South Africa’s hungry cities – the ‘canary down the mine’[1]

How far beyond reach must this sophisticated definition seem for SA, with her population of some 52 million? A population, moreover, that has grown, by 7 million – including 3 million immigrants from the rest of Africa – over the last decade.[4]

The old ‘poster’ depicting poverty and hunger – that of a stick-limbed, pot-bellied, trestful child in a rural village – no longer holds true. Instead, it is children living in our cities’ informal settlements who are the most disadvantaged and vulnerable[6] viz. Joubert’s De Aar ‘family’, dependent on charity for their single, nutritious daily meal. SA has entered a phase of so-called nutritional transition, wherein underweight and stunting of growth in our school-going children occurs side-by-side with overweight and obesity.[7]

In SA, large-scale commercial farming, contributing most to food security, operates alongside small-scale and traditional farming in communal areas to provide urban households with food via complex food supply and distribution systems that begin with food production.[13]

Whereas there were 120 000 commercial farms in 1980, this number has declined to 40 000 and may drop to 15 000.[12] While the importance of small-scale farming is recognised, at the hands of 1 – 2 million communal farmers it is at a disadvantage: poor infrastructure; lack of finance for fertilisers, machinery and seeds; dwindling water supplies for irrigation and the depredations of climate change; and inadequate transport systems to the market. Yet, arguably, food produced on small farms would be nutritious and ‘organic’ (i.e. chemical-free).

Access to sufficient food is enshrined in sections 26 and 27 of the SA constitution.[15] Government is thoroughly alive to the looming food security crisis: the 2030 National Development Plan identifies food security as a priority issue.[14] Joubert comprehensively deals with possible strategies that will assure the food security of city dwellers in the concluding chapter of her book.[21] The state would take responsibility for micronutrient (vitamin and mineral) fortification of the staple foods (already introduced in 2003 to good effect), and would regulate food companies so that they offer good food choices. The municipalities would provide healthier and safer city environments, encourage the adoption of healthy lifestyles and foster urban agriculture, and ensure food banking of left-over food from retailers. Apropos, SA wastes just over 9 million tonnes of food a year.[12] Fortunately, organisations such as Foodbank SA[26] exist to distribute about 6 000 tonnes of this waste’ as 20 million meals to the hungry every year.

Freedom from hunger and the provision of nutritious, as opposed to malnourished, food will not be easily achieved. Food insecurity is slowing (South) Africa’s progress in attaining, by 2015, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, reduction in child mortality, improvement in maternal health, and assurance of environmental sustainability. Significantly, the African Union, which celebrated 50 years of existence recently, subtitled its annual MDG report ‘Food Security in Africa’[17]

SA will host the Third Global Conference on Agriculture, Food Security and Climate Change in December. On October 16, the international community will mark WFD to heighten public awareness about food security.[13]

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*References available online. Use the QR code above to access (for an explanation of QR codes refer to page 762).