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## CONCEPT NOTE | High food prices and hunger in South Africa: Is government doing enough?

*Economic Justice Matters series | #12*

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**Broadcast date:** Saturday, 27 June 2026  
**Topic:** What is behind South Africa's persistent and worsening food insecurity rates, and what can be done about it?  
**Moderator:** Sizwe Mpofo-Walsh  
**Proposed panel:** Dr Andrew Bennie (Institute for Economic Justice), Koketso Moeti (Union Against Hunger and Amandla.Mobi), Dr Edzani Mphaphuli (GrowGreat Campaign)

### Executive summary

South Africa exhibits a stark paradox in terms of food insecurity: the country produces more than enough food to feed the population, and a dazzling array of it, yet it has a persistent and worsening crisis of hunger and food insecurity. Looming price shocks as a result of the war on Iran and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz have again put the threat of rising food prices on the agenda, which would exacerbate our already high levels of food insecurity and hunger.

Since 1994, the size of South Africa's agricultural sector has doubled. In recent years, while much of the economy stagnates, agriculture has continued to grow in terms of size and employment. The country also has one of the most extensive social grant systems in the developing world, a key need for which is to stave off hunger. Yet food insecurity is high and worsening, with around 63.5% of households experiencing some form of food insecurity, and 17.5% are severely food insecure.

This episode of the Economic Justice Matters series examines why, over 30 years after democracy, so many households still experience some form of food insecurity, and zooms in on the question of food affordability and prices: why food prices are so high, what government policy is currently doing about food prices, and what more can and needs to be done.

## Background and context

28 May was World Hunger Day. But while the world has never been more economically prosperous overall, global hunger and food insecurity rates have risen in the past few years. South Africa exhibits a stark paradox in terms of food insecurity: the country produces more than enough food to feed the population, yet it has a persistent and worsening crisis of hunger and food insecurity. As the South African economy has sputtered over the last few years, the agricultural sector has come to the fore as the star performer in terms of consistent growth and job creation. State agricultural policy and industry organisations continue to promote a guiding approach to the sector as one of economic growth, continued export expansion, and competitiveness.

But is this the answer to our problem of hunger and poverty? Civil society organisations and food justice advocates argue that a deeper look at our food system (not just agriculture) and the transformations needed is a prerequisite for meeting the right to food. The South African Human Rights Commission's recent inquiry attests to this question of whether the current organisation of the food system is aligned with the Constitutional right to food.

Because most people in South Africa buy much of the food they need rather than growing it, affordability is a key determinant of food security. Affordability entails two things: the income to purchase food with, and the price at which food is sold. The proximate causes of food insecurity in South Africa are therefore that incomes are too low and prices are too high. The result is that the number of people going hungry is rising. 41 million South Africans live below the upper-bound poverty line of R2,635 per person per month, surviving on less than R90 a day. The share of the population that cannot afford a healthy diet in South Africa (62%) is disproportionately high compared to other upper-middle-income countries like Brazil (24%) and China (12%). It is also higher than many lower-income countries, such as Ghana and Senegal. More than 1 in 4 children under five (28.8%) have stunted growth from chronic food insecurity. The Department of Health records 10,000 child deaths linked to acute malnutrition every year. A key aspect of affordability is therefore income, which can be raised through decent wages and income support.

The other key aspect is food prices. We often find that the food inflation rate is above the general inflation rate. After COVID and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, food price inflation reached close to 14% by March 2023, above the general CPI. A historical picture illustrates this further. Between 1994 and today, general prices in South Africa increased by 384%, while food prices increased by 680% - food prices at more than double the rate of general prices. Since the late 1980s, and after the passing of the Marketing of Agricultural Products Act in 1996, the agricultural sector was liberalised and its functioning was handed over to the market, including food prices. But this hands-off approach to food prices and affordability is increasingly coming into question in a time of mounting shocks and social inequalities. This includes pointing to the problem of corporate concentration in the food system, which has increased in most sectors since 1994, with only a few companies dominating inputs, processing, and retail. Corporate concentration raises widespread concerns about power over pricing and profits against food security imperatives.

The spectre of rising food prices because of rising fuel and fertiliser prices as a result of the war on Iran is another in a series of mounting overlapping emergencies that will continue to create supply and price shocks, and show that more needs to be done to contain and buffer against rising food prices. This includes climate shocks, to which South and Southern Africa are particularly vulnerable, and which inevitably translate into price spikes, another way in which climate impacts intensify already existing inequalities. There is thus increased global engagement by academics, governments, and multilateral institutions on how to more actively address rising food prices through multiple interventions across economic and social policy. Indeed, South Africa's Presidency of the G20 in 2025 prioritised food security and addressing food prices, particularly.

But is the government doing enough to actively explore the range of policy tools available to make food more affordable, and what are these options? Several different options are being implemented or have been proposed in different parts of the world, like price caps on a basket of nutritious foods, buffer stocks, strategic use of import and export tariffs, public food distribution, enhancing competition policy, increasing the social wage and introducing a universal basic income grant, and strengthening local food systems.

This episode of SMWX Economic Justice Matters will explore food price patterns, what is behind them and, most importantly, debate whether current policy approaches are sufficient to the human rights challenge we face, what places in other parts of the world are doing to make food more affordable, and what, therefore, can be done in South Africa.