

OPINION: Keeping hunger at bay in a time of crisis

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*Given problems that have occurred with food parcels in the past - sub-standard food being supplied - an inspection and quality control system would need to be in place, with penalties for suppliers who attempt to abuse the system, writes **Terence Corrigan**.*

The measures taken to deal with the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic may prove to be more debilitating than its health effects.

This point has been made by various people and on numerous fora over the past few weeks, as most of the country's economy has been shut down, and millions of people denied the chance to earn a living.

The threat is quite literally one of life and death, since it has created a situation in which people are deprived of that most basic of necessities - food.

As the headline of a recent piece put it succinctly: "The biggest lockdown threat: hunger, hunger everywhere."

A recent survey by the Human Sciences Research Council indicated that around a quarter of South Africans lacked money to buy food - a catastrophic situation by any measure.



Business is booming for people who own cars and wheelbarrows in Olievenhoutbosch. They charge between R5 and R30 to carry groceries. (Ntwaagae Seleka, News24)

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Instances of shops and delivery trucks being looted, and of corrupt officials diverting food aid serve as a warning of the possible trajectory of this situation. Hunger breeds desperation, a dangerous condition for a society already under stress.

It is a nationwide and societal problem and needs to be dealt with as such. Faced with challenges of the magnitude of the pandemic, we as a society - beyond government - need to pitch in.

South Africa has, fortunately, a tradition of civic and non-governmental action, much of which is on display now.

One story that has attracted attention is the initiative launched by farmers in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands to distribute fresh produce, milk and seedlings to impoverished communities.

Working together with the agri-business companies, churches, local authorities and non-governmental organisations, they have assembled food parcels in a scheme which has reportedly benefited some 4 500 families.

Sandy la Maque, CEO of the KwaZulu-Natal Agricultural Union (Kwanalu), proudly - and accurately - commented: "The selflessness, rapid organisation and collaboration of these farmers is truly outstanding and pays testament to the generosity and strength of the relationships the farmers have with their local authorities and local communities. We are incredibly proud of the work these farmers are doing for those in need and look forward to seeing more projects like this for our nation's benefit as a whole."

Indeed, it's a decent model, and with tweaks here and there could be rolled out elsewhere.

Farmers whom the IRR has spoken to (strictly over the phone in these times!) are well cognisant of the scale and implications of this challenge, and are eager to respond.

One group of farmers in the Wepener district said this was a trying time for everyone, but that that the farming economy was well-positioned to come to the assistance of the country beyond the farm gates.

This was not just about the ability to produce food, but about its unique organisation and reach.

This is especially the case in South Africa's rural parts, which are too often overlooked.

The idea would be to link, within common localities, the country's food producers with the food insecure. Farmers and the organisation to which they are affiliated - in particular, cooperatives, which have vast experience in coming up with practical, real-world solutions - together with associated industries would commit to providing foodstuffs to vulnerable communities over an extended period of time.

Commercial farming operations would likely be the backbone of these projects, but small-scale producers would be sought out and involved too.

Cumulatively, there would be significant economies of scale.

As a localised initiative, contracts would be negotiated between farming bodies and local and provincial authorities, possibly with grants from the National Treasury; since large volumes would be involved, very favourable terms could be reached.

Key to its success would be to identify beneficiaries.

Numerous benevolent organisations and religious bodies have existing networks and could act as a first step in identifying those in need of help.

However, if the goal is to provide a more thorough response to food insecurity, something more comprehensive would be needed.

What to do here?

One way that this could be done would be to use Sassa beneficiary status as eligibility criteria.

Sassa cards might be used to access vouchers. Another might be to distribute food packages to households with school children.

It might also be necessary to make blanket distributions to particular communities in which poverty and food insecurity is particularly significant.

Different localities might try different approaches, and lessons learned in one might then be applied elsewhere.

The vouchers would be redeemed against packages of food.

Food packs for households would be prepared with a particular calorie and nutritional value in mind, comprising largely local produce.

There would be no one-size-fits-all approach, but local groups would be encouraged to use what they produce or can source locally.

Given problems that have occurred with food parcels in the past - sub-standard food being supplied - an inspection and quality control system would need to be in place, with penalties for suppliers who attempt to abuse the system.

Distribution could be handled through existing infrastructure and with existing resources.

Cooperatives' premises, churches, schools and community halls could function as depots where food could be collected.

Where food might need to be delivered to recipients - where large distances or dispersed populations are involved, for example - vehicles belonging to farmers or to businesses (or even volunteers) could be put into service.

The military might be called on to assist, depending on circumstances.

All told, this would be a mutually beneficial arrangement for farmers, communities and the country – during the pandemic and beyond. The emphasis would be on implementable, local-level action.

Not the stuff of high political drama, but the stuff that changes real people's lives.

- Terence Corrigan is a project manager at the Institute of Race Relations.

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