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FOOD SECURITY AND
POVERTY REDUCTION
PROGRAMMES IN A
CAPE TOWN COMMUNITY:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Despite increased engagement with public programmes, low-income urban South African communities continue to experience high levels of food insecurity. More needs to be known about why progress in poverty alleviation and food security has plateaued (Shisana et al 2013). This discussion paper is based on a qualitative study that investigated how food insecure female-headed households in a Cape Town community made use of state (national) and local (government, NGO and community-led) poverty reduction programmes and social networks in their pursuit of food security (Duncan 2016). It revealed the study participants as skilled survivors who carefully navigated their environment, using both formal and informal strategies, to keep their households from collapse. In the midst of multi-dimensional poverty, the women engaged the complexities of food insecurity by using internal (personal) and external (structural, environmental) drivers for survival. They experienced the contributions of poverty reduction programmes to household food security as “half a help” given that these programmes only helped them to sustain rather than uplift them from their circumstances. To better address food insecurity, state and local poverty reduction programmes should improve their collaboration with each other, the communities that they serve (their aspirations, functioning and capabilities), and their understanding of existing local survival means including how households view and experience the causal factors of food insecurity and cope with the multi-dimensional nature of poverty.

Keywords

urban food security, poverty reduction programmes, social networks

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Introduction

Food security has been defined as a “state in which all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 1996). In contrast, food insecurity has been described as a “form of deprivation and an outcome of vulnerability” (McLaren et al 2015: xii) in which there exists a lack of food to meet daily dietary requirements and the food that is available is of limited variety and poor quality (Oxfam 2014: 10). The dynamic interaction between food security and insecurity is central because it acts as both a cause and consequence of multiple societal, economic, and political factors affecting the rate and direction of development (FAO 1996).

Despite continued efforts from the state and civil society (NGOs), the proportion of South African households experiencing food security has plateaued (Shisana et al 2013: 144-145). Hendriks and Olivier (2015: 555) describe these levels of household food insecurity in South Africa as “unacceptable”. To date, the main food security policy focus in South Africa has been on supporting rural food production. This is out of keeping with the country’s highly-urbanized population (Skinner and Haysom 2017). Rural bias exists in policies such as the 2013 National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security where it overshadows other important dimensions of food security and especially food accessibility, the main determining factor in urban food security (Battersby 2011b). Other key urban food security factors include “regularity, food safety and nutritional diversity and quality” (Crush and Frayne 2011:540) making urban outcomes and influencers such as food deserts, food prices, employment and transport networks increasingly relevant (Battersby and Crush 2014, Hendriks and Olivier 2015, McLaren et al 2015, Oxfam 2014). Furthermore, in an urban setting, food purchasing power varies considerably, making social groups more or less vulnerable to food insecurity with impoverished female-headed households identified as the most vulnerable (Battersby 2011a, Crush

and Caesar 2014). Given that nearly two-thirds of South Africans now live in urban areas, national food security policy should arguably not be dominated by a rural and productionist bias but rather address how citizens can better access suitable food in both cities and rural areas.

For growing South African cities like Cape Town, such a shift in policy is urgently needed (Haysom et al 2020). In 2011, the African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) found that 80% of the households in three low-income areas of Cape Town were moderately to severely food insecure (Battersby 2011a). Although the AFSUN study only represented selected pockets of the city, it pointed to the severity of food insecurity in low-income social groups in the city. Since 2011, food insecurity levels in Cape Town have not improved: the 2017 city-wide survey conducted by the Hungry Cities Partnership (HCP) found that food insecurity was closely correlated with household income, with 70% of households in the lowest income quintile being severely food insecure compared with only a handful in the upper income quintile. In total, 36% of Cape Town households were severely food insecure, and only 45% were completely food secure (Crush et al 2018: 27). The HCP survey also found that as levels of food insecurity increased, the proportion of households never experiencing food shortages declined, from 61% of those in the mildly food insecure category to only 17% of the severely food insecure.

This discussion paper provides additional qualitative insights into the contributing factors for the high and persistent levels of food insecurity revealed by household surveys. The paper focuses on the experiences of five women who head food insecure households and who access state (national) and local (government, NGO and community-led) poverty reduction programmes to meet their household’s food security needs. The study on which this paper is based had four main objectives: (1) to understand how food insecure households themselves define and understand food (in)security; (2) to describe how food insecure households experience food insecurity; (3) to show the characteristics of effective poverty reduction programmes; and (4) to

identify the failings of ineffective poverty reduction programmes from the perspective of food insecure households. The key research question addressed was the following: “How do food insecure female-headed households experience the contributions of poverty reduction programmes to meeting their food security needs?” (Duncan 2016).

Formal Responses to Food Insecurity

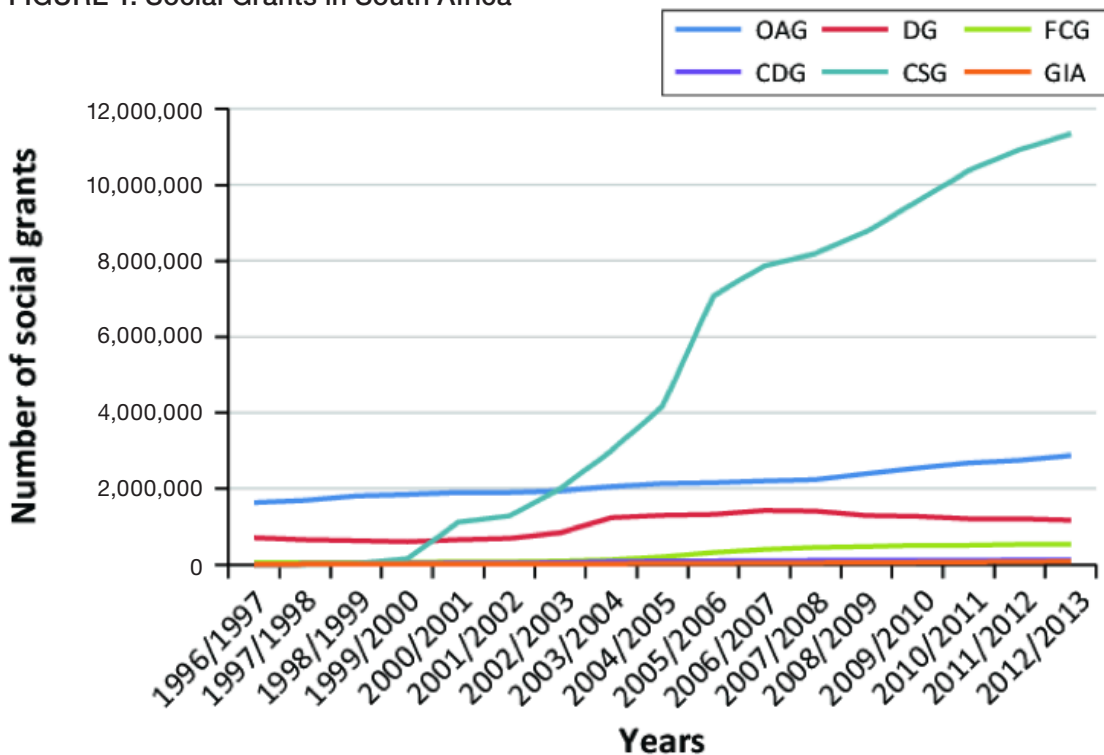
South Africans have a constitutional right to food and the state is thus obligated to find ways to address issues of food insecurity in the country (SAHRC 2014: 3). While national food security policy has fallen short of its desired effect, one helpful state provision has been the establishment of social safety nets. Social safety nets generally consist of state-funded programmes and initiatives designed to alleviate food and financial insecurity, and ease poverty by protecting households from collapse, thereby promoting long-term national economic growth and social development (Conning and Kevane 2002, Diana 2014). Ideally, social safety nets should not create dependency but rather uplift households and communities by improving household consumption levels, facilitating investment in assets, and strengthening the agency of recipients (Barrientos 2011).

South African social safety nets are organised into three types: social insurance, informal insurance, and social assistance (van der Berg et al 2009). While initiatives like the Western Cape National School Nutrition programme (NSNP) have assisted many food insecure households in particular localities, the most effective national social assistance safety net contributor to improved household food security is South Africa’s social grant system (Altman et al 2009). Through this state system, several types of social grants are distributed on a monthly basis to over 18 million South Africans (SASSA 2021). These grants target vulnerable populations, including children (child grant, foster child grant), older people (old age pension grant), people with physical and developmental disabilities (disability

grant), war veterans (veteran grant), and those requiring specialized care (care dependency grant, grant in aid) and temporary relief (social relief of distress). Figure 1 shows the increase in social grants to 2013. During the year that ended 31 March 2019, over ZAR161 billion was spent on the old age grant (OAG), disability grant (DG), child support grant (CSG), foster care grant (FCG), care dependency grant (CDG) and grant in aid (GIA), which make up 99.23% of the full benefit spend (SASSA 2021). These grants are expected to remain in place but taper off over time (Carswell et al 2020). Each grant comes with its own financial value and applicant criteria, which have changed over time to include more vulnerable South Africans and better provide for their needs. For example, in response to the pandemic, the South African government created a short-term COVID-19 Relief Grant valued at ZAR350 (Bam 2021). In practice, South Africa’s social grants help to support and maintain household security and are used to pay for everything from electricity to school fees to food (van der Berg et al 2009). In response to the state system, Altman et al (2009) argue that social grants have improved household food security since 2001, notably expanding access to food and purchasing power for women (Labadarios et al 2011).

However, although the different grants have helped many, the disbursement system faces ongoing challenges including poor administrative capacity, corruption, fraud, and regular scandals with both employees and recipients of grants abusing the system to their advantage (Bam 2021, van der Berg et al 2009, GroundUp 2015). More than internal systemic issues, the social grant system also faces external pressures such as the high unemployment rate in South Africa, which has resulted in the steady increase in the demand for grants (SASSA, 2021). The instability of the social grant system and shortfalls in other government and NGO social assistance initiatives often means that individuals and households are left to shoulder the full burden of food insecurity on their own.

FIGURE 1: Social Grants in South Africa



Source: Hanass-Hancock and McKenzie (2017)

Informal Responses to Food Insecurity

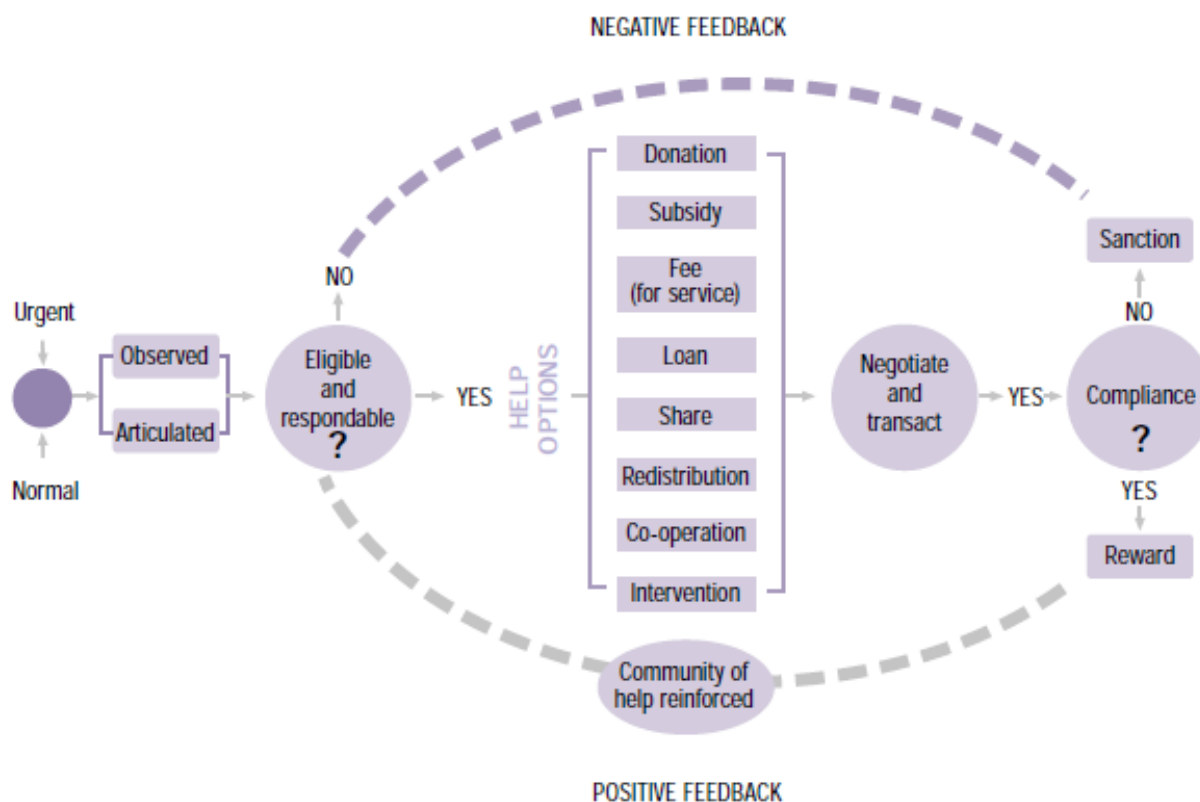
Writing on the dynamics of survival in poor South African households, Mosoetsa (2011: 17) describes impoverished households as “crucial but fragile sites of survival.” The multi-dimensional nature and fluidity of poverty requires skilled survivors – navigators of both the formal and informal sectors – who have learned to decrease vulnerability through the spreading of risk by, for example, using a range of food coping strategies such as food stretching and buffering at different levels of vulnerability and possible entitlement failure. The extent and duration of such coping strategies determines the magnitude and severity of suffering, including influencing the degree of food insecurity experienced by a household (Kimani-Murage et al 2014). Women, as household leaders in resource management and caregiving, will often increase their own vulnerability and suffering as, out of necessity, they employ coping strategies for the benefit of the household (Floro and Swain 2013). Before households stretch resources, they first need to access them. In Cape Town, the urban poor access food through purchase

from both formal and informal outlets, through formal social safety nets, and through social networks that allow them to borrow, barter, and take now/pay later (Battersby 2011a, Wilkinson-Maposa et al 2005). Gilchrist and Kyprianou (2011) describe social networks as both helpful and harmful as they create and restrict opportunities.

In their book *The Poor Philanthropist*, Wilkinson-Maposa et al (2005: 106) describe social networks as a “need-impelled, reputation-mediated, network-based system of mutual assistance affording self-respect, mutual survival and joint progress.” Their “horizontal philanthropy” framework has five steps – Initiate, Filter, Help Options, Negotiate and Transact, and Sanction or Reward (Figure 2).

Activating the “Horizontal Philanthropic Act” help (material or non-material) is first requested or offered; asking for help among those of a shared condition (horizontal) is encouraged and not perceived as begging. The potential recipient of help and their request is then filtered by the giver, who looks for proof of need (as help is not about

FIGURE 2: Rules of Engagement, Process and Content of a Horizontal Philanthropic Act



Source: Wilkinson-Maposa et al (2005: 82)

accumulating) among other criteria. If approved, the giver acts, providing the recipient with assistance. Expectation and accountability between the actors are established through a verbal agreement, and terms and conditions are also set. The implementation and outcomes of the help are monitored, with adherence to social rules being rewarded and deviance being sanctioned. Sanctioning is not taken lightly, with the actor opting to either correct, isolate or continue to help the recipient depending on a variety of factors – particularly, the extent of recipient need and reason for non-compliance (Wilkinson-Maposa et al 2005: 81-84).

Within a social network, individuals and households help and are helped. They stretch their networks as wide as possible, incorporating as many points of assistance as can be sustained. Women are found to be more active than men in establishing social networks and finding other innovative and practical ways to supplement their income (Citizen

Surveys 2004). When used alongside poverty reduction programmes, their social networks can become increasingly valuable resources for survival (Gilchrist and Kyprianou 2011, Narayan 1999,). Surviving poverty requires them to stay active within their social networks through being seen and experienced as someone capable of giving and worthwhile knowing.

Trust between the giver and receiver is very important, as is time. People see themselves as incredibly busy, with women in particular experiencing stress over how much time is needed to run a household and pursue different avenues of resource gain (Mosoetsa 2011). Time is an asset, if the time on task does not look likely to lead to an outcome of equal or greater value, then it may not be invested in the first place (Beatty et al 2013). This has implications for the uptake of programmes by end users, affecting both their sustainability and impact on food security. Understanding informal strategies

should, according to Ibrahim (2011), involve an investigation of what the poor aspire to and where, in contrast, their capabilities fall short. Social networks can provide poverty reduction programmes with a mind map of the functionings, capabilities and aspirations of those they seek to serve (Appadurai 2007, Sen 1993). In this way, social networks and other informal responses to food insecurity could be used by both households and programmes to sustain and uplift their communities alongside more formal efforts like the social grant system.

Study Site

The research was conducted in a low-income community on the outskirts of Cape Town (anonymized as North Town here). North Town has a population of almost 6,500 and an unemployment rate of 22%. The community has a mix of formal and informal housing, with high levels of poverty, crime and a sizeable disease burden. At the outset of the research process, participants (with pseudonyms here) identified the following poverty reduction programmes (PRPs) that they used:

- South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) social grants programme.
- School feeding programme run by the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP).
- Etham Trust, a faith based non-profit organization founded in 2002 providing services for over 1,000 people including home-based health care, a children's day care facility, support groups for vulnerable children and a community advice office.
- Arise, elderly and health club founded in 2006 by community health workers with a membership of approximately 45 pensioners and persons with physical and developmental impairments. The club offers health and support services for those with chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. The club meets every week for exercise or an activity, a health talk, food donation distribution, prayer and gospel singing.
- Woven Ministries, craft initiative and bible study started in 2013. While the focus is on ministry through bible education, the women who run the club encourage co-operative craft teaching where everyone who attends the club shares their crafting skills with the group. The group meets once a month with between 5 and 20 women attending.
- Tackling Real Emerging Diseases (TRED), an NGO active in the area during the early 2000s. The NGO trained and equipped members of the community to run their own community-based kitchen. In 2005, TRED handed over their initiative to the community.
- Benji's, a child-feeding scheme started by a local family and the longest running programme. It is supported by Etham Trust and is open three days a week, providing each visiting child with one or two sandwiches of their choice and fruit when available.
- Khula Seed Garden, a community garden started in 2004. While anyone is able to join the garden, membership numbers are low with only nine women using the land.
- Funeral policies offered by private companies, major retailers and local churches. They act as insurance policies in the case of a family death, and can provide important financial support to a household during a time of need. Payments made to community or church schemes can be accessed during other times of crisis, like a house fire.
- Stokvels are community-run saving schemes in which members pay in a monthly fee to a cash pot. Each month, one or more members (depending on the size of the group) receives the cash collected. Alternatively, the money collected is used to bulk purchase food (meat, vegetables, and staples), which is distributed among members at a set time of the year.

- **Microlenders:** Money can easily be borrowed but the interest rates can be as high as 150%. While microlenders provide an important service in times of crisis, study participants did their best to avoid using them.
- **Other:** Stamp books, local butchers, and Mr I. Stamp books are a savings scheme in which major and minor retailers sell shop stamps in small denominations (for example, ZAR5 or ZAR10). The stamps are placed in booklets and can be used later on for larger purchases. Responding to a need for affordable and accessible food, two local butcheries sold ZAR5 packs of soup bones. A valued addition to any meal, the bones are regularly purchased by all but one of the participants. Furthermore, Mr I, a fresh-produce hawker, visits the area most weekends. Community members can take goods and pay him back later for no additional cost.

Methodology

The study used a descriptive qualitative methodology, with participant data predominantly gathered through Photovoice supplemented with photo-elicitation interviews, semi-structured interviews, collage, and observation field notes. Photovoice (Wang and Burris 1997, Wang 1999) was selected as it afforded participants a direct and expressive means of conveying their personal experiences of food security. As a research method, Photovoice enables people who are marginalized, disempowered and illiterate to communicate through visual imagery in the form of snapshots of their lives taken with disposable cameras. While participants were provided with a broad frame in which to take photographs, space was left for interpretation (for example, a request for photographs of food sources produced data on participant's social networks). Each participant was issued with a disposable camera with 27 exposures and a notebook containing basic research information, self-prompting questions regarding the taking of photos, and instructions on camera use. Participants were encouraged to use

their notebook as a memory journal about the photographs they had taken.

Photo-elicitation interviews (Clark-Ibáñez 2004) involved gathering tape recorded raw data on the opinions, perspectives, and experiences of the study participants as they narrated their stories, based on their photographs, of engaging with local programmes and living as food insecure households. The researcher looked through the images with the participants and used probative questions to facilitate deeper discussion on issues pertinent to the research objectives. Tape recorded, semi-structured interviews, ranging in length from 20 to 90 minutes, allowed conversational and open-ended probing in which the participants were free to voice personal opinions, perspectives, and feelings that they considered relevant.

Collage, as a data gathering method, provides an opportunity to “include marginalized voices and encourage a range of linguistic and non-linguistic representations to articulate authentic lived experiences” (Gerstenblatt 2013: 294). The method served as a precursor and extension of Photovoice in that participants were asked during the first group meeting to create a poster using cut-out pictures and words from magazines (like composing a photograph) that represented their perception of food (in)security and what it meant to them. It was found that visual cues were helpful in stimulating and directing conversation, leading to several individual and group activities during interviews that involved verbal and visual engagement.

All tape-recorded data was transcribed semi-verbatim into textual form and analyzed using inductive coding. As units of meaning, the codes were then grouped into sub-categories and categories before themes were identified (Saldaña 2013). In qualitative research, trustworthiness is the equivalent of reliability and validity of the methods used in quantitative research. In this study, trustworthiness was promoted by data triangulation (i.e. data from multiple methods), prolonged engagement, and the detailed maintenance and recording of raw data (Babbie and Mouton 2008: 276-278).

To provide a measure of the extent of food insecurity experienced by each participant's household, the FANTA methodology was utilized to calculate an HFIAS and HFIAP for each household. These measures are based on answers to 9 frequency-of-occurrence questions that relate to food consumption and dietary quality over the previous month (Coates 2013). Frequency is rated on a scale (1=rarely, 2=sometimes, 3=often), and then depending on the question and frequency, each question is given a food security rating (Food Secure, Mildly Food Insecure, Moderately Food Insecure, Severely Food Insecure) with a final HFIAS score and HFIAP descriptor.

The Participants

The five study participants were selected using typical case purposeful sampling (Patton 1990). Each participant self-identified as the head of their female-headed household. Household composition and size in North Town is rarely static and four of the five participant households had one or more transient members. Basic demographic information about each of the five participants is provided in Table 1.

Donna, a 68-year-old pensioner, has lived in a government-built RDP house since 1999. Her granddaughter and great-granddaughter live with her. Living two doors down were Donna's daughter and young grandson with whom she shared

household resources and responsibilities. Donna last worked full time in 2001 and is dependent on her pension grant, which she supplements with the occasional sale of fresh produce from her work in the community garden. Donna is an active user of programmes, having completed multiple training opportunities from business management to HIV awareness. She makes most use of the Khula Seed Community Garden, Arise Club, Woven Ministries and Etham Trust. Through her work in the garden, Donna previously had access to City of Cape Town programme-related training opportunities and aid assistance. She invests in multiple stokvels when possible.

Doris, a 72-year-old widowed pensioner, has lived in a brick house located a short walk from Etham Trust since 1994. One of her sons, an unemployed recovering addict, lives with her in the house and another son lives with his wife and two children in an extension on the house. Also on the property is a backyard bungalow where one of her grandsons occasionally stays with his wife and two children. While none of the family members who live on Doris's property pay her rent, they help out where they can. She last worked full time in 2007 and is dependent on her state pension grant. Every month her grant is used to pay her funeral policy, make church donations, and lower her debt with local department stores. Of the poverty reduction programmes active in the community, Doris makes most use of the Arise Club. She is also helped by two of her daughters, her church community, and a nearby children's home where she volunteers.

TABLE 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

	Donna	Doris	Ethel	Elizabeth	Abira
Age	68	72	73	58	49
Household size	3	2+	2+	8-9	4
Personal income	1 Pension grant Food sales	1 Pension grant	1 Pension grant	1 Foster child grant	Odd jobs
Race	African	Coloured	African	Coloured	Coloured
Home language	Xhosa	Afrikaans	Xhosa	Afrikaans	Afrikaans
Faith	Christianity	Christianity	Christianity (Zion Christian Church)	Christianity	Christianity / Islam
Education	Grade 9	Grade 8	None	Grade 7	Grade 8

Note: All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the women

Ethel, a 73-year-old pensioner, has lived in an RDP house in North Town since 1999. Her young granddaughter lives with her, and on occasion her son (father of the granddaughter) and teenage grandson stay with her for short periods. Ethel is dependent on her pension grant and her social networks. Her granddaughter is on a foster grant but she does not always get the money. Of the poverty reduction programmes, Ethel makes most use of the Arise club, Etham Trust, her church and the community garden where vegetables are planted and harvested for her by Donna, her best friend. Ethel has a funeral policy through her church, she occasionally joins stokvels with Donna, and she makes use of micro-lenders when necessary. Ethel visits her extended family in the Eastern Cape at least once a year but they do not help her in Cape Town.

Elizabeth, a 58-year-old widow, has lived in North Town since 1990. In 2000, she moved into an RDP house where she lived with eight or nine family members. She also rented out two of her three backyard bungalows. Towards the end of the study period, her two rented backyard dwellings burned down and her home was damaged. Elizabeth moved quickly to recover from and capitalize on the disaster, networking different aid from a variety of sources. She evicted her renters and in their place one large bungalow was built by and for her son and his wife and their two children who had been living in the RDP house with her. Also during the study period, one of Elizabeth's daughters was released from prison and moved into a bungalow (unaffected by the fire) with two sons who had previously been living in the RDP house with Elizabeth. During the study period, Elizabeth fostered a grandson from another daughter who did not live with her. While Elizabeth is not on a social grant, her extended household receives and shares the following: one disability grant (son, unemployed), four child grants and one foster child grant. Although Elizabeth used to receive rent from her bungalows, the money was sent to her daughter while she was in prison. Elizabeth last worked full time in 2003. She wants to work again but her family said that she was too old and must stay home and take care of her grandchildren. Of the poverty

reduction programmes active in the community, Elizabeth's household makes most use of Benji's and Etham Trust. Unlike the others, Elizabeth does not make use of informal saving schemes such as stokvels but she does have a funeral policy.

Abira, 49 years old, has lived in North Town since 1998. Although she is married, she considers herself to be the head of her household. She lives in a brick house with her husband, daughter and young grandson. Her husband is on a pension grant, their main source of income, and her grandson receives a child grant but it is only used for purchasing his diapers and milk. In addition to the pension grant, Abira and her husband source a small income from the collection and sale of golf balls. Despite struggling with health concerns, Abira takes on odd jobs where possible and, by the end of the study period, had returned to full time work at a local butchery. She does not see herself as using any poverty reduction programmes. However, her reasons for non-participation were relevant to the research objectives so she was included in the study. Abira does use stamp books and said she was interested in participating in a food stokvel if her husband would agree to providing the capital.

Findings

Table 2 shows that all five households are severely food insecure according to the HFIAP and with very high scores ranging between 14 and 22 out of 27 on the HFIAS. Table 3 classifies the nine HFIAS food frequency-of-occurrence insecurity experiences into the four HFIAP categories from (food) secure to severe (food insecurity). It is clear from the table that food insecurity seems to be experienced more in relation to the amount of food available and consumed (Q. 5-9) than in its quality (Q2-4).

Throughout the study, all five participants described themselves and their households as having nothing in terms of food resources. The meaning of the word "nothing" was fluid as it changed with context and was used in different ways in varied scenarios.

TABLE 2: Household Food Insecurity Metrics

	Donna	Doris	Ethel	Elizabeth	Abira
HFIAS	22/27	18/27	14/27	18/27	21/27
HFIAP	Severely food insecure	Severely food insecure	Severely food insecure	Severely food insecure	Severely food insecure

TABLE 3: Types of HFIAS Food Insecurity Experience

No.	Question	Donna	Doris	Ethel	Elizabeth	Abira
1.	In the past four weeks, did you worry that your household would not have enough food?	Mild	Mild	Secure	Secure	Mild
2.	In the past four weeks, were you or any household member not able to eat the kinds of foods you preferred because of a lack of resources?	Mild	Mild	Mild	Mild	Mild
3.	In the past four weeks, did you or any household member have to eat a limited variety of foods due to a lack of resources?	Moderate	Moderate	Mild	Moderate	Mild
4.	In the past four weeks, did you or any household member have to eat some foods that you really did not want to eat because of a lack of resources to obtain other types of food?	Moderate	Moderate	Mild	Moderate	Moderate
5.	In the past four weeks, did you or any household member have to eat a smaller meal than you felt you needed because there was not enough food?	Severe	Severe	Moderate	Moderate	Severe
6.	In the past four weeks, did you or any household member have to eat fewer meals in a day because there was not enough food?	Severe	Moderate	Moderate	Severe	Moderate
7.	In the past four weeks, was there ever no food of any kind to eat in your household because of lack of resources to get food?	Severe	Severe	Severe	Severe	Severe
8.	In the past four weeks, did you or any household member go to sleep at night hungry because there was not enough food?	Severe	Severe	Severe	Severe	Severe
9.	In the past four weeks, did you or any household member go a whole day and night without eating anything because there was not enough food?	No	No	Severe	No	Severe

For example, “nothing” was used to describe a cupboard without food, a cupboard with food that was inaccessible (not theirs to eat), an insufficient amount of food (e.g. not enough food to last one meal) and food that was inadequate (not healthy and/or their choice). The experience of nothing also changed with each participant moving towards or away from food security and household collapse based on various internal and external drivers.

Internal Drivers

Internal Drivers relate to the first two objectives of the study: (1) understanding how food insecure households themselves define and understand food (in)security; and (2) how food insecure households experience food insecurity. They are associated with environmental and personal factors that determined actions taken to obtain resources when needing food. Environmental factors include social networks, poverty reduction programmes, and the

food insecure/impoverished context in which the women live. Personal factors refer to their capabilities and aspirations that inform what, if, and how they pursue food security through resource gain. These actions, capturing the women’s subjective, dynamic and adaptive stance in meeting their food-related needs are reflected in four phrases or themes: soldiering on, making a plan, watching and waiting, and eating with one eye open (Figure 3).

Figure 3 illustrates how the women respond to food insecurity based on what they believe (or aspire to) and what they are capable of achieving. Environmental and personal factors influence their capacity to move from needing food to obtaining resources, and back again. The women’s experiences continually “move” along the diagram’s x and y axis from one quadrant to another (as represented by the circular arrows), occasionally operating in more than one simultaneously, depending on whether they are pursuing single or multiple resources. While resources refer primarily to food, other material and non-material resources, such as money, clothing, social connections and information, are also pursued and often then leveraged to access food. Each of the four themes has two categories.

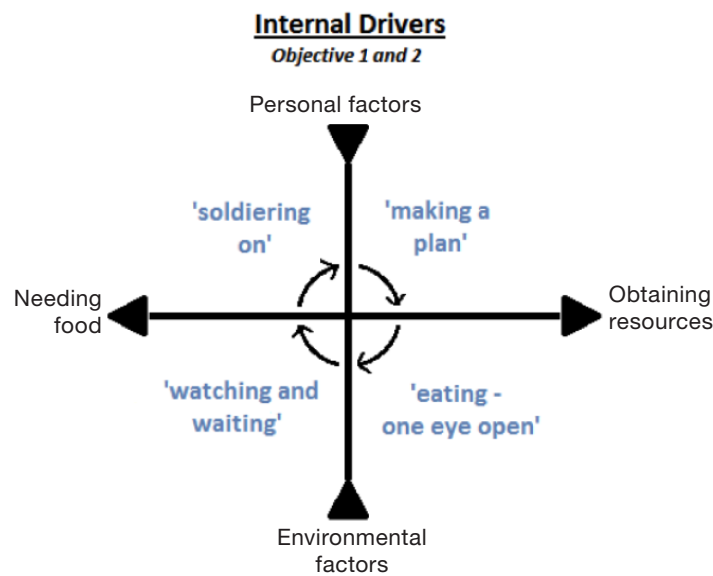
Soldiering On: Living in Poverty and Enduring Adversity

Living in poverty refers to the constrained circumstances preventing the women from obtaining the resources that would bring about the quality of life and food security they pursue and desire. Pressure to achieve these goals also comes from within the household, especially from its younger members. As Donna said:

And you know this grandchild? She says ‘I am tired of these rolls [programme hand out] – you must cook food, please mama.’ She doesn’t know I got nothing, every day we eating rolls. She says, ‘I am tired, I want food now.’ She doesn’t know that there is no food.

While living in poverty, the women endure adversity, looking inwards to personal factors to sustain them as they survive in a space of needing food. Despite these challenges, they soldier on, trusting and strategizing that provision will be made through the goodwill of God, of others, or by taking action themselves.

FIGURE 3: Internal Drivers and Subjective Stances in Managing Nothing



Making a Plan: Street Smart and Pursuing Ideals

As a response to “nothing,” the women use their knowledge and skills to create the means to access and obtain resources. Rather than simply accepting their situation, they adopt an attitude of proactively seeking change through action. As Abira noted, “I make a plan, there is always a plan.” Each plan requires being street smart or a keen sense of how to navigate social networks and how to use programmes to their benefit. While there were similarities in plan making, each woman uses a unique skill set (built through life experience) and available resources to make plans best suited to her needs and the needs of her household. For example, Doris relies on her faith networks to create a community of mutual help, Elizabeth has expanded her social networks to a local wealthier neighbourhood, and Donna has used her programme connections to gain access to resources.

The women therefore make plans based on their capabilities and aspirations (ideals), using the tools available to them and their capabilities to pursue an end goal defined by their aspirations. While some plans have immediate results, others can be stalled by environmental factors like a dependency on a slow social network connection or a sudden loss of assets, such as the fire that devastated Elizabeth’s home.

Watching and Waiting: Using Social Networks and Assessing Programmes

When they try to avoid engaging in potentially risky behaviour – such as taking loans from usurious micro-lenders – the women wait and watch for opportunities that are most advantageous to resource gain. By using their social networks, they are able to gain access to resources. However, while inclusion in a social network can bring benefits, it also has limitations. For example, some of the women shared resources when they had very little, and turned away from other opportunities because they were frowned upon by their household or community. Time is a valued commodity in North Town, used primarily to manage household affairs

and maintain social networks. As most of the women are pensioners, they are often expected to care for their grandchildren while their children look for work, work or socialize. Socializing, often the means of building and maintaining social networks, is time consuming but has both short and long-term resource gain benefits.

In contrast to household responsibilities and the gains of socializing, the benefit of outside programmes is not always apparent and thus the women find it difficult to justify (to themselves and to their households) why they should spend their time attending or participating in one. As a result, the value of participation in a programme is largely assessed in terms of its direct and indirect resource gain. In effect, to join a programme, the resource gain needs to outweigh the time loss and household/social costs. For example, the most active programme user, Donna, negotiated with her family for the time to work in the Khula Seed Garden because it afforded the opportunity of fresh vegetables and money from sales. As she noted, “I put it [the African spinach] in a plastic...then I say R11. And the R1 goes for electricity. The R10 is mine.”

Eating with One Eye Open: Living Out Poverty and Dealing with Broken Promises

When they enter a space of potential resource gain, the women retain their street smartness and cautiously navigate their new found relationships, often “eating with one eye open”. The women live out their poverty when they are forced by circumstance to give up aspects of their autonomy. Having “nothing,” they are dependent on fluctuating sources of food-related resources which they are wary of trusting. The unreliability of their sources of household income and the unpredictability of resources means that they have learnt how to deal with broken promises made by both their social networks and the programmes. Vigilant about the possibility of disappointment, the women soldiered on, watching and waiting for better suited opportunities to meet their needs and exercise their capabilities and aspirations.

External Drivers

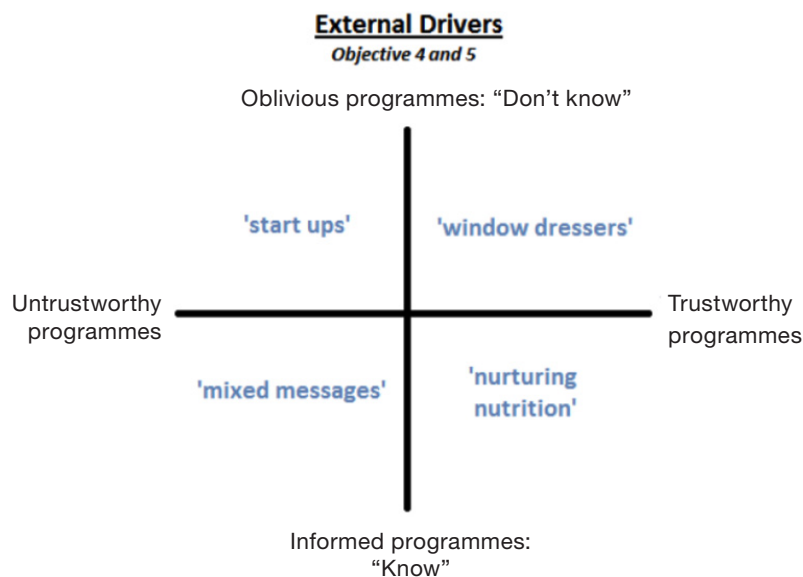
External Drivers relate to the other two objectives of the study; that is, identifying the characteristics of effective poverty reduction programmes and the failings of ineffective poverty from the women’s perspective. Also, they show how these perceptions influence their choices and ways of engagement. These drivers can be classified into four phrases or themes: start ups, window dressers, mixed messages, and nurturing nutrition (Figure 4).

Figure 4 represents the challenges of engaging with the more formal help environment of poverty reduction programmes (PRPs). Engagement in a PRP is either encouraged or discouraged based on the women’s perceptions of the capacity of a programme to help or hinder their pursuit of food security. Although programmes could arguably move from one quadrant to another in the figure, this was not communicated by the women or observed by the researcher during the study period. This lack of movement is represented within the diagram by the absence of the circular arrows seen in Figure 3. Each of the four themes has two categories.

Start Ups: Under Review and Settling In

Start ups refers to how PRPs encourage or discourage participation based on how they enter the community in terms of both their design and their introductory actions. Programmes still settling into the area are placed under review by potential participants who watch and wait to see the benefits and trustworthiness of these “start up” programmes. The women reported that they were sometimes forced by circumstance, like an acute onset crisis such as a fire, to engage with yet-to-be-vetted programmes. This type of engagement moves them into a personal attitudinal stance of “eating with one eye open”. New PRPs have to be vetted and tested via evaluations shared among the social network before they can move from being considered “untrustworthy” to “trustworthy”. They are evaluated according to the extent to which they settle into a local way of doing things and whether they encourage or discourage community partnership, collaboration, and support. Programmes that do not have sufficient understanding of local community dynamics can be pushed out of the area through, for example, non-attendance and/or vandalism.

FIGURE 4: External Drivers and Perceptions Informing Poverty Reduction Programme Engagement



Window Dressers: Political Building Blocks and Half Help

All of the women noted the contributions coming in to their community from the City of Cape Town, the Provincial Department of Social Development, and the South African Social Security Agency. Contributions from these different levels of government were associated with their corresponding and different political parties and thus constituted political building blocks. Local government was seen as helping sporadically and yet, unlike local programmes, they retain a degree of community trust. Although trusted, government projects are seen as “half help” as they miss real needs and perpetuate poverty when they do not appropriately engage the community in programme design and implementation. For example, an electric water pump was installed by the City of Cape Town at the Khula Seed Garden. Although grateful, community garden members could not afford to buy the electricity to run the pump and when it breaks, the plants in the garden quickly die and members lose their time and financial investments as well as their access to fresh food and income. As Donna said: “Now even the box of electricity is not working... They gave us this tomato, it grows so long...but, now it didn’t grow nicely because there was no water.” Access to water in the form of a pump was seen as a positive contribution by local government. However, without the finances to run the pump, protect it from vandalism and manage its maintenance, the intervention was insufficient.

Mixed Messages: Communication Breakdown and Double Standards

Citing their experience with PRPs, the women said they had expressed their concerns and offered solutions, only to feel unheard and rebuffed. The communication breakdown that occurred between programme users and those who design and implement programmes was compounded when the lack of open dialogue inhibited programme help and participant development. For example, the women felt trapped by circumstance to show gratitude for low-quality donated foods when the items were not

of use to them: “I rather take it then it doesn’t look so bad” (Doris) and “I stay hungry...[but] I can’t complain, they giving us” (Donna).

Communication breakdown also impacts programme attendance and participation. The design of many local programmes means that rewards, like end-of-year food hampers, can only be accumulated over time through regular attendance. Busy maintaining their households and social networks, the women feel that they cannot prioritize programme attendance because it comes with only potential resource gain. Those who attend do so when they have the time and for their own reasons, such as the opportunity to learn, socialize, and to break the monotony of their daily lives. As Doris noted: “I don’t go for the food...I am going...then I am not so boring at home...I am making friends with other people and so on.”

There is also communication breakdown when the women perceive a double standard of programme education, message, and action. For example, they are educated by programmes on the guidelines and value of healthy eating and exercise, and are then provided with unhealthy foods like doughnuts and sugary drinks. “They say that thing is wrong but they give us,” observed Donna. Such double standards in programme health education and action confuse the women who then develop their own belief and knowledge systems, in conjunction with their personal experiences, which subsequently informs their eating habits and aspirations. Ethel, for example, saw muffins as healthy because “I like them very much,” while canned tuna was seen as unhealthy because “it doesn’t make me feel alright.”

Nurturing Nutrition: Affirmation of Personhood and Equipped and Enabled

Despite the challenges of engaging with PRPs, the women were generally appreciative of programme contributions to their survival. While they struggle to trust some programmes, others are held up as exemplars of sound community knowledge, awareness, and trustworthiness. They respond well to programmes that affirm their personhood

by making them feel seen and heard. In describing effective programmes, they want to be proud of their association with these initiatives, to be treated fairly, and to be given choice and opportunities. The women were most appreciative of programmes which they felt addressed real (community) needs and did so in a successful and tangible manner. One such programme was Benji's feeding scheme for children. As Abira noted: "that child cannot wait to get out of school. He will see that Benji's is not yet open but he will sit there till she opens because he is hungry." Programmes that equipped and enabled users were deemed most successful. Effective programmes also create a lasting legacy for other programmes to live up to. Donna, for example, still referred to TRED as "number one in the world" for equipping, enabling, and empowering her.

Surviving the Complexities of Poverty and Food Insecurity

For programmes to effectively address the food security plateau in South Africa (Shisana et al 2013), household food insecurity needs to be placed within the broader context of chronic poverty. Simply providing food through donation and feeding schemes may sustain but does not uplift communities who also live in need of employment, education, and improved physical access to quality goods. The women's food insecurity was both a cause and consequence of their poverty and they themselves did not differentiate between their experience of food insecurity and their living conditions. Every day presented a challenge to secure resources – of which food was just one unmet survival need.

Poverty is both multi-dimensional and fluid (Barrientos 2011). Mosoetsa (2011) describes households as either declining, coping or improving. The study participants, all female heads of food insecure households, fall into the "coping" category. Their households have a few basic assets (such as shelter, access to electricity, running water, and some food) but they are unable to use them and their resources

to effectively manoeuvre out of poverty. Further complicating their situation, the women expressed confusion about the meaning of "food security". They had positioned their pursuit of food resources within a knowledge and belief system built up over time and through experience. For example, foods were pursued on the basis of likes and dislikes and perceived health benefits rather than actual nutritional value.

The women depicted here are skilled navigators of their spaces of "nothing". They have learnt how to survive on minimal resources, and are the best sources of knowledge on how to effectively advance their food security status. Seeking resources and responding to PRP shortfalls, the women prioritize the building, maintenance, and use of their social networks. Accustomed to living within and operating social networks, when they do engage with PRPs, they do so as another connection in their social network. For example, if the community does not approve of a programme, then it is unlikely that the family will create space or time for a member to attend. By acknowledging their place within, and the functioning of, social networks and community, PRPs can improve attendance and also better target their poverty reduction programme design and roll out. Furthermore, by understanding social networks through Wilkinson-Maposa et al's (2005) horizontal philanthropy framework, PRPs could open new pathways to communication, build stronger and more dynamic relationships, and better aid their users to attain their food security aspirations. Given the dire state of food insecurity in South Africa, and the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, actors from all sectors and levels need to work together to form integrated poverty reduction programmes. These integrated programmes should be context specific and reflect the needs of the communities they serve, while also offering comprehensive, collaborative, and dynamic solutions to poverty and food insecurity.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to understand if and how women engage with a series of state and local poverty reduction programming initiatives with the common purpose of addressing food insecurity. These programmes face the major challenge that their actual and potential users are trapped in a day-to-day struggle for survival. They not only often lack the capacity to attend and participate but also the means to realize their own basic aspirations or even aspire to anything beyond the realities of their circumstances. Although state-funded and local programmes do provide help to the women, they serve only to sustain rather than uplift the women's households. For example, although the formal social grant system helped them with a degree of stability and opportunity, the women felt that the grant amount was too little given the gravity and diversity of their household's collective needs. Without adequate formal assistance, they are forced to employ food coping strategies such as buffering, food stretching, and using their limited educational knowledge to make meals 'healthy'. However, despite these efforts, the extent of their poverty means that their households still hover on the edge of collapse.

Communities and programme users who have a vision of what they want for their lives and how to get there are more enabled to engage as equal partners with programmes in their pursuit of household and community food security. It is thus important that programme users are empowered to define and articulate their situation and needs so that PRPs can be better equipped to assist them attain food security. To encourage engagement, programmes need to have clear and realistic ambitions that meet real community needs, and uplift users in the process. By improving programme design and output, local PRPs could more appropriately engage their users – meeting them where they are (listening to their voice), learning to engage on their level (their current capacities, aspirations and survival mechanisms like social networks) and interpreting their needs within a multi-dimensional and integrated multi-sectoral poverty reduction approach.

Methodologically, this paper has taken a more qualitative and in-depth approach to household food insecurity than most previous work by the Hungry Cities Partnership. Through innovative use of participatory methodologies, the paper shows the value of conducting research with small groups and understanding how they perceive, respond to and mitigate the construct of food security. As such, the paper provides a model that could be extended to other cities and communities in the HCP network.

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