

Back to basics is the only sustainable solution

Look to a future where everyone has food that is healthy, nutritious and affordable

COMMENT



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BY THE end of the month in South Africa, most people are hungry. Every month. That is in “normal” times. And that is for “normal” families – not the very poorest – in a country where 60% of the people are poor, according to official figures, and the next 20% are just one misfortune away from poverty.

That is for most South Africans even before Covid-19 struck. The crisis shines a harsh light on the need to change the food system from one that is corporate to one that is accessible, nutritionally acceptable and controlled by people.

When the lockdown was announced, many people felt rising levels of panic and desperation. Those who could afford it rushed to buy essential foods and stocked-up. Even before the crisis, most people could not afford a diet with adequate nutrition, according to Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity.

This accounts for the high incidence of dietary-related disease such as diabetes and stunting in children. During lockdown, the cost of a household food basket rose sharply, particularly for bread and vegetables.

It has stopped informal livelihoods and with the wave of retrenchments and rising unemployment, so are people's ability to afford even a poor diet. Some hoped the government would supply food parcels to relieve their distress and enable them to stay at home. Food parcels are delivered but do not reach many.

The hungry have ignored the lockdown to make means to put food on the table. As the Unemployed People's Movement echoes: “Without food, we need to hustle.”



A GIRL from an informal settlement carries apples she received from a community support programme in Strandfontein, Cape Town. Beyond the coronavirus lockdown, there is a need to change the country's food system from one that is corporate to one that is accessible to poor communities, says the writer. | EPA

Giving out food parcels, while needed at this time, is a questionable approach, taking away people's ability to make decisions for themselves. Addressing the crisis is not about food parcels and hand-outs, but rather about setting in place the practices that will create system change.

The lockdown exposes the fragility of the peoples' basic rights to health, food and water and ultimately to life. It exposes the growing inequalities of the post-apartheid era. The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a wake-up call for how we produce food and who eats what.

Following the enclosure of their land, people have been made dependent on industrialised agriculture, turning them into consumers instead of producers. The crisis reveals how many children depend on school meals and are one meal away from starvation. It exposes how many of their parents are just one wage-day away from extreme poverty. It has broadcast on our TV

screens a reminder to us all about the daily struggles of communities and workers in our country and for many the struggle to survive. The National State of Disaster regulations systematically favour the industrial food system. Supermarkets remain open with their supply chains intact.

The reported lack of Covid-19 adjusted work conditions means market gardeners are cut off from markets and street traders are shut down.

They are excluded by the paperwork and by not being registered on databases. Such bureaucracy creates rights for big corporates with big environmental impacts but not for informal but sustainable producers.

Coastal fishing communities, with the support of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, engaged in a sharp struggle to have their fishing rights recognised. The Environment, Forestry and Fisheries Department finally issued them with permits to continue fishing to feed their families and recognised this as an essential service.

However, it appears that the eThekwinini municipality has not aligned to the National State of Disaster regulations and has stopped subsistence

fishermen and women from fishing despite their permits, so the struggle continues for fisher folk trying to feed their families. Everyone who lives in South Africa has the constitutional right to sufficient food and water.

These rights are linked to the fundamental rights to life and dignity. Current economic and food systems are neither designed to deliver on these rights nor capable of doing so. They are designed for profit.

Our best agricultural lands are used to grow non-food products and food for export, while our people go hungry. Seed supplies are privatised, basic foods corporatised, deadly chemicals and pesticides are sprayed across the land and genetically modified foods entrench corporate control.

For a system change to be possible, people must have access to resources needed to produce food, including water, land and skills.

They can create a food network that is not dependent on monopolisation but is owned and defined by people. The choice of what, how and where food is produced is political.

It is a matter of survival that people collectively transform the food regime, removing it from the impositions of industrialised systems and create ecologically sound and resilient systems owned and controlled by people. In addition, people need to be equipped to withstand the impacts of the climate crisis including drought, wildfires and floods.

This is what food sovereignty is about. And it comes with a set of practices that include agro-ecology, localised production, seed saving and swapping, growing indigenous foods, conserving water and energy, restoring the soil, protecting biodiversity and sharing knowledge, and ensuring people's access to food they need.

A future where everyone has food that is healthy, nutritious and affordable, is within reach and it is in our hands.

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