

A Socially-engaged Theological Response to the Historic and Structural Nature of Food Insecurity in South Africa

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Abstract

Food insecurity in urban South Africa is situated in both historic and contemporary factors. This article argues that there is a need to reimagine and reconceptualise national, socio-ecclesial and theological responses to urban food insecurity in South Africa. We contend that the global and enduring nature of food insecurity is indicative of the violence of hunger and poverty and can be viewed as structural violence. While the church has since its inception been involved in feeding the hungry, the structural and systemic nature of food insecurity requires more nuanced theological responses and reflections. As a prophetic voice, the church and theological reflection and action are important partners in conversations, dialogue, measures and interventions geared towards the eradication of hunger and food insecurity in urban South Africa. A descriptive and evaluative method of enquiry was adopted in order to identify the historic structural and systemic factors that perpetuate food insecurity in South Africa. This article concludes that social inequality, economic disenfranchisement and poverty are as a result of structural inequalities that amount to structural violence inflicted on the most vulnerable of society.

Keywords: food security; food insecurity; structural violence; socially-engaged theology; socio-ecclesial

Introduction

Enshrined in the South African Constitution are the health, wellbeing and food security of all who live in South Africa. Yet, almost 28 years after democracy, structural and systemic factors continue to hamper the nation's food security. This article contends that the food insecurity crisis in South Africa can be viewed as structural violence (Booth and Pollard 2020, 87). We argue that institutionalised inequalities promulgated



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through colonialism and apartheid, as well as the ineffectiveness of the present dispensation to effectively address such inequalities, make food insecurity a pervasive, post-apartheid reality. We, therefore, seek to explore through descriptive evaluation of desktop literature what measures can be adopted to address the violence of structural and system oppression that perpetuates food insecurity. We argue that national exchanges of knowledge and information at micro and macro levels must be instituted in order to envisage and work towards a just and equitable food system in South Africa (Argaw and Shewankena 2018, 490). While the article outlines numerous dialogue partners to address the weaknesses in the nation's food system, the main focus is on socio-ecclesial and theological responses to food insecurity. We postulate that the church must be a prophetic voice in the critique of South Africa's food insecurity crisis and must participate fully in remedial actions. In light of the church's mandate as an agent of transformation and change, we ask the question: How effective is charitable giving in addressing hunger and food insecurity? We put forward that socio-ecclesial and theological action that effectively deals with food insecurity must take into account the *contextualities* of food insecurity and the idea that communities and citizens are the rightful holders of the country's resources. Moreover, we contend that the duty bearer that must drive and ensure food security, is the government. Consequently, all measures aimed at the sustained eradication of food insecurity must engage government as well as other stakeholders. Engagement must focus on how violations, such as systemic racism and structural inequalities, disproportionately affect Black people, women, children and under-resourced communities. Theologically, reflection and action must consider those who have been systematically oppressed, exploited and dispossessed from the perspective of the Christian faith and in an environmentally sustainable way.

Food Insecurity as Structural Violence

Different, but not unrelated to direct or personal violence, structural violence is the bedrock upon which rampant systemic food insecurity hinges as a result of institutionalised inequality. Coined by Johan Galtung, the term "structural violence" refers to the structural disadvantage that permeates social and cultural spheres of life, inhibiting growth, development and overall wellbeing and security of individuals and groups within a society (Galtung 1969). Structural violence is a deeply embedded social phenomenon and is most prevalent in societies characterised by unemployment, low income, restricted mobility, lack of or underdeveloped infrastructure and uneven access to amenities (Poutiainen 2018, 5). Due to the systemic nature of structural violence, no one person can be held responsible, even though it often affects the wellbeing, growth and development of whole societies or communities. Another proponent of structural violence, Paul Farmer, notes that those caught in its grip often share the experience of "occupying the bottom rung of the social ladder in egalitarian societies" (Farmer 1996, 263). For Farmer (1996, 276–277), structural violence is the primary cause of morbidity and mortality and is the direct result of the uneven distribution of power, which is central to suffering. Structural barriers related to food insecurity generally affect particular

demographics within a society, preventing them from accessing sufficient nutritious food, thereby infringing on their human right of access to basic human needs.

Secured under the South African Constitution adopted in 1996, are the “physical health and wellbeing of all South Africans, including the right to food” (Koch 2011, 4). Yet, the process of ensuring food security for all who live in South Africa is slow. Disparities in food security are linked to inequalities related to the spatial legacy of apartheid, gender, race and class. Significantly, almost 28 years after South Africa’s transition to democracy, racial discrimination, gender disparities and unequal access to resources and opportunities continue to shape the food security of the nation (Caesar and Riley 2018, 1). It is this multifaceted net of structural inequalities and economic adversity in South Africa that renders people susceptible to food insecurity. It is estimated that over 1.7 million households in South Africa experience hunger (Statistics South Africa 2019, 18). Research reveals that only 45.6% of South Africans are food secure, 28.3% are at risk of hunger, and 26.1% are food insecure (Crush and Caesar 2014, 170).

Food insecurity in South Africa can be considered a consequence of structural violence because uneven social structures, promulgated through apartheid and the failure of the present democratic dispensation to address the deep-seated societal disparity, sustain and maintain social inequality, thereby driving food insecurity.

Structural and Systemic Oppression: A Post-apartheid Urban Reality

The interlocking systems of institutionalised inequality under colonialism and apartheid are the basis of structural and systemic oppression in urban South Africa. Through interlinked processes such as land dispossession, minority White ownership of major assets (particularly land), political power “backed by armed forces” and deliberate economic and political disenfranchisement of Black people, inequality in South Africa has become institutionalised (Phillip, Tsedu, and Zwane 2014, 61). This level of structural and systematic exclusion resulted in inequalities with regard to employment, housing, education, service delivery, food security and a host of other factors. This intersected with race, class, gender, religion, geographic location and other factors to reproduce multiple layers of disadvantage and oppression (Plagerson and Mthembu 2019, 7). After a longstanding process of “de-stabilising the apartheid state through interlinked structural and agency-led processes,” a negotiated settlement between the apartheid state and the liberation movement was completed. However, the compromises made during the negotiation process have negatively impacted the pace of social and economic transformation in post-apartheid South Africa (Battersby-Lennard 2009, 171).

Post-apartheid South Africa is still grappling with the legacy of apartheid. In many ways, the failure to address this legacy of oppression is as a result of the complex, interlinked, intersectional nature of oppression. Addressing one issue, therefore, necessitates addressing a range of related issues. So, for example, the historic underfunding of Black schools, and resultant poorer quality of education for the Black

child in under-resourced areas, cannot be solved by the redistribution of funds equally. For the Black child, every area of education was negatively affected by apartheid legislation. Black schools did not have enough access to resources and qualified educators. The “spatial legacy of apartheid” disenfranchised the Black child to such an extent that access to amenities and resources was denied or restricted (Battersby-Lennard 2009, 171). Situated some distance away from city centres, township and rural schools further disadvantaged the Black child in terms of access to libraries and other amenities, which were also racialised, meaning that access did not guarantee quality resources. The state’s supplementation of Black education under apartheid was meagre (Battersby-Lennard 2009, 171). These negative effects of apartheid education still reverberate in post-apartheid South Africa. Nortje (2017, 52) posits that around 63% of South African children live in poverty. These levels of poverty affect every developmental trajectory of a child, including physical, mental and emotional development, perpetuating poverty and food insecurity. Lack of access to amenities and services in this context inhibits a child’s educational development. While education is widely acknowledged as being a tool to overcome poverty, “South Africa’s poor public education system is currently sustaining the poverty cycle instead of breaking it” (Nortje 2017, 52). In post-apartheid South Africa, spatial segregation is still very much a part of the landscape. The Black child from townships, urban, semi-urban and rural schools is still extremely disadvantaged in a myriad of ways. Township and rural schools are still underfunded. Infrastructurally, many such schools are not conducive to learning and some even pose a severe risk because of poor sanitation systems and lack of other amenities.

The education of the Black girl child, as was the case under apartheid, is far more undervalued than any other demographic, and the implications of this disparity affect the development and progress of girls and women. The racism and sexism that existed in apartheid schools meant that the girl child was trained for domesticity and to play subordinate roles in society (Carrim 2007, 176). While curriculums have changed and pedagogical approaches improved, the historic legacy of disproportionate support of schools in under-resourced rural, urban and semi-urban areas and the undervaluing of the girl child are still entrenched.

So pervasive was apartheid’s power and tyranny that the majority Black population occupied only 13% of the country’s land, cementing White privilege through sustained spatial and economic advantage. While land reform in South Africa is critical for promoting equity and justice, land redistribution is slow and hampered by many drawbacks. Urban South Africa still largely reflects apartheid’s racial segregation spatially and in other ways. Property in previously White owned areas is exorbitantly expensive, making desegregation difficult. For a variety of reasons, post-apartheid urban South Africa is characterised by the “peripheralization of poor households” (Battersby-Lennard 2009, 172). So, while apartheid was dismantled in 1994, it is still not possible to speak of any developmental trajectory in South Africa without taking into consideration the enduring effects of apartheid, which continue to disadvantage

under-resourced Black households and communities. In this context, structural and systemic inequality is the key driver of poverty and food insecurity.

Urban Food Insecurity: An Indicator of Structural and Systemic Inequality¹

Structural and systemic inequalities inhibit the urban poor's access to food. While there is enough food within city limits in South Africa, Pulker (2016, 4) observes that food insecurity is "embedded in socio-economic and spatial disparities." A range of structural and systemic issues shape urban food insecurity at individual, household, city, nation and global levels. Undoubtedly, power disparities produce and sustain food insecurity in metropolitan and semi-urban areas (Riley 2015, 336). This is as a result of social injustices which emanate from structural disadvantages and play out on multiple levels ranging from historic inequality, poor distribution of resources and failure of the present government to effectively address poverty and inequality in South Africa. Food security is described as "all people, at all times" having the means to access adequate, safe and nutritious food that meets daily dietary requirements. When people lack physical and/or economic access to *sufficient healthy* food necessary to sustain a healthy lifestyle, they are food insecure (Pulker 2016, 25). Importantly, when considering issues of food security relating to South Africa's urban communities, one must consider that food insecurity is as a result of the lack of access to food and not the availability of food. Pulker (2016, 27) confirms that food insecurity in South Africa is as a result of socio-political and socio-economic disparity, not availability.

Poverty and lack of income are the main drivers of food insecurity in South Africa (Misselhorn and Hendriks 2017, 10). Moreover, opines Haysom and Battersby (2016, 9), local governments do not have direct food security directives and still adopt or adapt rural food insecurity programmes to tackle urban food insecurity. Resultantly, food insecurity is seen as a household problem and not addressed as a systemic issue. By and large, continues Haysom and Battersby, the government is unwilling to address food insecurity as a systemic issue by regulating food companies and challenging dominant development agendas. As a result, there currently exists an increased promotion of urban agriculture as a political strategy to alleviate food insecurity. This attempt is aimed at repairing the effects of structural and systemic poverty and food insecurity without actually addressing the root causes.

Challenging the notion that urban agriculture is a viable intervention in the eradication of urban food insecurity, Haysom and Battersby (2016, 8) note that only 5% of the poor in the City of Cape Town are involved in urban agriculture. In Mogale City and Johannesburg, only around 10% of poor urban dwellers are involved in urban agriculture. Moreover, issues related to "context, climate, soil fertility and spatial

1 Pulker, A. 2016. "The Relationship between Urban Food Security, Supermarket Expansion and Urban Planning and Policy in the City of Cape Town: A Case of the Langa Junction Mini Mall." Master's dissertation. University of Cape Town.

legacies” all play a role in the viability and success of urban agricultural projects (Haysom and Battersby 2016, 8). Since income generation through the sale of produce is generally low, the direct benefits of urban agriculture are limited. To date, argue the authors, there exists little evidence to suggest that urban agriculture can mitigate food insecurity. Moreover, research conducted in KwaZulu-Natal (Madlala 2012, 33) confirms that women lack access to land, seed, agricultural equipment and resources to sustain community urban food garden projects in a way that guarantees long-term food security and sustainable livelihoods.

Urban Food Deserts as Structural Violence

As a result of rampant food insecurity, particularly in under-resourced Black urban neighbourhoods, such areas are considered “food deserts” (Walker et al. 2010). The term “food desert” is increasingly used by academics and other stakeholders in the field of urban food security worldwide to describe areas where people cannot access affordable, nutritious food (Cummins and Macintyre 2002, 436). While definitions of food deserts appear to be varied and there appears to be no definitional consensus, food deserts have been defined as “poor urban areas” where residents cannot buy affordable, healthy food. Food deserts are, therefore, “areas of relative exclusion where people experience physical and economic barriers to accessing healthy food” (Cummins and Macintyre 2002, 436; Mannering 2017, 81).

Redefining the concept of food deserts for the African context, Battersby and Crush (2014, 149) conceptualise it as “poor, often informal, urban neighbourhoods characterised by high food insecurity and low dietary diversity, with multiple market and non-market food sources but variable household access to food.” This conception of food deserts is defined and understood based on an understanding of “the multiple market and non-market food sources, the spatial mobility and dynamism of the informal food economy, the changing drivers of household food insecurity and the local conditions that lead to compromised diets, undernutrition and social exclusion” (Caesar and Crush 2016, 2).

In urban South Africa, people rely to a large extent on supermarkets for their food supply. Research shows that there is a growing presence of supermarkets in poorer urban areas and many poor households source their food from these outlets. However, food insecurity is extremely high in these areas, creating food deserts across under-resourced urban communities in the country (Caesar and Crush 2016, 4). The presence of supermarkets and other food sources, therefore, does not guarantee food security because people are experiencing economic obstacles in acquiring food. Urban food deserts in South Africa are an indication of the violent nature of structural inequality which inhibits access to food in an environment where food is readily available.

Gendering the Urban Food Insecurity Crisis in South Africa

In the South African context, gender shapes mobility, household income and resources to a large extent. Moreover, women have far less access to employment and housing than their male counterparts. All this directly impacts women's ability to access food (Battersby and Crush 2014, 148). Significantly, demographic markers such as "age, gender, marital and family status" intersect with race, class, ethnicity and other disparities to either constrain or enable the acquisition of food (Dodson, Chiweza, and Riley 2012, 10). As mentioned earlier, urban households in South Africa generally obtain food through monetary exchange. In this context, the state of food insecurity is directly linked to poverty, promulgated and perpetuated through structural and systemic inequalities in a context where lack of or sparse income has a direct bearing on livelihoods and people's ability to maintain food security.

The entrenched marginalisation of women propagated through prejudicial legislation, exclusion from the mainstream economy and women's subordinate positions in households and society, at large, facilitate the gendered nature of urban food insecurity in South Africa (Dodson et al. 2012, 11). Moreover, the responsibility of accessing and preparing food generally rests on women (Abrahams and Smith 2018, 9). In addition, women often navigate these duties in conjunction with working in the informal sector, selling agricultural produce and other food items to earn a meagre income. Juggling both productive and reproductive roles, women are also often heading households and/or are primary breadwinners. "The gendered nature of occupational categories and livelihood strategies" are, therefore, important determinants of food insecurity (Dodson et al. 2012, 12).

In a report on the affordability of food for low-income households in South Africa, Abrahams (2020, 7) posits that the food insecurity crisis in South Africa has resulted in millions, particularly women from under-resourced communities, being unable to absorb the financial pressures of day-to-day existence and food supply. Abraham maintains further that government fails to understand how poverty and inequality affect low-income communities, particularly women. Poor governmental decisions reverberate negatively into every development trajectory in South Africa (Abrahams 2020), further entrenching systemic inequality that economically disenfranchises the poorest of the poor, resulting in the feminisation of food insecurity. Food insecurity in South Africa can, therefore, be understood as structural violence.

Food Insecurity and Covid-19

The coronavirus or Covid-19 was first reported on 31 December 2019 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to have originated in Wuhan, China. In March of 2020, the WHO declared the disease a pandemic. South Africa recorded its first case on 5 March 2020. On 23 March 2020 a state of national disaster was declared, and South Africa went into a total national lockdown on 26 March 2020 (Statistics South Africa 2020, 14). While food insecurity was not caused by Covid-19, the pandemic both exacerbated

and highlighted a different long-term pandemic in South Africa—that of structural and systemic inequality, poverty and food insecurity.

While the country continued to produce sufficient food under lockdown, restrictions made access to food even more difficult, particularly for low-income households. Food prices rose only marginally during the national lockdown; however, low-income households, because of restricted mobility, were unable to access food from informal traders and local shops. The lockdown brought the nation's state of food security to the fore and multiple institutions, inclusive of NGOs, businesses, corporations, and faith-based organisations began to collaborate and mobilise in order to support those who were not able to access food. The dire state of food insecurity, the shortfall in the amount of social grants and money needed per household for food supply, as well as ineffective existing measures to combat food insecurity, became more heightened and apparent. Furthermore, the state of rampant corruption and how it negatively affects food supply and distribution was highlighted. This heightened awareness of food insecurity, particularly for low-income households, stimulated questions and calls for redress and initiatives to help better understand and drive access to sufficient, affordable, nutritious food. Moreover, the violent structural nature of inequalities that sustain and maintain poverty and food insecurity was brought to the fore (Gould and Hatang 2020).

Addressing South Africa's Broken Food System

The nation's state of food insecurity, propagated through structural and systemic inequalities, raises the question: What will it take to fix the country's broken food system? In terms of social and economic development, South Africa is one of the most unequal counties in the world (World Bank 2018, xiv). As discussed above, a host of interlinked factors often converge to create, maintain and sustain this environment of inequality. Rising inequality in South Africa is manifest in highly unequal societal structures, the vast gap between the rich and the poor and the ever-increasing levels of income disparity and unemployment. Only 10% of employed South Africans earn 52% of the total earned income and spend only 10% of that income on food. Households in the bottom 25% income bracket spend around 47.7% of their total earnings on food. Additionally, this income bracket spends 19% of their total earnings on electricity and transport (Oxfam 2014, 17). Food insecurity, hunger and poverty create physical barriers to people reaching their full potential and perpetuate inequality. For example, even when access to education is granted, a child cannot learn well on an empty stomach. Addressing food insecurity is a key component in addressing structural and systemic inequality (Oxfam 2014, 7).

Unemployment and low incomes increase vulnerability, as access to food is worsened where there are high levels of unemployment and low incomes. In such contexts, people depend mainly on social grants for survival. The stability of access to food is greatly compromised where people are unemployed, collect social grants or earn a low income. So, while social grants are a lifeline to people, it does not guarantee sustained food security. Undoubtedly, unemployment and low incomes impact poverty, inequality and

hunger in South Africa. In addition, with the stark reality of gender injustice in South Africa, women suffer far more under the weight of food insecurity than men. In order to eradicate hunger, poverty and malnutrition in South Africa, more deliberate efforts at job creation are necessary. To this end, skills development is essential as initiatives embarked on by both government and the private sector. The collaboration between government and the private sector regarding food security must translate into employment that results in liveable earnings that ensure food security. Social grants must be amended to reflect the current rate of food prices in the country (Oxfam 2014, 35). For the eradication of structural and systemic inequality, access to land and amenities must be expedited. Initiatives targeted at access and ownership of land for the most marginalised and vulnerable must be expedited in a far more deliberate and nuanced way. Such initiatives must be accompanied by post-settlement support where necessary in the form of access to water and electricity, transport and amenities that will help build resilience. Long commutes to schools, food access points and other amenities necessary in day-to-day life put excessive strain on people, taking a huge chunk of their income. This also affects their food access capacity.

Research reveals that while supermarkets bring a greater variety of food, such foods are often not accessible because people cannot afford to buy them. Rising prices further complicate and prevent accessibility to food. In addition, the rising price of electricity and water also perpetuates hunger and food insecurity because people spend less on food in order to take care of other important household expenditures.

Oxfam (2014, 34) finds that there is an urgent need for the creation of a national Food Act, developed together with local communities facing hunger and food insecurity. At the heart of such an initiative should be the goal of eradicating hunger and food insecurity with “greater legal force than existing piecemeal policies to incentivise better coordination and implementation.” This would include mechanisms to “hold government and stakeholders accountable” (Oxfam 2014, 35). Such an Act would go a long way in including businesses and other institutions, local, national and international organisations. This will result in an improvement in all levels of coordination and policy implementation. The Act would make provision for local and municipal governmental divisions in collaboration with national government, communities and civil society to better understand and evaluate the food security needs and challenges in the country. This will enable a fair, accountable and sustainable food industry that works comprehensively to address price fixing, cartels, food deserts, food waste and management (Oxfam 2014, 34). Lastly, food insecurity must be addressed from a structural and systemic perspective by creating national conversations, discourses, dialogues and debates to better understand the causes and consequences of food insecurity at both micro and macro levels, with the aim of eradicating it. Such engagements will include local communities, national government, local and municipal governments, businesses, NGOs and FBOs, and all other stakeholders in order to envisage and work towards a just and equitable food system (Oxfam 2014, 35).

Socially-engaged Theological Responses

The problem of food insecurity in South Africa represents an immense social injustice that must be approached as a structural weakness in the nation's food system. Moreover, as established earlier, it requires the participation of a host of entities. From the perspective of socio-ecclesial action and theological reflection and engagement, Byarugaba (2017, 1) posits that the church must reevaluate how it acts and reflects regarding food insecurity. The activity of the church and theological reflection, argues Byarugaba (2017, 18), should be participation in the broken lives of the hungry and food insecure. This action and reflection must reach beyond its social, cultural and religious affiliations to encompass the whole of humanity. In other words, alongside current measures of addressing food insecurity, the church needs to be a prophetic voice in the critique of the broken food system in South Africa. Through full participation in remedial action and critique of the injustice and inequality that lead to food insecurity, the church must safeguard and promote a just and equitable life for all. In order to achieve this, the church must challenge oppressive systems that cement food insecurity and hunger in South African societies. This must be done through an awareness of the economic policies and systems that subjugate people and of how colonialism, apartheid, globalisation, and issues of race, class and gender embed social injustice, leading to food insecurity and hunger. From a Christian perspective, the Eucharist, which is the centre of Christianity, is a reminder of the body and blood of Christ and a demonstration of the shared joys, sorrows and commitment to justice and equality inspired by Jesus. From the perspective of food insecurity, the broken bread shared at the Eucharist is both political and personal. In a personal sense, it is symbolic of the love of Christ, and in a political sense, it is a directive of Christianity to be mindful of the empty tables in the world and to work towards a food secure world (Byarugaba 2017, 16).

Can Charitable Giving be the Solution?

Unarguably, the church must be an agent of transformation and change as it actively seeks to eradicate food insecurity. To that end, new food spaces must be created that widen the circle in terms of membership, participation and concerted efforts toward meaningful collaboration (Allen 2016, 361). In other words, ecclesial and theological responses, action and reflection regarding food insecurity must enter into collaboration with a wide variety of voices and perspectives. Furthermore, argues Allen (2016, 5), such collaborations must allot epistemological privilege to those who suffer under the yoke of food insecurity by favouring their voices, concerns and perspectives. To focus all its energies in the fight against food insecurity on charitable giving is short-sighted and merely demonstrates a more privileged position. Furthermore, such positionality serves only to reproduce the existing food challenges. Moreover, charitable giving often stirs up connotations of the celebration of Christian givers and giving; and recipients often appear as beggarly. It is, therefore, not too far a stretch of the imagination to consider that the experience of receiving food in the form of charity could be humiliating and demeaning. In some instances, charitable giving translates into "sometimes visibly substandard ... only one step removed from the dustbin" type of offerings, and can

provide uncomfortable insights into the inequalities that exist between givers and receivers (Allen 2016, 6). Allen posits that charitable giving cannot be an appropriate response to food insecurity because it reproduces social inequalities by “reasserting the privilege of the privileged” (Allen 2016, 7). Allen further notes that charitable giving has for too long become synonymous with the Christian ethos. This response to food insecurity inappropriately reflects the privileged nature of the church voices that celebrate it, and does little to address or critique the systems of power that entrench inequality, poverty and injustice. For Allen, charitable giving is an ineffective response to food insecurity because it does not address its root causes.

However, from the rich history of the church’s presence and action the world over, the role of Christianity’s social mission in charitable giving cannot be argued. Cropsey (2015, 56) argues that for centuries, food distribution was and still is a very important part of the Christian mission. While such initiatives generally start out as community development and mission outreach, it slowly changes to Christian goodwill and charity. Importantly, such measures often become substitutes for adequate social policy to address issues of hunger and food insecurity (Cropsey 2015, 59). This can also set a precedent that the responsibility for a nation’s food security does not lie in the hands of government. In response to the chronic manifestations of hungry communities, Poppendieck (1998, 288) uses the following narrative analogy to highlight the dangers of not dealing with the structural root causes of food insecurity:

In a quaint village situated on a river, a villager one day sees a baby floating down the river. She rushes into the water and saves the baby. Her neighbours help her find clothes, a crib, a blanket and food for the baby, making sure it is warm and fed. The next day two babies are rescued and the day after that, several more. Soon, babies are being rescued in large numbers as a regular feature of life in the village. Finally, after much consternation over the source of the babies landing up in the river, one of the villagers suggests that they make an expedition upstream to determine how the babies are getting into the water in the first place. The villagers, however, are too afraid to take time and energy away from the immediate rescue project, fearing that the babies will drown if there was no one there to save them.

I concur with Allen (2015) and Cropsey (2015) that charitable giving alone, as an initiative to combat food insecurity, is inadequate. When a nation’s food security is as a result of structural and systemic factors, working towards satisfying the immediate need of hunger might be necessary but cannot be seen as a long-term measure or strategy to effectively combat food insecurity. In the South African context, while the practicability of charitable giving cannot be disregarded, such initiatives as Christian responses to food insecurity must operate in tandem with addressing the problem of food insecurity from the perspective of transformation and empowerment. In other words, the socio-ecclesial and theological responses to food insecurity must take seriously the structural and systemic drivers of food insecurity, and as a task of the church, these factors must be confronted and addressed within a food security discourse.

In South Africa, there is a dire need for government, the private sector, NGOs, FBOs and all other stakeholders to navigate upstream towards addressing the structural and systematic causes of food insecurity. From a socio-ecclesial and theological perspective, Le Bruyns (2015, 465) warns that the post-apartheid theological discourse in South Africa “may not necessarily be as appropriate and responsive as we would like for the kind of public impact and critical participation that the times demand.” Drawing from Kairos Theology² and Public Theology,³ Le Bruyns (2015, 460) notes that emphasis must be placed on contextuality, criticality and change. For social engagement within the theological arena to be relevant, opines Le Bruyns (2015, 463), it must engage concretely in the public sphere. This entails interaction in tangible ways with the entirety of public life. Such a theology must make a meaningful impact towards transformation. In order to attain this impact, the development of “expertise in other disciplines of knowledge matched by a commitment to participate in conversations and exercises” that transcend ecclesial and theological realms of engagement, must be engaged. Public theology enacted within a Kairos tradition, argues Le Bruyns (2015, 475–476), should engage those in positions of power and influence and those whose meaningful participation is limited by the lack of democratic agency. Moreover, ideologically speaking, such theological engagement must take into account the “regional and parochial nature of theology” that takes seriously critical historical dimensions of contextually based struggle and resistance. Le Bruyns (2015, 477) concludes that public theological engagement must draw its resources, and what informs it, from the African soil in its quest to overcome dehumanisation and oppression. For public theological engagement to be relevant, suggests Le Bruyns, it must embody a Kairos awareness that is contextually based, critical and change orientated.

Prophetic Socio-ecclesial and Theological Responses

If, for centuries, charitable giving has been one of the greatest avenues the Christian faith has employed to address the problem of hunger and food insecurity, then, given the prevailing food insecurity crisis, the church must acknowledge that it is not an effective measure. With millions of South Africans living from pay cheque to pay cheque and struggling to put food on the table, defending or advocating for current systems, both governmental and ecclesial, must be challenged. Socio-ecclesial action and theological reflection as a basis for meaningful engagement and participation must begin with the acknowledgment that citizens and communities are the “rights holders” of the country’s resources and that government is the “duty bearer” (Fakhri 2019, 2). Theological reflection must, therefore, call for urgent reform related to structural and systemic oppression and reform related to the current food system. This would amount

2 Le Bruyns (2015, 461) Kairos theology is a prophetic theology for a time of struggle. It is a theological tradition “in which the dimensions of contextuality, criticality and change are specifically discernible.”

3 Public theology, according to Le Bruyns (2015, 462), draws on the intrinsic public nature of Christianity. It is a theology that has relevance beyond the ecclesial domain and places emphasis on the purposefully public role of Christianity and theological engagement on the question of public responsibility in a context of “overwhelming contradictions, ambiguities and complexities.”

to efforts at protecting the basic right to food of all who live in South Africa. Such reflections and engagement must firstly focus on how violations of the basic human right to food intersect with systemic racism and structural inequalities, disproportionately affecting Black people, women and children, and under-resourced communities—both urban and rural. Theological reflection must address how all these factors affect the socio-economic status of people, denying them fundamental freedoms and the right to access to food. A theological response to the need for economic accessibility to food is vital. Adequate employment opportunities and skills development initiatives, liveable wages and gender and racial disparity in the workforce must be given attention. The protection and development of the informal sector must be prioritised. Theological reflection must take seriously those who have been systematically oppressed, exploited and dispossessed of land. Moreover, reparations and redistribution must be approached from the perspective of the Christian faith. Access to amenities, proper housing and adequate infrastructure, as well as access to good healthcare, must be advocated for through theological engagement with all stakeholders in the South African food security landscape. Importantly, within the framework of a holistic theological response to South Africa’s food security crisis, dialogue, debate and action should be imagined and envisioned in an environmentally sustainable way.

One way of addressing the structural and systemic nature of approaching food insecurity from the perspective of the Christian faith, is the notion of *Oikoumene*. Translated from Greek antiquity to mean “the whole inhabited earth,” the term is used in the Christian tradition to signify God’s presence and engagement in the earth towards social justice, equality and food security for all. *Oikoumene* brings together the idea that humanity is called to ecumenical co-creation with God towards unity and sustainability, which in turn leads to food security and justice for all (Diakonia 2006, 25). It challenges the exploitative nature of much of the economic systems of the world and advocates for systems that are inherently mutually beneficial for all of humanity and the sustainability of the earth’s natural resources. *Oikoumene* challenges oppressive labour laws and systems of employment and production that result in the exploitation of the majority, for the benefit of a minority. *Oikoumene* calls for the realisation of human rights and human dignity of all people and takes seriously the idea that economic systems must embody an ethic of justice, dignity and equality. It calls for equitable access to resources and highlights the link between economic justice and ecological justice in the creation of just and equitable food systems that are life affirming and not life denying (Naicker 2021, 35–36).

Conclusion

In this article we argued that the complex web of structural inequalities in South Africa is the root cause of vulnerability and food insecurity. Food insecurity is, therefore, the outcome of structural violence characterised by social inequality, economic disenfranchisement and poverty. From a socio-economic perspective, the government

must demonstrate political will that overtly pursues structural solutions to South Africa's food insecurity problem. From a theological perspective, oppressive social structures must be viewed as sinful, requiring collaboration, engagement, dialogue and actions from a variety of stakeholders. The fad of feeding people en masse, whether it be a measure adopted by government, NGOs or religious organisations, is clearly ineffective at combating food insecurity in South Africa. It is disempowering and does little to alleviate poverty and inadequate governmental and social security protections and redress. In order to address the violence of poverty and food insecurity, structural solutions must be envisaged and pursued.

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