



Can you have your kale & eat it?

Problematizing questions of food security and food gardens in South Africa

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Agriculture is almost as old as civilization itself and has formed a part of cultures on almost every continent. Humans have fed themselves on cultivated foodstuffs for thousands of years, but in the last three centuries ownership of arable land has become increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Nowadays, most farming across the world is commercial. Most people who farm do not own the land they work on, nor do they directly consume the fruits and vegetables of their labour, instead purchasing their foodstuffs from a retailer, typically an outlet of a national supermarket chain, and only after it has undergone several standardizing and packaging processes.

The food security system in South Africa is underpinned by several fundamentally misplaced beliefs and concomitant policies. Chief among them are the assumptions that firstly, food insecurity is a result of food being too expensive. Secondly, that society can fix the food insecurity problem if more food is produced; according to the principles of supply and demand, increased food production would lower the costs of food. Thirdly, that stimulating the economy by deregulating mega agri-businesses is the best way to solve the problem of food insecurity in South Africa because mega agri-businesses are in the best position to produce more food. It follows from this that the problem of food insecurity can be solved by letting market forces organically, so to speak, allocate resources to the most efficient methods of production and distribution.

This has created a situation so iniquitous that 1 in 4 South African children is chronically malnourished to the point of being noticeably stunted (May et al, 2020). A situation in which farmers, the people who actually plant the seeds, till the soil and harvest the crops, and not the farm-owners, cannot make enough money from their labour, or in the case of small-scale farmers from selling their produce, to buy enough food to meet their nutritional requirements. It is a situation in which price-fixing is the order of the day, and food retailing and food processing corporations exploit workers and exclude small-scale producers from entering the marketplace, all with impunity from the government and in the face of consumer indifference.

Many voices, the government's among them, have expounded on the discourse around the idea of poor people growing their own food as a viable solution to the problem of their food insecurity, either to supplement their diets or income. This paper argues that food gardens may



present a viable alternative, but only in the case of community gardens, not individual or family gardening projects, and as wage earning jobs, not by directly consuming their produce.

The aforementioned discourse is problematic in that it puts the onus on the individual hungry person to fulfil their nutritional requirements through their own enterprises, without giving them the agency to do so in a meaningful and sustainable way. By the same token that discourse blames the very same people for being too lazy to help themselves. This problem will never be solved, says anthropologist Tracey Ledger (2016), because it has been fundamentally misunderstood. It is not as simple as saying that poor people do not make enough money to afford food, or that food is too expensive, but rather that shovelling more money and fewer regulations in the direction of large-scale commercial agricultural production is seen as the only means to resolve the problem, while it is making things worse for many hungry South Africans by driving up the prices of foodstuffs, reducing wages, worsening working conditions, and ultimately forcing people to either starve or eat food of such poor quality it is not deserving of that name.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines food security in terms of consistently consuming sufficient nutrients to live a healthy life, or “at all times, [having] physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs” (Committee on World Food Security, 2014:7). It is realized in four principles: availability, accessibility, utilization and stability.

Availability refers to the presence of sufficient nutrients and calories in the food at the national and local marketplace. Accessibility refers to the relative logistical difficulties of obtaining nutritious food – how easy it is to access the food market and how much it costs to make the purchase. Utilization refers to having food that is sufficiently rich in calories, macro- and micronutrients to fulfil the nutritional requirements of its consumers. This is particularly important because there is a great deal of very unhealthy food on the market that not only does not fulfil nutritional requirements but has a negative use value in that it often makes people less healthy. Finally, stability in food access means having all three of the above at all times, and not being at the mercy of global political, environmental and market forces. If we think of food security in these terms, it is clear that the state of food security in South Africa leaves a great deal to be desired.

More recently, the FAO has recommended the addition of two new principles, or pillars, to the definition of food security. These are sustainability and agency. Sustainability means that to be considered truly secure, food must be produced in ways that don't jeopardize food security in the future. Key to this is choosing to produce enough food to live on and a small surplus for storage or sale, in marked contrast to the current paradigm premised on maximizing output and efficiency at every level of the supply chain. Agency entails people being able to obtain food on terms that are not exploitative and make a choice between products of similar value. This is particularly important in situations where people are forced to purchase food that is deeply unhealthy. Thus, as Jane Battersby (2022) points out, food producers who promote cheap foodstuffs as a solution to food insecurity and congratulate themselves as the saviours of the



poor, would not be able to get away with it. Under this recommendation, what constitutes food security would be more clearly defined, and realizing it would have a more meaningful impact on the lives of food-insecure South Africans, in contrast to a great deal of the legislation and intervention around food insecurity and agri-business which will be discussed below.

‘Agri-business’ refers to the organizations and processes involved in large-scale agricultural production and the packaging operations that the product undergoes before it reaches the retailer. The organizations comprising much of the food economy are corporations that exert a stranglehold on the nation’s food industry: having controlling interests throughout the supply chain means that they can dictate the terms of the market, and they use this to squeeze out small farmers, obstruct new entrants into ‘their’ markets and, worst of all, collude to raise the prices of essential foodstuff. It is estimated that the ‘Big Four’ supermarkets – Checkers, Pick ‘n Pay, Spar and Woolworths – control 2/3 of the market share in retail and processing industries, more than enough to dictate terms for farmers and other producers. Big names like Pioneer Foods, Tiger Brands and Premier Foods do this with impunity – when they are occasionally caught, the fines they pay, not to mention their gestures towards corporate social responsibility, are laughable when compared to their annual turnovers.

The prevailing discourse surrounding issues of food, food security, hunger and malnourishment is premised on some fallacies that will be unpacked here. It should be stated that the right to food is in the Bill of Rights, the foundational document of our constitution. But food security is not a problem the government has prioritized, and the South African government entities responsible for alleviating (not solving) hunger view this problem only in terms of the first principle: availability. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the public subscribes to it too. We have all donated canned goods at the supermarket checkout, and those supermarkets encourage us to do so. People are too poor to afford food, so the government distributes billions of rands every year in social grants to the food insecure across the nation, when they could instead make structural changes like subsidizing the price of basic foodstuffs or raising the minimum wage for farm employees and save themselves some money and poor and food insecure South Africans a lot of grief. And this is a very convenient coincidence since it absolves the government of responsibility for the situation or doing anything meaningful about it.

According to the government’s logic, the solution to the apparent lack of food on the market is to ramp up food production. Small-scale farmers seldom have the capital, resources and infrastructure to expand, and industrial agriculture is the natural solution to this. Perhaps the most horrifying example of how the government is tipping the scales in favour of industrial agriculture is their ‘use it or lose it’ land policy.

Under this policy, farmers who are not ‘trying’ to get maximum efficiency (in terms of cost and speed) and maximum output from their land, must relinquish or lease their land from agri-business. This is regardless of the reason farmers may aim not to produce at maximum efficiency. Often what government and big agri-business view as maximizing productivity is not profitable for farmers who lack the infrastructure to store, transport and process large volumes of their



produce and the expensive equipment or larger workforce that more intensive production requires.

Small-scale farmers lose either way and worse, they are blamed for not trying hard enough and deserving their fate. Still worse, the government doubles down on this discourse by framing it as an issue of “underutilization”, as Sifiso Ntombela – chief economist of the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC) – describes it (2022: 31). As he sees it, if the government can throw all these underperformers off their land and turn it into profitable and exploitative vineyards, for example, the food security problem will be fixed in no time. The NAMC is the government body responsible for overseeing the enforcement of the regulations (such as they are) around food production and sales, conducting research regarding the farm-gate, processing, and retail costs of foodstuffs, how those prices fluctuate, and why.

The plight of farmers and farmworkers across South Africa has historically been and continues to be one of the greatest stains on the nation’s collective consciousness. Since the passing of the 1913 Land Act and with it the wholesale dismantling of the burgeoning wealth of black farmers, the erstwhile farmers have been forced into a cash-based economy in which livelihood is tied to having shelter. Farm workers are subject to routine abuse by farm owners, and, in the case of the grape-farming industry, often paid in alcohol to maintain their poverty and dependency on the farm owner. The government is not very interested in changing the situation, as the 2012 farm worker strikes made demonstrably clear. Workers in De Doorns in the Hex River Valley began striking over their working and living conditions when their farm was bought by a company, South African Food Exporters. Despite the active efforts of the company to prevent them from unionizing, the strike actions spread across the Western Cape. The strikers were demanding a wage increase to R150/day, up from R69. The government had recently arrived at this amount as the national standard, which was the acute cause of the strike. Farms and vineyards were set alight, and three protestors were killed.

After a great deal of bad faith negotiations between farm owners and their employees, hijacked by COSATU, the government assigned an impartial research group, the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAB), to conduct feasibility assessments on this issue. They concluded that the raise workers were demanding was not in those workers’ best interest, as it would result in increased mechanization for many farmers who would be able to meet that cost and result in fewer jobs for farmworkers. They also concluded in the same report that even R150 per day would not be enough to cover a healthy diet. The number arrived upon, R104 per day, was nowhere near the R3500 a month that the BFAB decided would be the bare minimum for half of a four-person household to eat a reasonably healthy, balanced diet. Ledger reads this contradiction as demonstrating the prevailing *status quo* of viewing the striking workers purely in terms of their value “as inputs to the economy” (2016: xix) and not deserving of their constitutional right to food unless they can contribute to the widening of corporate profit margins.



Perhaps the clearest crystallization of the government's priorities when it comes to food is in the 1996 Marketing of Agricultural Products Act. One of the first pieces of legislation passed by the nation's first majority-rule government, it lays out the priorities of post-apartheid South Africa's agri-food system in callously neoliberal terms. They are as follows: expanding market access for all stakeholders, maximizing efficiency in the *marketing* of food products, optimizing the agricultural industry for export, and enhancing the viability of the agricultural sector. There is no mention of feeding people, food security, or the constitutional right to food. Moreover, these priorities are geared towards the needs of large-scale agri-business, as small-scale commercial farming is not focused on exporting or marketing as they seldom have the capital to expand to those aspects of the food retailer supply chain. 'Viability' in this context is a way of saying 'more profitable' within the framework of economic equality that was so prevalent in the early years of the new South Africa.

Most of the measures to address food security have been focused on household or community level interventions, geared towards altering the behaviour of the food-insecure into more 'productive' channels and by so doing remedying their own food security as per the guidelines of the 1996 Marketing of Agricultural Products Act. The Act frames the constitutionally sanctioned right to food in terms of "equality of opportunity in the economic sphere...first and foremost", and thus to avoid at all costs (so to speak) individual free will being "subordinate to the will of the people" (Government Gazette No. 17473, 10). In other words, the individual's right to win or lose, to grow fat or to starve, must come before public goods for the public good.

Food gardens may present a short-term solution, but this paper argues that the level of intervention required to make them effective is not sustainable in the long run, or rather, that direct intervention in the marketing and sales of foods would be far more cost-effective for the state than the present situation – distributing just enough money to keep people from dying of hunger (several billion rand annually in the form of social grants) – alongside the current state and NGO investment in food garden programmes across the nation, which would have to be ramped up and radically overhauled to make a meaningful contribution to increasing food security in South Africa.

The remainder of this paper will discuss trends in food garden interventions and recommendations for going forward with the practice, differentiating between individuals (single household or extended family) and communities (multi-household), and make comparisons between local projects and interventions in other African countries.

In a world rendered increasingly unstable by the worsening effects of climate change, scientists and policymakers across the world are turning to crop diversification as a cost-effective way to build resilience into existing and emergent food systems. Research indicates that diversifying the crops grown on a farm, or intercropping, has several positive net effects: more efficacious pest suppression and dampening pathogen transmission as a variety of crops will have different vulnerabilities and so if a disease or pest outbreak does occur, the loss will not be catastrophic, and by that same token will act as a buffer against climate variability. This will be of particular



use in rural agricultural communities where capital investment in farming is generally quite low and it is common for many community members to grow the same crop thus the whole community is vulnerable to outbreaks and climate variability. Brenda Lin (2011) notes that the current set-up incentivizes monoculture cultivation, by making large-scale commercial farming – the biggest contributor to biodiversity loss through monocropping – very profitable through economies of scale. Lin recommends that governments attach penalties to monocropping and/or offer guaranteed prices for the products of intercropping.

If crop diversification can improve food security and the resilience of food production systems, many policymakers and researchers have considered whether this can be applied at the level of a household food garden. A study of a five year USAID intervention in Uganda measured the effect of the intervention in reducing food insecurity, using children’s stunting as the metric of nutritional outcomes, focusing particularly on the presence of Vitamin A in the children’s diet. Where subsistence farming is relatively widespread and the primary crops are grains with low nutritional value, farmers were given access to a wide variety of seeds, agricultural and nutritional knowledge, and small-scale farming equipment.

In 2013, the Ugandan government released a National Agricultural Policy “to improve food and nutritional security and improve household incomes” (quoted in Namulondo & Bashaasha, 2020:3). The policy identified 12 foodstuffs optimized for output, pest resilience, handling, and nutritional and commercial value, and small-scale and subsistence farmers were encouraged to invest in these foodstuffs, with subsidies for their purchase and workshops in their management. USAID gave farmers training in intercropping and crops optimized for micronutrients, all taught from “evidence-based interventions” (Namulondo & Bashaasha, 2020:2) proven to increase productivity and profitability. In its five years, the programme produced no meaningful outcomes in the metrics employed.

Indeed, home food gardens are not the cure-all that many would like. While there have been good examples of food gardens having a meaningful impact on food security during the Second World War – the Victory Gardens and Dig for Victory campaigns in the UK and the US respectively. – These programmes cannot be so easily transplanted into a less developed context.

Another study, closer to home in the town of Emfuleni, Gauteng outlined the pitfalls of home gardening as a long-term solution in a less-developed context. Of the respondents surveyed, 72% were classified as gardening “substantially” (Du Toit et al, 2022:9), and of those respondents, a further 86% could partially meet their nutritional requirements with homegrown vegetables but chose not to. Overwhelmingly, their reasons were financial and logistical: less than 10% of all the respondents had indoor plumbing and for many of the respondents access to water was a prohibitive factor beyond their control. Production was unreliable and seasonal; space was lacking and when it was accessible it was seldom safe. Most prevalent of all was the issue of soil quality: areas historically designed for people of colour were intentionally sited on land not fit for agriculture, and many means of improving the soil quality with chemicals or organic waste, and indiscriminate spraying of pesticides are not hygienic.



The state of food security in South Africa has been and continues to be characterized by gross inequality, malnutrition and corporate greed. This is largely as a result of the deregulation of the food production and marketing industries, and the fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and cause of South Africa's food security problem, which is structural in nature, and not a matter that can be solved with the present measures. The most popular alternative expounded by governments and NGOs alike are community and household food gardens that are not as simple as many would wish them to be and are not a viable alternative for long-term food security.

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