



Vulnerability to hunger during the pandemic: Proactive Food Assistance Policy Actions

Policy Brief

POLICY BRIEF

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Summary

This policy brief is a synthesis of learning to strengthen anti-hunger policies in complex socioeconomic crises in South Africa. Lack of access to nutritious food stands at the epicentre of such crises, with the complex nature of the crisis rooted in multiple facets that often evolve in hard-to-anticipate ways. The food and nutrition insecurity emergency that unfolded in South Africa since the early waves of the Covid-19 pandemic is a case in point. A closer analysis of hunger vulnerability during this period holds lessons for uncertain times ahead. New data on the first 2 waves of the pandemic shine a critical light on the depth of hunger and forces that accelerated the spread of hunger. This unique dataset also allows for comparing the implementation processes of different anti-hunger assistance schemes.

State and non-state actors introduced multiple types of food assistance for hungry people. Food parcels and vouchers were the main direct ways of delivering food to needy people. According to DSD administrative data, nearly a million food parcels had been delivered to recipients by the end of September 2020. This is almost double the number of food parcel recipients reported six months earlier. This information is limited to food parcel delivery through DSD distribution systems and mechanisms, excluding food parcels that non-state agencies handed out during this period. Non-food social safety nets, especially cash grants that reach more than 18,5 million recipients, were increased but was excluded from official reports on direct food recipients. In addition, there was an expansion in cash grants because eligible recipients use a large share of this money to buy food, but administrative databases have not linked this to food parcel information. This disjointed reporting of direct and indirect food assistance has obstructed the building of a coherent picture of who has received what type of support, how often and how much the recipients and their dependents benefitted from the support.

Preventing people in livelihoods distress from sliding into hunger became an overriding concern for government agencies and civil society organisations as the pandemic crisis sparked wider socioeconomic devastation. These intersection crises tested the responsiveness of South Africa's food policies and social protection system in providing appropriate safety nets for people unable to secure enough food to meet

their dietary needs. This test was not restricted to the design principles, intent and practical workings of policies to protect vulnerable people. It also tested the capacity of state and non-state agencies to implement these livelihood protection programmes. After all, the effectiveness of food assistance requires reliable tools to characterise the hunger crisis and work out context-specific solutions.

Agile policy actions to counter hunger emergencies require that food relief agencies start with a minimum number of high-priority interventions, such as:

- Mobilise enough resources for the rapid delivery of social assistance
- Identify and locate hungry people
- Deliver and distribute adequate food to the needy
- Provide supplementary cash transfers where necessary and feasible

South Africa's hunger crisis existed before the onset of Covid-19. However, the pandemic has cast a spotlight on the breadth and depth of hunger as well as the need for anti-hunger safety nets that are proactive rather than reactive.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted socioeconomic activities in rich and poor economies, but the severity of these disruptions was not evenly spread within and across all countries. Poorer countries suffered a disproportionately larger burden compared to richer countries. Before the rollout of mass vaccination, the main tool that health authorities used was to limit physical contact among people. Physical distancing rules, in many instances, mandated the closure of non-essential economic activities, usually enforced through temporary layoffs of workers. Blunt applications of person-to-person contact restrictions often resulted in economic shutdowns and unemployment that aggravated economic and social hardships. Whilst access to adequate food was classified as essential, operations of agrofood value chains could not escape disruptions from the mandatory restrictions to curb the spread of this highly infectious and lethal respiratory virus. The situation in South Africa, mirrored the dominant patterns in most other countries at comparable stages of economic development and similar living standards indicators.

The SARS-Cov-2 virus reached South Africa in March 2020. At that time, the country was battling a new recessionary wave that was gathering momentum from the last two quarters in 2019 (National Treasury 2021; Jacobs et al 2020). Covid-19 aggravated South Africa's economic, livelihoods and social crises. At the same time, as multiple crises reinforced each other, it tested the responsiveness and agility of policy actions to help vulnerable people in severe socioeconomic distress. By the end of March 2020, economic output had contracted by 2,1% and the rate of unemployment reached 30,1%. The recession deepened in 2020, with updated calculations from National treasury confirming that economic output fell by 7,2% for the year. To stop the steep drop in macroeconomic performance, government invested in fast-tracking the implementation of its economic recovery plan. While the ERRP focuses on a medium- to longer-term vision for macroeconomic advancement, it also frames emergency policy actions and how to stabilise the volatile economy.

Government's Covid-19 interventions blended direct assistance to vulnerable households with incentive schemes to jumpstart business activities. Through a solidarity fund, a substantial transitory anti-crisis measure, government mobilised donor finance for varied pandemic-related relief efforts. Support and incentives for private businesses intend to scale up job creation as an intermediate step but have

intrinsic shortcomings. Bailing out businesses rarely stimulate automatic quality of life improvements for vulnerable people because it depends, among other factors, on the employment absorption appetite of the private sector. Irrespective the reasons for private sector reluctance to create jobs, often pointing to weak or missing trickle-down effects, this tardiness invariably perpetuates impoverishment. This scenario calls for better livelihood protection schemes in times of deep and prolonged socioeconomic calamities.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the crises have intersected in complex ways, with the hunger crisis emerging as one of its key facets. One study reported that household hunger was 6-12 percentage points higher than the pre-2020 levels, with considerable fluidity in proportions of households moving into and out of hunger in 2020 (HSRC 2021). Food poverty, according to this study, remained in the order of 48% during the first two waves of the pandemic. It became increasingly likely that all pre-2020 improvements in the food and nutrition status of the population (FAO 2021) will be erased due to the severity of the crises.

The pandemic crisis tested all aspects of the food and nutrition security policy. Against the backdrop of these developments, this Policy Brief addresses the following question: How responsive was South Africa's food-based assistance in helping vulnerable households cope during the pandemic induced economic, livelihoods and social crises?

2. Hunger Vulnerability: Correct Timing Matters

Consuming enough food of the right quality is a common benchmark for an active and healthy life. This minimum consumption benchmark helps with a fine-grained understanding of hunger status. A person below this minimum food consumption benchmark is considered hungry. Often, someone barely meets the minimum nutritious food intake or survives above a socially acceptable hunger benchmark. Individuals in this condition might be free from hunger or perceived as not hungry but can easily slide into hunger if a livelihoods crisis hits them.

Hunger vulnerability is a broad concept which includes people at risk of sudden and steep falls in consumption of enough food to meet their minimum dietary requirements (Hart 2009). This shortfall in food consumption often endures more than a day or two. It may be temporary, transitory, protracted or chronic. People surviving above the

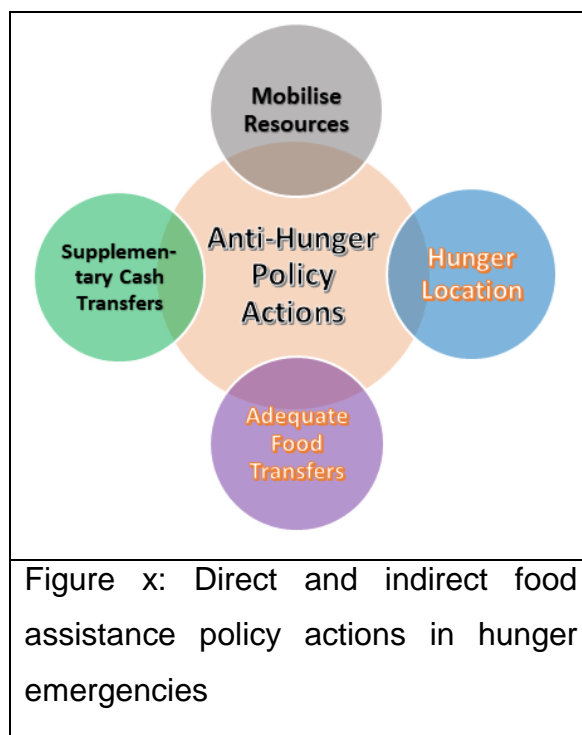
hunger threshold are pushed into hunger and those who are already suffering from a lack of food undergo a further deterioration in their situation.

Consuming enough nutritious foods *at all times*, which incorporates easy access to food, sits at the heart of the standard definition of food and nutrition security (Hart 2009). In an enlightening elaboration of how to interpret the phrase '*at all times*', Hart explains that this phrase finds expression in words like 'stability' and 'vulnerability'. These are now staple words in the vast policy and academic literature. Timing cuts across all other dimensions of food and nutrition security (Jacobs and Nyamwanza 2021) and is therefore an essential ingredient of responses to hunger emergencies. Moreover, food assistance relief practitioners have also translated and entrenched these staple words in effective, efficient and self-sustaining practices. Interventions must occur at the right time, coupled with being alert to what early warning signals reveal about hunger status. Alertness to the time dimension of hunger vulnerability, Hart underscores, is critical to make relief agencies aware of the causes and triggers of hunger emergencies. Good practice policies usually cater for contingencies that are difficult to forecast accurately.

3. Food assistance policy action

Any food assistance relief must confront basic preparedness questions. Are enough resources available for the provision of food to hungry people? Where resources for food assistance are lacking, how can these resource gaps be closed? Do we know where the hungry people are and how to deliver food assistance to them quickly? How suitable are existing food and nutrition insecurity measurement, monitoring and assessment tools to support relief efforts? What evidence do these tools generate that can inform proactive anti-hunger policy actions?

Each of these preparedness questions has been incorporated in Figure 1 which shows the high-level focal areas that proactive anti-hunger policy actions ought to concentrate on. The rest of this policy brief elaborates on each of these actions without ranking them in any particular order because synchronised action on all fronts may be the rule rather than the exception.



3.1. Mobilise enough resources for the rapid delivery of food-related assistance

Successes against hunger vulnerability presuppose the availability of enough resources to provide nutritious food at the right time and place. Hunger relief agencies need surpluses of adequate non-perishable food for rapid distribution to those in need. Standby food stocks should be combined with a dedicated hunger relief fund to finance the smooth operations of the food delivery system, including food storage and transportation, especially in the absence of in-kind food transfers.

Decisionmakers and advocacy groups can often detect the early warning signs of hunger emergencies but lack the resources for countervailing actions in advance or to prevent a calamity from further deterioration. Financing hunger relief interventions is often too costly and therefore unaffordable for poor countries with constrained public finances. Resources that seemed to be enough before the outbreak of hunger crises can deplete fast when the actual disaster materialises.

In resource-poor settings where the fiscal space is absent, public debt, international aid and donor funding will need to be mobilised in support of hunger relief. An optimal combination of resources from diverse sources is vital in these situations.

3.2. Identify and locate hungry people

Knowing who is unable to access enough food to meet their basic consumption needs is an essential step in effective food assistance policy actions. Relief agencies must know who is hungry, where to locate them and how to reach them in the shortest time feasible. Information tools that can guide anti-hunger relief efforts must be readably available, functional and frequently updated. Modern information and communication technology (ICT) platforms, especially social media, should ease locating those in need of hunger relief. However, exploiting all the benefits of ICTs in these situations depends on the functionality of ICT infrastructure and the capabilities to optimally use the ICT devices, especially smart phones and phablets.

Hunger vulnerability identification requires purposeful information collection, analysis and reporting methodologies. Although nationwide surveys of food and nutrition security status have a valuable role in aiding efforts to targeting hunger interventions, real-time data tools remain the ideal in these cases. Investment in real-time administrative data focused on smaller geographic units would aid the efficacy of food assistance programmes. This can be done through secure and integrated dashboards that transmit and display validated hunger indicators.

The information in Table 1, extracted from the new NDA study, gives a sense of how hunger status intersects with socioeconomic status. Starting with roughly 1 million recipients of food parcels in DSD databases, a nationally representative sample was extracted to illustrate key provincial differences in food and nutrition insecurity experiences. The analysis compared the self-reported monthly incomes of these recipients in 2019 and 2020 with the national poverty lines. Across this sample, headcount poverty rates were in the order of 66% (64% in 2020), with the poverty gap (33% in 2019) pointing to a study population living far below both the food and lower-bound poverty lines.

Monthly income and food spending per person for the poorest 40% of food assistance recipients was well below the food poverty line, which was R561 pp/pm in 2019 and R585 pp/pm in 2020. The food spending share allows for a quick summary of the incidence of food poverty. On average, for the entire study population, more than 60cents of every R1 flowing into the household goes toward food buying. Among the poorest 40%, this is worse: the spending share is as low as 70% and climbs to 87%

for the poorest 20%. Furthermore, the small amounts monthly per capita food spending suggest that hunger vulnerability also manifests in a food affordability crisis.

Table 1: Food poverty and inequality

Income Quintile (ADEQ)	Income, R.pm (ADEQ Avg.) 2019	Income, R.pm (ADEQ Avg.) 2020	Food Spend, R.pm 2019 (ADEQ)	Food Spend Share (%)
Bottom Quintile	163.90	282.24	147.02	87,1%
Qnl2	295.77	366.41	220.55	70,1%
Qnl3	505.99	614.74	291.70	55,6%
Qnl4	494.23	466.02	257.19	50,2%
Top Quintile	932.37	750.51	405.85	43,1%
Overall	469.77	494.04	261.87	61,5%

Source: HSRC study (2022)

3.3. Deliver and distribute adequate food to the needy

Timely food delivery to those who need it is an overriding goal and task of hunger relief. The failure to do so can set off spinoff crises. Delays in timely food distribution where it is urgently needed, World Food Programme has warned, can turn a temporary food crisis into a hunger catastrophe. It can result in protracted illness and the loss of life. Distributing adequate food to the needy starts from basic questions, such as: where must the food be delivered, in what quantities and what would be the best transportation mode? This hinges upon agile food distribution and delivery arrangements, including coordination across state and non-state agencies.

Table 2 displays information on food-based and cash transfers among the study population. It helps to answer the following question: for each type of social assistance, how many types did the interviewee or its family members receive it? Food assistance was either provided in the form of a food parcel or a voucher. Cash assistance includes standard conditional cash grants, the special social relief of distress grant and ring-fenced support for workers in the temporary lay-off category (see Table 3 for a summary).

Several messages stand out in Table 2, but it is worth highlighting at least three messages. First, a food parcel recipient or its family members often obtained more than one type of food-based support, which included a voucher or food from a non-state agency. Access to more than 1 type of food assistance appears particularly prominent in Gauteng, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal. Second, the provincial

distribution of food-based assistance was uneven, but it is not immediately evident what factors drove the provincial differences. It is plausible that factors such as the agency of hungry people to actively search for food assistance, institutional capacity of provincial departments or the heightened activism of non-state relief agencies contributed to this situation. Third, while access to cash assistance correlates positively with food assistance, it is not immediately evident what could be driving it.

Table 2: Count of food-based and cash assistance accessed per main recipient in 2020

Province	Food-based Assistance		Cash Assistance		
	1	2	1	2	3
Eastern Cape	24,379	0	20,139	10,599	529
Free State	25,349	0	44,848	5,849	0
Gauteng	369,488	11,729	293,245	181,812	0
KwaZulu-Natal	29,706	10,581	22,788	25,637	1,221
Limpopo	106,583	10,839	77,679	25,291	7,226
Mpumalanga	70,741	1,769	47,751	28,296	0
North West	24,333	0	10,245	8,965	1,281
Northern Cape	13,183	6,592	37,902	8,239	0
Western Cape	33,978	0	61,586	10,618	0
SA (National)	697,742	41,509	616,184	305,308	10,257

3.4. Supplementary Cash Transfers (conditional or unconditional non-food assistance)

Responses to hunger emergencies often get stuck in a so-called trade-off between direct food delivery and cash transfers. Results in Table 2 suggests that this trade-off was peripheral in reality because multiple types of assistance went to the same recipients. Government expanded access to its conditional cash-based social safety nets with the introduction of a temporary social relief of distress grant set at R350 per month for qualifying individuals. Both the child support grant and the old age pension grant values were increased.

Table 3: Characterising Social Safety nets in Covid-19

Analysis Categories	Food parcels	SRD-R350	TERS- UIF	Traditional Conditional Cash Grants
Intervention purpose	Food-based support to households living below the food poverty line and	Social relief assistance to persons living in poverty and without any other income protection.	Wage subsidy for workers on temporary lay-off	Aims to provide support to those living in poverty and in need ³

³ NPC, 2012

	inadequate access to food ¹		during the Covid-19 the pandemic ²	
Primary benefit	Direct food parcels comprising basic food basket items.	Cash transfer at the value of R350 per month for each eligible person.	Cash transfer to eligible worker or employers.	Cash transfer every month; value depends on cash grant conditions.
Recipient numbers	3.2m	10.5m	5.7m	18.4m

Source: HSRC Study (2022)

4. Key Policy Action Recommendations

Food emergencies happen when there is a sudden and steep rise in the number of hungry people. Tigger events of food emergencies differ, and one cause often coexists with and reinforces another cause. The hunger crisis that accompanied the unfolding SARS-Cov-2 pandemic is a food emergency in all its starkness.

Integrating direct food-based transfers and cost-of-living adjusted cash safety nets was a noteworthy innovation in social development policy activism against food and nutrition insecurity. Agile policy actions to counter hunger emergencies require that food relief agencies start with a minimum number of high-priority interventions, such as:

- Mobilise enough resources for the rapid delivery of social assistance
- Identify and locate hungry people
- Deliver and distribute adequate food to the needy
- Provide supplementary cash transfers where necessary and feasible

¹ Vermeulen et al., 2020

² Kohler & Hill, 2021

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