2020.
- 15 S. Philips, R. McCutcheon and P. Delius, *Short-term Employment Creation Programmes in Development Southern Africa*, 12, 1995, pp 237-247; P. Delius with E. Breslin and C. Madrid, *Strengthening institutional safety nets in South Africa*, *Development Southern Africa* 14, 1997, pp. 21-43; CDE, *The Expanded Public Works Programme: policy, rhetoric, reality and opportunities foregone*; [http://www.idc-online.com/technical\\_references/pdfs/civil\\_engineering/The\\_Expanded\\_Public\\_Works\\_Programme.pdf](http://www.idc-online.com/technical_references/pdfs/civil_engineering/The_Expanded_Public_Works_Programme.pdf)
- 16 For background on these arguments see William Beinart and Peter Delius, *Smallholders and Land Reform: A Realistic Perspective* (CDE, 2018). William Beinart and Peter Delius, *Next Steps towards Land Reform* (CDE, 2019)
- 17 On 21 April 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a R500-billion economic package to put South Africa on a path towards a "new economy". This is supposed to mean increasing opportunities for small-scale providers of food.
- 18 Thomas Koelbe, *Ramaphosa's vision of a 'new economy' must embrace both the climate crisis and small local producers*, *Daily Maverick*, 18 May 2020.
- 19 Wandile Sihlobo, *Finding Common Ground: Land, Equity and Agriculture* Picador Africa, Johannesburg, 2020.
- 20 Recent research has provided a much clearer sense of what kinds of schemes might be sustainable. This have been a number of reviews of existing smallholder irrigation works by Denison and Manona, Van Averbeke, Cousins and Aliber, and others. There is a clear sense that it is most successful in Limpopo and in gravity-fed smaller projects.
- 21 William Beinart and Karen Brown, *African Local Knowledge and Animal Health: Diseases and Treatments in South Africa*, Wits University Press, 2013.



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