

Marginalised, desperate and angry: The poor are now beyond breaking point

By  Andy du Plessis

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People all over the world are feeling physically and/or mentally exhausted, while others are depressed, fearful and anxious because of the hardship they have had to endure as the ubiquitous pandemic and its seismic after-effects continue to cause havoc across all sectors of our global society.



Andy Du Plessis, managing director at FoodForwardSA.

South Africa has not been spared its share of this melancholy. Starvation, malnutrition, job losses, food price inflation, load shedding, looting and riots, fuel price increases, transport and electricity hikes, corruption and coping with the loss of loved ones, especially breadwinners, has made life near unbearable at times for many.

Unfortunately, conditions are unlikely to improve any time soon. As our economy continues to hobble along, the middle class is clearly feeling the proverbial financial pinch while the poor are already stretched beyond their ability to survive, leaving them vulnerable to mental illness, sickness, disease and exploitation.



July unrest shows need for anti-poverty programmes

19 Nov 2021



“Food price inflation is increasing rapidly”

According to the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity group (PMBEJD), food price inflation is increasing rapidly. The group’s October 2021 media statement revealed that a household food basket consisting of basic groceries cost R4,317.56, which is 10.2% higher than the previous month.

Meanwhile, the national minimum wage is R3,643.92. When factoring in transport, electricity and other costs, this mammoth shortfall means that as food prices escalate, food availability for low income earners shrinks significantly for the poor and places severe pressure on these households to be able to secure enough food for a family for a full month. PMBEJD raises the alarm by emphasising that “the cost of the household food basket is very high and families can’t afford it. We remain in an emergency food crisis, and this crisis is set to deepen.”

As this chasm in income levels versus the cost of basic food groceries and other necessary expenses widens, further desperation and frustration from the marginalised and angry poor, will likely see an increase in already out of control crime statistics, a rise in erratic looting and riots - similar to what we have witnessed in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in July 2021, and further increases in the unemployment rate, which will destabilise our ailing economy and fragile social stability even more.

Government, civil society must work together to implement social policy

So how do we successfully navigate this turbulent and uncertain environment? Firstly, we need a more capable state - a well-oiled machinery that is committed to rooting out corruption and implementing a pro-poor plan since the current safety nets are grossly insufficient.

The National Development Plan (NDP) was comprehensive enough at the time of its release, but given the multiplicity and severity of our current challenges, further exacerbated by a prolonged and unpredictable pandemic, we need a new, more robust and inclusive paradigm.

Secondly, for this new paradigm to be successful, the government must take the lead but it is essential that they consult civil society broadly, which has been their downfall in terms of developing and implementing social policy.

Over the past 20 months, as food insecurity worsened intensely, it was an over-burdened civil society that “carried the can,” making sure that meals were prepared daily under very difficult circumstances - packing food parcels for desperate households, taking people to get urgent medical attention and offering psycho-social counselling for anxious and vulnerable people in their respective communities.

Government cannot ignore the crucial role that civil society plays, taking up the slack. Civil society must be regarded as a key stakeholder of social reform and the government must find ways to better support high impact civil society organisations doing incredible work in under-served communities.



Food justice must be realised for people to be truly free

Andy du Plessis 11 Nov 2021



Address food insecurity through better access to food

Lastly, because of the critical nexus between jobs and food security, as unemployment continues its upward trend, our first priority as a nation must be to ensure that we address the disturbingly high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition by creating better access to food for the most vulnerable households until such time that job creation levels can mitigate this risk.

The Bureau for Food and Agriculture Policy's (BFAP) Baseline Agricultural Outlook for 2021 - 2030 released in September 2021 states that "unfortunately, despite the sector's successful contribution to food security through the availability of food, the stark reality is that approximately half of the South African population cannot afford a basic healthy diet."

As a consequence, we are likely to see the emergence of higher incidences of child and maternal malnutrition, which is a sad indictment for a country that produces enough food to feed all its people. There is a critical need for faster progress, more action and better implementation strategies that address household food insecurity and malnutrition.

In 2022, Stats SA will conduct their national census, which will give us a much clearer picture of poverty at the household level. Government must use this data to formulate this new paradigm of social reform and implement it speedily, or we may see desperation and anger lead to protracted social instability and economic regress that could be near impossible to recover from.

ABOUT ANDY DU PLESSIS

Andy du Plessis is a food justice activist and has been involved in the development sector for nearly 30 years. He is currently the managing director of FoodForward SA, which he joined in 2013.

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