

FEATURE

Food Protest in South Africa: 'Them Belly Full, But We Hungry'

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**Cost of livin' gets so high,
Rich and poor they start to cry:
Now the weak must get strong;
They say, "Oh, what a tribulation!
'Them belly full, but we hungry';
A hungry mob is a angry mob
– Bob Marley and the Wailers**

South Africa is a 'food-secure' nation, producing enough to feed every member of its population adequately. The painful truth, however, is that more than 22 per cent go to bed hungry (Statistics South Africa 2017: 5; Nkrumah 2017: 1). The situation suggests one of two things: that the policy steps taken by the state are either woefully inadequate in themselves or are poorly implemented. As

such, this article sets out to determine which policy actor is best suited to bring about policy change to address the issue of chronic hunger.

One influential category of policy actor is the social protester. Social protesters have used protest to improve their access to key socio-economic rights, such as health (through, for example, the Treatment Action Campaign), education (#FeesMustFall) and housing (the squatters' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo). However, despite these and other service delivery protests, the right to food has rarely been a pivot around which protesters have sought to pursue reform in South Africa. The article thus seeks to understand the reasons for this lack of activism and to consider how citizens can be mobilised to address food insecurity.

The nature of food protests

Before attempting to define 'food protests', it is necessary to set out what the right to food entails, as this is a key concept in the discussion that follows. The right to food is a human right recognised under international and national law. In South Africa, it is guaranteed under section 27(1)(b) of the 1996 Constitution, which protects the right of everyone to feed him- or herself either by buying or producing his or her own food. Section

27(2) takes this obligation further when it provides that '[t]he state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of each of these rights'. Thus, the Constitution imposes a legal obligation on the state to ensure that everyone has access to adequate food at all times without discrimination.

Food protest, or protesting for food, on the other hand, is an 'instinctive response to hunger' (Nkrumah 2017: 238). It implies contention over



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food between the masses and their government. This discussion will thus define ‘food protest’ as people taking to the streets in demand of food. Normally, such protests are defensive acts in which protesters attempt to assert previously established rights of theirs which they perceive as being violated by the state. In the case of South Africa, this right, as mentioned, is grounded in section 27 of the Constitution, which obliges the state to ensure that ‘everyone’ has access to adequate food.

To attract the necessary attention and popular support, protesters often perform their rebellious acts in places of ‘natural assemblage’, or common public places. These acts can take the form of petitioning, parading effigies, food looting, or mass demonstrations in which calls are made for the reduction of food prices or free provision of food by the state.

The next section outlines several of the reasons why these incidents are not common in South Africa in spite of widespread hunger due to poverty and the lack of means to afford basic foodstuffs in the market (Sen 1981: 1).

A hungry (but not angry) mob: Why is food protest rare?

Provincial or racial differences notwithstanding, a number of factors cut across the catalogue of food protest and significantly influence people’s participation, or lack thereof, in such acts. Among the most decisive are the payment of social grants, the weakening effect of chronic hunger, lack of activist organisations focused on the right to food, and lack of interest in the issue on the part of opinion leaders and political representatives.

This section provides a mapping of how these factors hinder the upsurge of protest in a context where citizens experience chronic hunger amidst challenges brought about by unemployment and high food prices. The factors are not exhaustive, since other forms of political discontentment (perhaps seemingly unrelated to food) could be a trigger of food protest. These other grievances fall beyond the ambit of this discussion.

1. Lack of awareness of the right

Exacting accountability (in the form of protest) depends on awareness that a right exists and on people having been equipped to claim the right, even if the existence of that right has, to date, been only nominal. Hence, for South Africans to be able to claim their right to food, they first need to know that such a right exists and that they are entitled to it.

While every South African knows that human beings must eat to live – if not, they will die – not everyone is aware the Constitution provides for the right to food. Unlike its counterparts (the rights to health, education and housing), this right is not widely recognised as a right to be claimed. The situation is reflected in the lack of political debate about chronic hunger and the fact, for instance, that political parties do not compete with each other on the issue and seek to position themselves as best suited to addressing it (see further remarks below).

The right to food’s lack of visibility or priority is also apparent in the international arena, where it is regarded once again as less important than other rights. For instance, whereas the recently approved Sustainable Development Goals clearly recognise access to education, health and water as universally guaranteed rights, access to adequate and affordable food is not given such recognition. As such, it is important that civil society organisations deconstruct the dominant narrative of food as a commodity and replace it with a human-rights narrative in which food is placed squarely as a public good and, ultimately, as a right to be claimed.

2. Social assistance brings some relief

South Africa has a range of social assistance programmes that arguably assuage the need people in poverty would otherwise feel to take to the streets in food protest. It is important to note that the grants provided in these programmes (namely the old age, war veterans, grant-in-aid, child support, care dependency, foster care and disability grants) are not only 'usually distributed among many individuals besides the intended beneficiary', but 'make up part of the income of the household and are spent on (non)food requirements of the entire household' (Nkrumah 2017: 157).

For instance, as of January 2018, beneficiaries of the disability grant receive R1,600 per month; the foster care grant, R920; the care dependency grant, R1,600; the child support grant, R380; grant-in-aid, R360; the war veterans grant, R1,530; and the old age grant, R1,620 (SASSA).

While in most cases the funds are inadequate, especially given that they are typically used to cover the non-food as well as food needs of entire recipient households rather than only the nominal beneficiaries, they bring relief to millions living in poverty, thus serving to keep them from taking action through protest.

3. Hunger demobilises potential protestors

Many political scientists and journalists new to the field assume that food protests are the work of the hungriest, and poorest, people, but that is yet to be proven. Indeed, severe deprivation appears to demobilise people in that they 'just don't have the energy to take to the streets' (Brown 2011: 5). After observing the lack of participation in Haiti's 2008 food-market looting by residents of the country's poorest slums, Girard (2010) mooted that hunger can weaken people's physical and mental ability

to resist unfair treatment and agitate for reform. Arguably, the chronically hungry in South Africa too lack the energy to mobilise themselves to undertake food protests.

4. Lack of activist civil society organisations

South Africa lacks effective right-to-food movements or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that advocate for the right to food for the poor. The country has no clear-cut social movement or NGO equivalent to, for example, the Right to Food Campaign in India. The latter played an influential role in the adoption of India's 2013 National Food Security Act, through which subsidised grain is provided to about two-thirds of the population (Pradhan 2015: 133).

Those few such civil society organisations with food-security mandates – among them Oxfam, the Ekurhuleni Environmental Organisation, the Centre of Excellence in Food Security, and the Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute – seek to address food poverty mainly at the policy level rather than by mobilising the food-poor to assert their right. This points to the need for these organisations to broaden their activities by embarking on a joint campaign with the food-poor, a strategy which India's Right to Food Campaign used successfully in advocating for the National Food Security Act.

5. Opinion leaders lack interest

Although there are chronically hungry people in every street corner, under bridges, parks and in front of shopping malls, opinion leaders in the country have not shown much interest in promoting their right to food. For instance, Archbishop Desmond remains a strong advocate for the gay community, former Wits University SRC president Mcebo Dlamini for the #FeesMustFall movement, and Zackie Achmat for people living with HIV and AIDS. The chronically hungry, however, lack such leadership and support.

6. Lack of political opposition

In India and Egypt, opposition political parties (OPPs) play a key role in the mobilisation and agitation for adequate food for citizens. Yet parties in South Africa, such as the Democratic Alliance (DA), Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and Congress of the People (COPE), hardly engage on issues to do with chronic hunger.

The most recent involvement of these parties in food-related issues can be linked to three incidents, namely the EFF's call for wholesale expropriation of land, the OPPs' condemnation of the Minister for Social Development's assertion that R753 a month was adequate for sustaining a family, and the DA's march over the social grants debacle. The interventions, although useful, are inadequate since they were or are not directly targeted at either food prices or lack of access to food.

Thus, the lack of interest among existing political representatives or parties in triggering large-scale food protests to ensure the rights of the food-poor (and not only of beneficiaries of grants) is another factor contributing to the rarity of food protest in South Africa.

Conclusion

This article set out to consider the question of why the chronically hungry rarely protest in South Africa, especially amidst numerous protests directed at other socio-economic conditions. It was argued that key actors, such as civil society organisations and opposition political parties, lack commitment to agitating for improved access to food. The food-poor therefore lack activists or leadership figures who engage with the government to ensure that it complies with its constitutional obligation.

It is recommended that, to address chronic hunger effectively, all the relevant actors join forces and rally to engage the state to adopt a 'reasonable' policy aimed at expanding existing social security grants to provide for the excluded food-poor. The state could broaden the scope of its social grant programme into a large-scale grant to provide for the needs of the unemployed until such time

as they become employed or have a means of livelihood.

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