

PRIORITY NUMBER ONE:

How a UBIG can help defeat hunger

Introduction

- Food insecurity in South Africa is closely tied to income poverty, with millions of households struggling to access sufficient nutrition despite the country producing enough food for everyone.
- Expanding social protection, particularly through a Universal Basic Income Grant (UBIG), is key to addressing hunger.
- By reducing income poverty, a UBIG can help ensure that people have the money to buy enough food, improving overall health and well-being.
- Over time, reducing food insecurity not only benefits individuals and families but can also support sustainable development by creating a virtuous cycle where improved nutrition leads to higher productivity of the economy, better educational outcomes, and inclusive economic growth.

Food insecurity in South Africa: A function of income poverty

In some countries, food insecurity is the result of there not being enough food to go around. This is not the case in South Africa, which is considered food secure at the national level.¹ This means that the country produces enough food to feed the population. Despite this, at the household level, hunger and food insecurity in South Africa is alarmingly high, widespread, and persistent. This underscores major inequities in the distribution of/access to food.



THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF A UBIG

- ✓ **UNIVERSAL** – applies to all adults.
- ✓ **BASIC** – covers basic necessities.
- ✓ **INCOME** – a regular cash benefit.
- ✓ **GUARANTEE** – provided as a right.

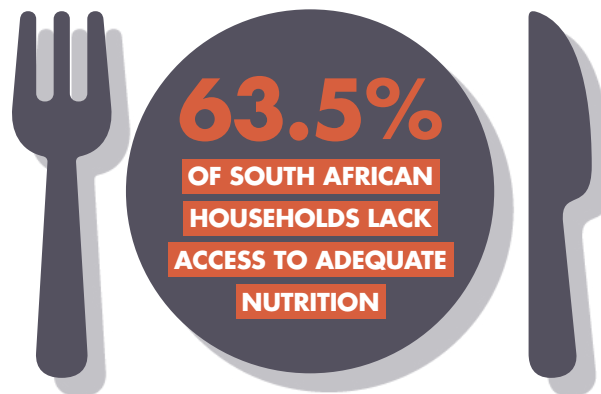
There are various methodologies and definitions for measuring access to food in official data. While they each refer to slightly different things, collectively they paint a picture of a deep crisis of hunger in South Africa. According to the latest General Household Survey (GHS), the proportion of households that had “limited access” to food was 23.1% in 2023, and the proportion of individuals with limited access to food was 26.2%.² This roughly correlates with a 2022 study by researchers at the University of the Witwatersrand which found that 20.4% of South African households did not have sufficient access to food.³ In addition the GHS finds that 13.5% of households had at least one member who reported “going hungry” (i.e. missing meals) in 2023.⁴ In 2024 the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) found even higher rates, with 15.3% of households experiencing moderate hunger and 5.6% experiencing severe hunger.⁵

Not all food sources provide proper nutrition, and low-income households (even if they can access basic food sources) may still not be meeting their full nutritional needs—as varied and nutritious diets are more expensive. The proportion of South African households that lack access to adequate nutrition is estimated at 63.5%, according to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC).⁶ Many of these households may be managing to avoid hunger, but are doing so by switching to less nutritious diets. Children in such households are vulnerable to malnutrition, including stunting.

Inadequate access to food has remained persistently high over time in South Africa. As Figure 1 (insert) shows, there has been little change over the last decade, and in fact food insecurity may have worsened as a result of shocks to the economy experienced since 2020.

In the National Food and Nutrition Plan (NFNSP) 2018-2023,⁷ the government set targets, including reducing the rate of hunger to less than 10% of households, and lowering malnutrition rates among children and adults. However, the latest available data indicates that the government has fallen significantly short of these goals (Table 1).

Understanding the cost of a basic nutritional diet, compared to monthly household spending on food, can also help to provide insight into the extent of the crisis of hunger. Statistics South Africa’s food poverty line (FPL) is based on the cost of meeting an adult’s minimum energy intake requirements and is currently set at R796 per person per month. The HSRC finds that a shocking 64.7% of all households have expenditure on food per person that amounts to below the FPL.⁸ But the FPL does not fully reflect the actual cost of an adequate diet—the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity (PMBEJD) organisation tracks the monthly cost of a basic nutritional food basket, and found that in September 2024 this was R923 per person for a four person household.⁹



Taken together these figures illustrate that the majority of households in South Africa are not spending enough on food to meet their basic nutritional needs, and this closely correlates with the rate of food insecurity identified by the HSRC. While some households may be accessing food in other ways than buying it, for example through subsistence farming or informal networks, South Africa’s rates of subsistence farming are well below those of peer countries. As such, we can take the cost of a nutritional diet, relative to actual household expenditure on food, as a strong indicator of a crisis of hunger and malnutrition that likely extends beyond official estimates in the GHS.

Moreover, inadequate access to food may have worsened as a result of shocks to the economy experienced since the onset of the pandemic in 2020. The HSRC found that rising food prices was the most common shock felt across all households three weeks after the first lockdown, with many reporting running out of money and not being able to eat healthily.¹⁰ The rising cost of living, which was mostly driven by international disruptions such as COVID-19 lockdowns, supply chain issues, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, has significantly impacted food prices. The year-on-year increase in the cost of a basic food basket has outpaced headline inflation. In 2022 for example, annual consumer inflation was 6.9%, while food inflation soared to 13.4%.¹¹ This rising cost of living disproportionately affects the poor, who typically spend a larger portion of their income on food. In South Africa, the poorest 10% of households spend around half of their income on food, whereas the richest 10% spend only about a tenth.¹²

If we take together official statistics on the prevalence of hunger and inadequate access to food in South Africa, alongside data on the rising cost of a nutritious diet relative to what households are spending on food, we can see that a lack of access to income is a fundamental driver of a lack of access to food in South Africa, contributing to widespread and unconscionable levels of hunger.

Table 1. SMART impact targets for the NFNSP (2018 – 2023)

Impact Indicators	Target for 2023	Official stats	Data Source
% of households vulnerable to hunger	5.7%	13.5%	GHS 2023
% of households with inadequate or severely inadequate access to food.	<10%	23.1%	GHS 2023
Stunting: Proportion of children below 5 years of age with height for age scores <-2 Z-scores	<20% in 2020 <15% in 2023	28.8%	HSRC National Report 2024

Malnutrition and the long-term impacts of food insecurity

Food insecurity is closely correlated with malnutrition, meaning that those who are food insecure or come from food insecure households are more likely to experience malnutrition.

The proportion of children under 5 who are stunted in South Africa is 28.8%¹³. This proportion is much higher than the global average of 22.3%¹⁴. Malnutrition is also prevalent among adults, with at least one in four women in South Africa suffering from anaemia and high levels of vitamin deficiency.¹⁵

Hunger and malnutrition have intolerable human costs. In the Department of Health's 2022/23 reporting cycle, 1000 children died of malnutrition, and over 15000 were hospitalised.¹⁶ Fatality rates from severe acute malnutrition are consistently above the World Health Organisation's threshold in most provinces.¹⁷ This highlights the urgent need for effective interventions to safeguard young lives.

This severe health crisis not only threatens the immediate well-being of children and their families, but also casts a long shadow over their future prospects, with malnutrition being linked to intergenerational cycles of poverty. Malnourished children are more likely to have stunted physical and cognitive development, which harms their academic performance, increases their likelihood of dropping out of school, and leads to higher absenteeism¹⁸. As a result, these children often obtain lower education levels and earn lower wages in adulthood. Adults who suffer from nutrient deficiencies have lower capacity to perform daily tasks. Additionally, research indicates that women from food-insecure households are more likely to give birth to children with low birth weight, a condition strongly associated with stunting¹⁹.

Malnutrition not only prevents a large part of the population from ever reaching their potential but it also exerts a drag on the economy, which makes it harder to address the causes of hunger in the long run.

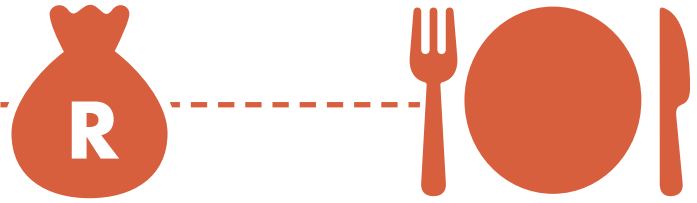
Research shows that food insecurity and malnutrition depress overall economic performance due to their impact on educational attainment, skills and cognitive development, and labour productivity. Additionally, malnutrition imposes additional costs on the healthcare system, including by increasing the risk of communicable diseases.

The economic consequences of malnutrition have been quantified in various contexts. In South Africa, the World Bank estimated that, in 2009, the economy incurred annual losses of approximately US\$1.1 billion (equivalent to 0.3% of then-GDP) due to reduced economic productivity from vitamin deficiencies alone.²⁰ In Cambodia, a study estimated that malnutrition costs the economy around \$266 million annually, or 1.7% of their GDP.²¹



A report by the African Union on 12 African countries found that malnutrition massively depresses economic productivity and leads to substantial income losses.²² For example, in Ethiopia they estimated economic losses amounting to 4% of GDP from reduced productivity, and a staggering 11.9% in potential losses due to childhood malnutrition.

Food insecurity also significantly impacts mental health. Researchers at Wits University found that individuals living in households at-risk of or experiencing food insecurity have higher odds of suffering from anxiety and depression.²³ This association is largely due to the coping strategies households adopt in response to food scarcity. Such strategies include adults skipping meals to ensure children have enough to eat, opting for bulkier but less nutritious foods, and even begging. Unsurprisingly, the act of begging for food had the most negative impact on mental health. This finding is particularly concerning given that this same study uncovered that approximately one in five households in South Africa have to resort to sending someone to beg for food on a regular basis.



Reducing hunger and sustainable development: A positive feedback loop

Hunger is intolerable to any moral society. It diminishes human potential and catalyses massive suffering, and ending hunger must be a national priority. In South Africa, the urgency to eradicate hunger is also grounded in constitutional rights. Section 27(1)(b) of the Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to sufficient food and water. Additionally, Section 27(2) mandates the state to mobilise its resources to progressively realise this right. South Africa is also a signatory to various international commitments to end hunger, including in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

However, hunger is also an indicator of and contributor to the health of the economy more broadly. As such, beyond the moral and constitutional arguments, there is also a strong economic rationale for addressing hunger. This is not to say that ending hunger is good because it helps us to strengthen the economy. Ensuring that everyone has sufficient nutritious food should be one of (if not the) ultimate objective of economic policy. However, there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between improved nutrition, and broader economic outcomes. Improvements in nutrition stimulate economic activity, and this in turn helps to sustain reductions in food insecurity over time, and to break intergenerational poverty cycles.

There is plenty of international evidence to support this. For instance, modelling of the economic impact of preventing iron deficiency in ten developing countries reported a median gain of \$2.32 per capita, equivalent to about 0.57% of GDP²⁴. Another study, a randomised trial focusing on increasing iron levels in adult males demonstrated significant improvements in physical and psychosocial health, which translated into enhanced economic productivity; participants experienced fewer illnesses, reduced work absences, and increased energy levels²⁵.

Expanded social protection is a critical intervention for eradicating hunger

Because food insecurity in South Africa is primarily a function of income poverty and inequality, redistributive cash transfers are among the most direct policy levers we have to rapidly address the problem.

Cash transfer programmes internationally have been shown to significantly improve nutrition. In Brazil, the Bolsa Familia programme contributed to an 84% reduction in food insecurity over 24 years, which led to Brazil's removal from the UN/FAO hunger map.²⁶ Research found that families primarily used the transfers for food purchases, and diversified their diets.²⁷ In the United States, a Universal Basic Income (UBI) pilot in Jackson, Mississippi, which provided \$1,000 monthly to single black mothers, resulted in the number of beneficiary mothers able to feed their families three meals per day, increasing by 43%.²⁸

In South Africa, historical reductions in food insecurity can largely be attributed to the expansion of social grant programmes—though as we have shown, these reductions still fall far short of targets due to enduring gaps in the social protection system. Extensive research on the Child Support Grant (CSG) and Older Persons Grant (OPG) shows their positive impacts on nutrition. Even the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant, despite its low value, has been shown to have an impact on hunger. For example, a survey conducted by the Department of Social Development revealed that 93.3% of all SRD beneficiaries reported using their grant primarily for food purchases.²⁹

Research on the OPG shows that it increases food security in recipient households by 5-8 percentage points.³⁰ Similarly, research into the CSG shows that it consistently alleviates food insecurity over time and narrows the nutrition gap between economically disadvantaged and wealthier children.³¹ The effectiveness of the social grant system in curbing hunger has led to calls for its expansion, including from the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) in 2023, in response to the harrowing levels of hunger and malnutrition in the Eastern Cape.³²

Current grants in South Africa aren't enough—nor are food vouchers... why we need a BIG

A universal basic income set at least the food poverty line and progressively expanded to the upper bound poverty line, would guarantee that everyone in the economy is at least able to meet their minimum dietary needs.

Although existing grants have demonstrated efficacy in mitigating hunger for recipients, they will not be able to meaningfully reduce wider household hunger if working-age adults continue to be excluded from the social protection floor. This is in large part because targeted individual grants are, in the absence of adult income support, pooled at the household level. The CSG and OPG commonly need to cover the needs of both direct recipients (children and older persons) as well as others in the household who do not have access to individual social assistance, including the caregivers of children. Even if the CSG was increased to the value of the FPL, if it is shared with a single caregiver, its purchasing power per person is reduced to half the FPL. To comprehensively address hunger, we need a universal basic income grant that ensures everyone in South Africa—including working-age adults—has access to adequate financial resources to enable them to meet their basic needs.

There have been proposals in South Africa to use food vouchers as opposed to cash transfers to address hunger. However food vouchers are paternalistic in the sense that they assume that there is a need for the government to ensure that social assistance is used for food as opposed to other goods, or that beneficiaries do not know what nutritious food consists of so they have to be directed. Underlying this are often assumptions that poor people have a greater propensity to spend their income on 'temptation goods' like alcohol and tobacco. Evidence clearly shows that low-income people in South Africa are well aware of healthy diets and also do plenty of market research before doing their grocery spending.³³ The greatest barrier to achieving a nutritious balanced diet is therefore not a lack of knowledge or inclination, but a lack of income.

Moreover, food vouchers entail more administrative complexity than cash transfers, are more prone to corruption, and also have a market-distorting effect. They would likely favour large retailers at the expense of informal traders—and this would diminish the economic stimulus effects that a UBI provides for small businesses and local economies. In contrast, cash transfers are typically spent within local communities, significantly boosting demand and acting as an economic stimulus. This positive impact is well-documented in various studies. For instance, researchers investigated the local stimulus effects of the SRD grant in Philippi, Western Cape. Their findings highlight the significant benefits to the local



Concerns about food vouchers

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“But won’t it lead to inflation?”

An argument sometimes levelled against a UBIG is that it could lead to inflation, including in food prices, which would negate its ability to mitigate hunger. Critics argue that while a UBIG would successfully increase income levels because everyone receives the cash transfer, this increased income would not mean that people are able to buy more goods, if the goods are not available to buy. In such a scenario, the prices of the available goods would increase.³⁵

But this argument assumes an economy that does not have any room to grow, where the increased demand from people having more money cannot be matched by increasing supply. In South Africa, however, it is demand for food that is constrained due to poverty, rather than the supply of food—this means the risk of food price inflation is low.

Taking a broader view, evidence from basic income pilots internationally indicates little to no inflationary effects, except in cases of food shortages or severe supply constraints. For example, a UBI trial in Kenya achieved

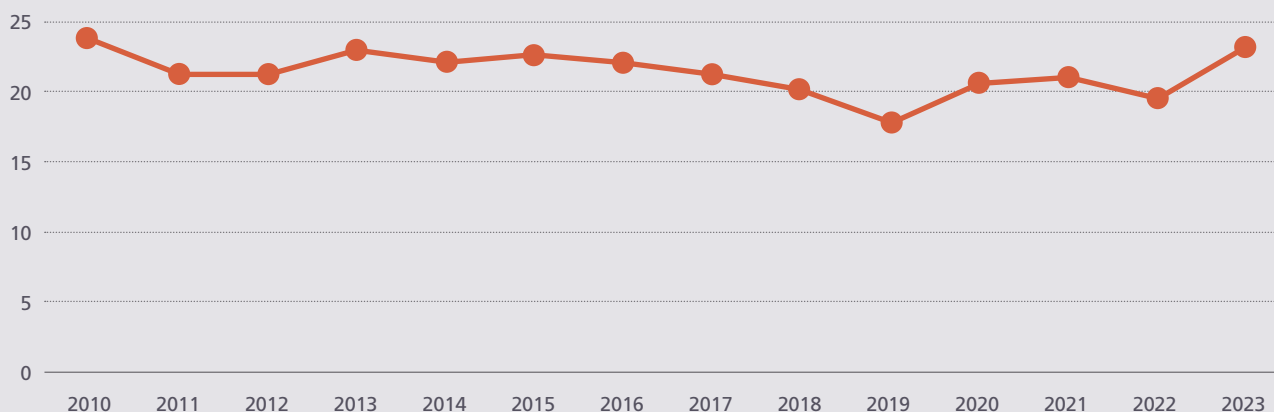
a significant growth in demand with only a minimal increase in prices—of about 0.1% over the trial’s three-year period—suggesting that the economy had untapped capacity to grow and was primarily hindered by insufficient demand, which the basic income helped to alleviate.³⁶

Instances where inflation did occur were typically linked to existing supply constraints. For example, the Mexican social assistance programme “Programa de Apoyo Alimentario” observed a greater price effect from cash transfers compared to in-kind transfers.³⁷ This was attributed to the isolated nature of the villages and constrained supply chains involved. A similar pattern was noted in the Philippines, particularly in remote villages where high transport and storage costs exacerbated inflationary pressures.³⁸

These findings suggest that the impact of a basic income on inflation is context-dependent. It is overly simplistic to assume that a basic income will invariably lead to inflation. The actual effects depend on the local economic conditions and the balance of demand and supply, particularly the capacity of local markets to absorb increased spending without significant price increases.

They also depend fundamentally on the design of the cash transfer programme, and particularly how it is financed. If a cash transfer is financed through a large injection of new money into the economy (for example a large increase in borrowing) this may increase the risk of inflation in the economy. However, if a cash transfer is financed through the redistribution of existing wealth in the economy (for instance via increased taxation of the highest income-earners), it is less likely to add inflationary pressure. We argue that the latter approach is more appropriate in South Africa given our very high levels of inequality.

Households 2010 - 2023 with limited access to food





Basic income must be part of a multi-pronged policy response to hunger

While a BIG can significantly reduce food insecurity by ensuring that everyone can afford basic food items, it alone is not a panacea for all the issues within our food systems. As some agricultural economists argue, persistent food insecurity in South Africa is also the result of systemic issues in the way food reaches communities.³⁹ This includes the massive market power of supermarket chains and the deregulation of agricultural markets which have been shown to lead to higher food prices and unfavourable conditions for farmers and producers.⁴⁰

Furthermore, South Africa's food systems are vulnerable to climate change, and a just food transition (JFT) is essential to ensuring their resilience.⁴¹ Climate change could affect food production like maize and lead to higher crop failures. Without a JFT, food will only become more expensive and inaccessible, which would serve to worsen food insecurity.⁴² Realising a JFT calls for the adoption of more ecologically harmonious production methods, improving wages and working conditions in the farming industry, supporting small, local producers, and regulating food prices to prevent anti-competitive behaviour or profiteering.

Given these overlapping pressures and imperatives, there is a need for complementary policy and initiatives which ensure that people have continual access to nutritious food in their local communities. Such initiatives could include enhancing existing food nutrition programmes, like the school nutrition programmes that benefit many South African children—as evaluations have suggested that many schools currently do not provide sufficient amounts of all vital food groups.⁴³ Other responses could include investing in food cooperatives to empower small-scale producers to enter formal value chains, in order to support the development of a more robust, resilient and localised food system. There is also an opportunity to leverage the large scale injection of income from the grants to support local food producers. Additionally, improving access to basic services like roads, water, and sanitation, which are very closely linked to food security, is crucial.⁴⁴

Evidence very clearly shows that reducing hunger has positive economic benefits which can contribute to overall poverty reduction and sustainable development. There is a common misconception that economic growth inherently leads to improved nutrition.⁴⁵ This gets things the wrong way around. While we have high levels of malnutrition and hunger, sustainable economic growth is impossible. In order to grow the economy in an inclusive way, there is a need for interventions that target nutrition immediately.

However, whilst acknowledging the importance of the above issues, food insecurity and hunger in South Africa remain in significant part due to income poverty and inequality. Closing the social protection gap is a critical intervention in addressing this. While we advocate for a UBIG, we are clear that it should not replace other services or initiatives, but should be part of a broader array of supportive measures, in order to be truly effective in eradicating hunger and food insecurity in South Africa.



Endnotes

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This factsheet is part of our series on the universal basic income guarantee (UBIG) in South Africa. Visit our special UBIG portal by scanning the QR code.

Factsheets in this series are:

1. Why does South Africa need a Universal Basic Income Guarantee?
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3. Jobs versus Grants: Are employment and basic income a policy trade off?
4. How a UBIG can support healthier kids, happier adults, and lifelong learning
5. How a UBIG can advance gender justice and social cohesion
6. Not just a handout: How a UBIG gives people the power to prosper
7. "But how will we pay for it?" Financing a UBIG
8. Modelling fiscal pathways to a basic income
9. Work-seeking conditionality is just bad policy: Why a basic income should have no strings attached
10. A true safety net: How a UBIG can support a Just Energy Transition
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