

Collaborative effort required across value chain to fight hunger

One in five South African households doesn't know where their next meal will come from. Fix that and our prospects for socioeconomic development will improve dramatically, but it will require a collaborative effort, writes Sanjeev Raghubir

World Hunger Day is marked annually on 16 October to commemorate the founding of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 1945. Nearly 80 years later, it seems almost inconceivable that hunger remains a direct threat to humanity and a barrier to socioeconomic development, and particularly in Southern Africa.

The [World Food Programme](#) has found that conflict – including Russia's invasion of Ukraine – as well as economic pressures, extreme weather driven by climate change, and soaring fertilizer prices are combining to create a food crisis of unprecedented proportions.

And South Africa, regarded as the world's most unequal country, hasn't been spared. A walk among the desperate, in our cities, townships and *dorpiess* should jolt us into action. Failing that, a glance at the statistics: the World Hunger Clock estimates that 52% of South Africans are food insecure: 30.8m out of 60m.

In SA, 70% of children are born into poverty and by age five, one in four suffers from stunted cognitive and physical development due to malnutrition. This, in turn, leads to stunted early childhood development, poor cognition and learning and, ultimately, impaired self-sufficiency.

Apart from children, a study in the Journal of Health Policy last October found that the most vulnerable were females, those living in rural areas, those without high school certificates, and those over the age of 45.

The plight of the most vulnerable will have been worsened by Postbank's recent social grant payment mishaps. Grants provide relief to food insecure people, and it is often all that stands between beneficiaries and hunger. To be effective, it is imperative that social grants are distributed timeously and efficiently.

The social grant system's recent challenges are deeply concerning, but it's not the main reason we need a collective national effort on improving food security. The reason is that we must see hunger as a crisis and a threat as great as we did the Covid-19 and HIV/AIDS pandemics, and the social unrest in 2021.

Because we cannot expect social cohesion and development in the face of hunger. In fact, the FAO contends that it is easier to solve hunger than it is to solve the problems hunger creates.

Reduce food insecurity and poverty, and South Africa's prospects for socioeconomic development will improve dramatically.

As South Africa's low-cost retailer, the Shoprite Group is intensely aware of the scale of SA's hunger crisis, and the scale of the intervention needed. It fuels our obsession with affordability and accessibility to ensure our most price-sensitive customers can put food on the table.

While many have come to disregard the R5 coin's purchasing power, we subsidise one million R5 loaves of bread every week, and offer a range of R5 deli meals, including a protein-rich liver burger.

Through the Act For Change programme, we actively invest in and support the communities in which our business trades, most notably by enhancing food security at a community and household level through our garden programme which benefits 61 834 people, and providing 1.1 million nutritionally balanced meals to children in the ECDs that we support.

We will continue to intensify our efforts to reduce hunger, a crisis which requires a collaborative effort across all stakeholders: agriculture, manufacturers, retailers, government and non-governmental organisations.

Two immediate, tangible steps the government can take to reduce food insecurity: One, exempt food retailers from the Road Accident Fund levy on diesel used for generators, and two, consider zero VAT on certain key commodities to further prioritise relief for the people of South Africa.

If we truly wish to eradicate hunger, every feasible option must be explored.

- *Sanjeev Raghubir is Head of Sustainability and CSI at the Shoprite Group.*