The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on South African food security: A paradigmatic turn for building back better

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on South Africa's food security, as there is a yawning scholarly gap in this nascent area. In 2020, about 23.6% of South Africans experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, while 14.9% experienced severe food insecurity. Therefore, by applying the United Nations' Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), this paper classifies victims of food insecurity into two groups: those who experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, and those who experienced severe food insecurity. To put the impact of this insecurity into perspective, I simultaneously present and discuss the country's food insecurity pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. Therefore, this desktop-based paper answers the following research question: How has the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the food insecurity crisis in South Africa, and what practical and resilient measures should the South African government adopt and implement to ensure sustainable food security? Findings have established that the pandemic and the measures implemented to contain it exacerbated pre-existing economic vulnerabilities and exposure among poor South Africans, particularly Black Africans. The pandemic-triggered hunger and food insecurity was thus racialised, gendered and regionalised, pointing to the structural inequalities that have characterised South Africa since colonialism and apartheid to the present day. Therefore, for sustainable and resilient food security and sovereignty, this paper recommends that Africa in general and South Africa in particular take a paradigmatic turn by designing an effective food insecurity crisis contingency plan. Doing this requires implementing a 'Do-it-Yourself Africa' approach in food production and distribution.

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Kennedy Manduna holds a PhD in Political Economy and Public Policy from University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, where he is currently hosted as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow of the The International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies (IRGAC) of the Rosa Luxemburg-Stiftung within the Wits School of Governance.

In his PhD, he focused on the drivers, processes and outcomes of uneven development within the extractive industries in Africa, but with special reference to issues lying at the intersection of rural underdevelopment, mining capitalism, extractive industry indigenisation and uneven development in Zimbabwe. He is a member of the ISA-RC40, at whose mini-conference on The Food System in the (Post-) Pandemic World: Disruptions, Vulnerability, Resilience, and Alternative' held at Leipzig University, Germany, between 19 and 21 October 2022 he presented this paper. His current research focuses on the intersection of the political economy of contested extractivism, neoliberal authoritarianism, indigeneity, economic indigenisation; uneven development; food (in)security, systems and sovereignty; and geopolitics.

Introduction

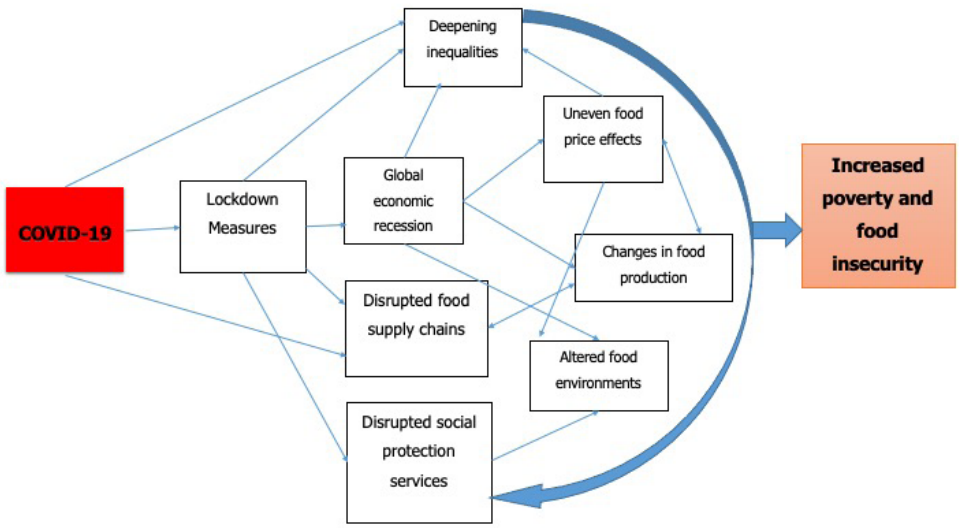
The COVID-19 pandemic, much like the current Russia-Ukraine war, has significantly disrupted the global commodity markets and the flow of international trade, resulting in severe disruptions of global food supply chains, nutrition and food security. This has worsened food insecurity across the globe (FAO, 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic and its attendant lockdowns have had multiple repercussions: massive disruptions to social protection programmes; widening inequality; uneven food prices in localised contexts; loss of income and livelihoods; and altered food environments (Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Clapp and Moseley, 2020; Laborde et al., 2020).

Commenting on this, McCandless (2021: 1) argues that "COVID-19 has brought the crisis to the doorstep of every country in the world, spotlighting political incoherence and failed policy visions, deep vulnerabilities of systems and institutions across sectors, and polarised state and societal relations. This is occurring in underdeveloped and developed countries alike. Consequently, the measures adopted and implemented to contain the spread of the virus unleashed new dynamics, whose spillover effects on food systems, food security and nutrition are enormous and deep."

The FAO, IFAD, WFP, UNICEF & WHO Report (2022) on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World revealed that COVID-19 lockdown-induced global economic slowdown resulted in 132 million undernourished people in the world in 2020. In Africa, where most of the world's undernourished people live (reaching more than 250 million following the pandemic), the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the food insecurity crisis many African countries had been experiencing due to climate change, perennial droughts, and conflict (and now the Russia-Ukraine war). Globally, these COVID-19 pandemic-triggered "crises have resulted in lower incomes and higher prices of some foods, putting food out of reach for many, and undermining the right to food and stalling efforts to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2: Zero hunger" (FAO, 2020: 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic set food insecurity on a slippery slope, the worst effects of which are yet to come (Ghebreyesus, 2020; FAO, 2020; Khorsandi, 2020). In fact, all efforts to contain the virus and its spread through lockdowns created "conditions for a major disruption to food systems, giving rise to a dramatic increase in hunger" (FAO, 2020: 1). Figure 1.1 below illustrates how the virus and efforts adopted and implemented to contain the virus qualify the pandemic as a wicked and sticky public and social problem that worsened food insecurity and poverty.

Figure 1.1: The wickedness of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on food security



Source: Adapted from FAO (2020).

Fig 1:1 shows how the wickedness of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures adopted to contain it worsened the food insecurity crisis globally, although with variegated qualitative and quantitative outcomes in different contexts. For example, the lockdowns seriously disrupted food supply chains and social protection services, and caused global economic and financial recession. In turn, these disruptions caused food inflation, altered food environments, and

deepened inequalities in food distribution, access and supply.

It is important to note that before the COVID-19 pandemic, about two billion people across the world experienced food insecurity at severe, moderate or moderate to severe levels, due to climate change, conflicts, perennial droughts, etc. (FAO, IFAD, WFP, UNICEF & WHO Report, 2021). In South Africa, on 15 March 2020, following the identification of the first case of COVID-19 earlier that month, President Cyril Ramaphosa, in terms of the National Disaster Act, 2002 (Act No. 57 of 2002), declared the virus as "a National Disaster and announced several extraordinary measures to combat this grave public health emergency" (Department of Labour Notice 215 of 2020: 4). The government then announced a full national lockdown, with Level 5 beginning on 27 March 2022, Level 4 on 1 May 2022, Level 3 on 1 June 2022, Level 2 on 18 August and Level 1 – that represented an almost complete removal of all the restrictions – on 21 September 2022 (COVID-19 South African Online Portal, 2022). Even though between late July and the end of August 2020, the rate of new infections dropped sharply, in September of the same year, South Africa was one of the COVID-19 global hotspots; it was ranked sixth globally, with the highest number of positively confirmed COVID-19 cases, and the highest in the continent.

South Africa is among the countries that identified COVID-19 early and adopted the strictest lockdown measures (i.e., Lockdown Level 5 that lasted for 35 days), by global comparison (Gustafsson & Deliwe, 2020). Yet the 2022 Statistics South Africa Report indicated that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdowns in 2020, over 38.5% of South Africans faced moderate to severe food insecurity challenges. The reason was that "economic activity virtually came to a standstill" during Lockdown Level 5 (Wills et al., 2020: 6). This was notwithstanding the fact that South Africa was touted as a country whose COVID-19 response measures were deemed to be science-based and transparent, and whose government coordination and communication with the public was considered effective. Anger over unresolved structural and enduring inequalities was widely cited as the major cause of the pandemic-induced selective food insecurity challenges.

The pandemic-induced lockdowns clearly worsened food shortages and fuelled runaway food inflation in the country, potentially causing social unrest like food riots reminiscent of the French food riots prior to the 1789 French Revolution and those in Tunisia before the 2011 Jasmine Revolution. The July 2021 protests, which started as demonstrations against the arrest of former president Jacob Zuma, and saw mostly food shops looted in KwaZulu Natal and Gauteng provinces, stands out as a case in point here (Gilili, 2021).

The food riots demonstrated clearly that the COVID-19 food relief programmes – for instance the R350 COVID-19 grant – failed to move the needle in addressing the pandemic-induced food insecurity crisis. The riots further damaged food storage, distribution and logistics networks, and disrupted the food supply chains, agricultural activities, and food distribution and sales. In so doing they pushed food prices up and left a critical mass of the population food insecure – with the poorest as the worst hit. Therefore, the pandemic and its attendant effects, like food riots, put Africa, notably South Africa, significantly off track to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 2, (i.e., Zero Hunger target by 2030).

This paper examines how and why the COVID-19 pandemic triggered new overlapping and mutually reinforcing dynamics and trends in South Africa, that affected the 2020 HLPE Report's six dimensions of food security: access, agency, availability, sustainability, stability and utilisation.

Methodology

The main focus of this qualitative desktop research paper is to examine the impact and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdowns on South African food security. It is set to respond to the following research questions: (a) How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected\worsened the food insecurity crisis in South Africa?; and (b) What practical and resilient measures should the South African government adopt and implement to ensure sustainable food security?

This study relied on data collected using the document analysis method, such as the panel data from the findings of the following surveys: (a) the National Income Dynamics Study's Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM) Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, as well as some pre-COVID-19 pandemic waves of NIDS; (b) various NIDS-CRAM policy briefs and working papers; (c) the General Household Survey (2017–2020); (d) the South African Vulnerability Assessment Committee (SAVAC) 2020 survey; and (e) the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) survey. While most of the findings presented and discussed in this paper are mainly statistical, the reader should be reminded that the data was gathered using the documentary analysis method, making the study qualitative in nature and orientation. In this paper, as advised by Merriam (2002), combining the presentation and discussion of findings "ensures a logical and clear flow of the arguments to avoid unnecessary repetitions of the presented data while on the discussion stage" (Manduna, 2022: 147).

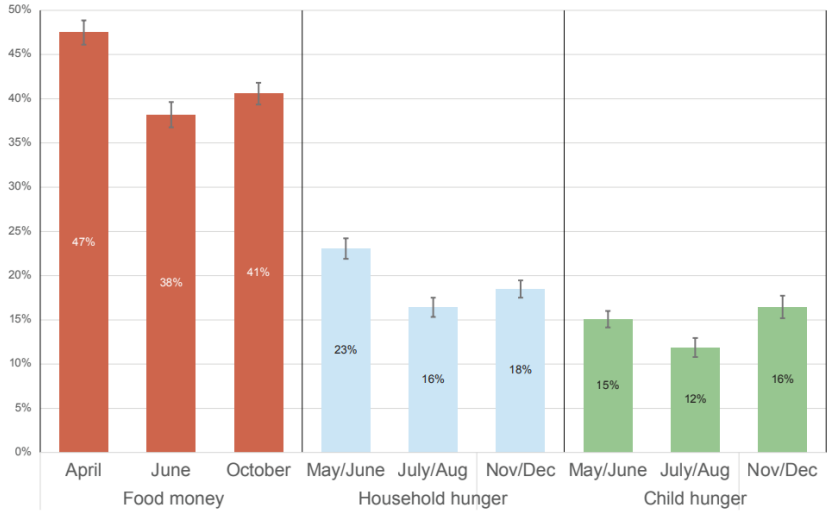
Findings and discussion

While COVID-19 is a respiratory disease with no known scientific evidence that food can be a vector of its transmission (FAO, 2020), the measures the South African government, and indeed many other governments globally, implemented to contain its transmission and spread significantly disrupted the food supply chains. In South Africa, evidence has shown that the food supply chain disruptions affected the quality, access, pricing and availability of food – with the disadvantaged populations bearing the brunt of it all. In this section, the paper presents and discusses the findings on the following three superordinate themes and their sub-themes: (a) hunger and food (in)security; (b) employment and income; and (c) social protection measures/services.

Hunger and food security situation following the COVID-19 pandemic

One theme that recurred throughout the findings was the direct relationship between the levels of the COVID-19 lockdowns, on the one hand, and hunger and food insecurity levels (of both adults and children) in South Africa, on the other. The hard lockdowns witnessed serious and high hunger levels, while the soft ones were associated with low and moderate hunger. This means that there were high levels of hunger during the initial days of the pandemic, which gradually subsided as time went by and the government relaxed the stringent lockdown measures. The findings of the NIDS-CRAM Waves 1, 2, 3 and 4 testify to these gradations in levels of hunger and food insecurity among South Africans during different lockdown levels, with the findings of Wave 1 showing high levels while those of Wave 4 show low levels. Figure 1.9 below reflects the nuances of all of these. Much like the two preceding themes, this theme also has the gender, regional, racialised and income level dimensions to it.

Figure 1.2: Lack of money for food, household hunger, and child hunger, during different stages of lockdowns



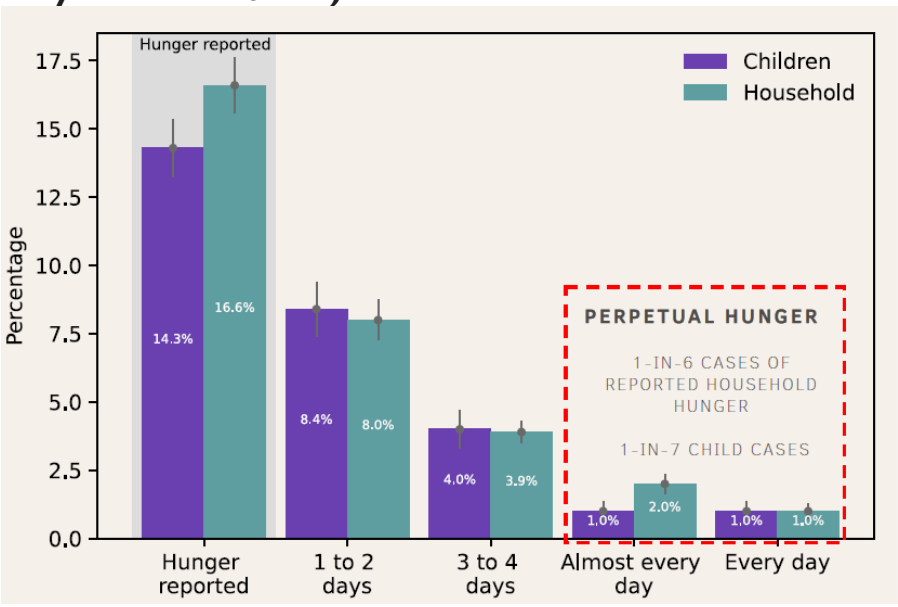
Source: van der Berg, Patel and Bridgman (2021) and NIDS-CRAM Wave 3 Synthesis Report (2021)

The diagram above shows differentiated food insecurity (i.e., household hunger, child hunger, and absence/presence of food money) throughout the lockdown periods.

Findings from the NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 Synthesis Report (2020) have shown that household and child hunger peaked during the first quarter of 2020 (i.e., during Alert Level 5 Lockdown). Close to 50% (i.e., 47%) of the NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 participants indicated that they ran out of money for food, 21% reported household hunger, and 15% child hunger in April 2020 (NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 Synthesis Report, 2020). These figures contrast starkly with 21% who ran out of money to buy food, 14% who reported household hunger, and 14% who reported child hunger in 2018 (General Household Survey, 2018). Nonetheless, it is important to note that grant-receiving families indicated high rates of food insecurity, with 53% reporting running out of money to buy food in April 2020, 24% reporting household hunger, and 15% reporting child hunger between May and June 2020 (Wills et al., 2020).

Wave 2 findings saw the percentage declining to 38% before rising to 41% in Wave 3, and then declining again to 39% in Wave 4, before finally declining to 35% in Wave 5 (van der Berg, Patel & Bridgman, 2021). During the second quarter of 2020, 15% of the NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 participants reported that one of their children had gone hungry in the past week, and 8% of the households with children indicated frequent hunger, which Cleary (2020) framed to mean three or more days per week. Between April and May 2021, NIDS-CRAM Wave participants reported 14% child hunger, indicating that child hunger remained extremely high during the pandemic.
Corroborating with these findings, Wittenberg and Branson (2021) revealed that about 10 million South Africans and roughly three million children faced moderate to severe hunger between April and May 2021. This reality presents hunger as a permanent feature in South Africa during the pandemic. Figure 1.9 below shows different levels of hunger reported during the four periods (i.e., when NIDS-CRAM Waves 1, 2, 3 and 4 surveys were conducted), that also reflected hunger as a permanent feature in South Africa during the pandemic. Commenting on this, van der Berg, Patel and Bridgman (2021: 10) reveals that "the results from Waves 3, 4 and 5, however, point to the fact that hunger and food insecurity in South Africa has settled at a permanently higher equilibrium level in comparison to pre-2020 levels."

Figure 1.3: Levels of hunger reported during the five periods (i.e. when the NIDS-CRAM Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 surveys were conducted)



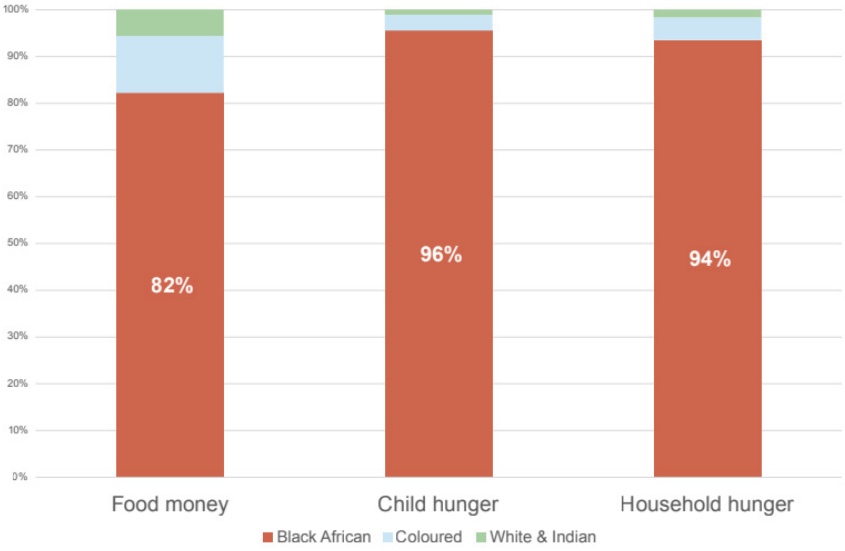
Source: Bridgman et al. (2020) using data from NIDS-CRAM Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 surveys

It should be noted, however, that the removal of the Child Support Grant (CSG) and Old Age Pension (OAP) top-ups by October 2020, and of the COVID SRD grant of R350 at the end of April 2021, significantly in-

creased hunger and food insecurity. The most disadvantaged groups – notably poor black women with children (NIDS-CRAM Wave 3 Synthesis Report, 2021) – were the hardest hit. Poor black women with children are the group that reported the highest rates of weekly hunger (NIDS-CRAM Wave 3 Synthesis Report, 2021; van der Berg, Patel and Bridgman, 2021). On top of the R440 per child CSG that recipients used to receive before the COVID-19 pandemic, the government had, until October 2020, added another R500 per caregiver. The addition went a long way in mitigating the hunger and food insecurity effects of the pandemic. Corroborating with these findings of the gendered reality of hunger and food insecurity in South Africa during the pandemic, the Statistics South Africa Report (2022: 22) revealed that "the female population is more likely to be affected by both moderate to severe and severe food insecurity compared to their male counterparts."

As hunger and food insecurity during the pandemic was also a racialised phenomenon, child and household variants of hunger were more pronounced and prevalent among Black Africans. The fact that they used a significant percentage of their CSG to buy food was "a strong indicator of food insecurity" (NIDS-CRAM Wave 3 Synthesis Report, 2021: 3) among this social group. Hunger and food insecurity challenges among Black Africans was further exacerbated when the government phased out the primary variant of the COVID-19 social assistance, i.e., the R350 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant, at the end of January 2021. Figure 1.10 below shows the fine details of the extent to which Black Africans were disproportionately affected by hunger and food insecurity during the pandemic as compared to other races, such as whites, Indians and coloureds. The racialised and racial unevenness of hunger and food insecurity points to the racialised structural and perpetual inequalities that have been South Africa's distinctive feature since the initial days of colonialism and apartheid, to this day. Commenting on this, Statistics South Africa Report (2022: 22) revealed that "Black Africans followed by coloureds are still more prone to be affected by moderate to severe and severe food insecurity than Indians/Asians and whites."

Figure 1.4: The racial and regional unevenness of hunger and food insecurity

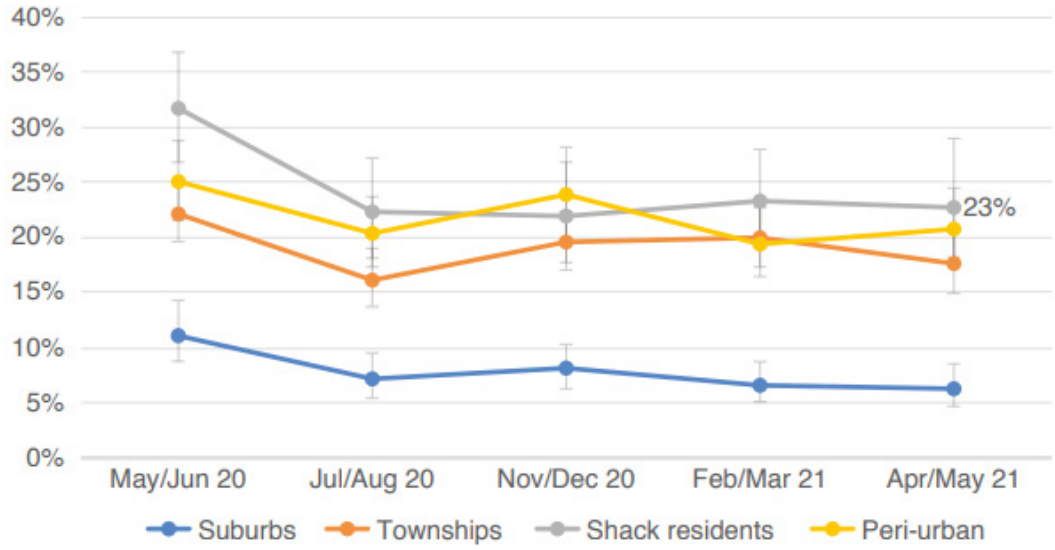


Source: van der Berg, Patel and Bridgman (2021)

The graph above shows the differentiated and racialised nature of the pandemic-induced food insecurity. Black Africans were the hardest hit: 82%, 96% and 94% of the population that suffered a lack of food money, along with child hunger and household hunger were Black.

The pandemic-triggered hunger and food insecurity were also regionalised, even in urban areas. As shown in Figure 1.11 below, shack and peri-urban residents were the hardest hit by hunger and food insecurity challenges during the pandemic compared to their counterparts in suburbs and townships. About 5.4 million people in South Africa live in shacks, that is, 9.5% of the country's population (NIDS-CRAM Wave 5 Synthesis Report, 2021). They all faced hunger and food insecurity challenges during the pandemic.

Figure 1.5: Percentages of urban participants who indicated that their family members went to bed hungry in the past week (i.e. one week before 08 July 2021)



Source: Visagie and Turok (2020) using NIDS-CRAM Waves 1-5 and NIDS-CRAM Wave 5 Synthesis Report (2021)

The graph above shows the differentiated and regionalised nature of the pandemic-induced food insecurity in South Africa's urban and peri-urban areas, with shacks and peri-urban dwellers being the hardest hit compared to their counterparts in suburbs and townships.

To further illustrate the regional unevenness of hunger and food insecurity in South Africa during the pandemic, Table 1.1 below shows the percentage of the population in each of the nine provinces affected by moderate to severe and severe food insecurity in September 2020.

Table 1.1: Percentage of the population per province affected by moderate to severe and severe food insecurity in South Africa in September 2020

Province	Percentage of moderate to severe	Percentage of severe food insecurity
Limpopo	28.9 (±2.7)	18.2 (±5.0)
KwaZulu Natal	26.4 (±2.1)	16.4 (±4.6)
Gauteng	24.5 (±3.1)	16.6 (±2.6)
Mpumalanga	23.5 (±5.6)	14.3 (±4.7)
Free State	21.8 (±4.3)	13.0 (±3.5)
North West	21.7 (±6.3)	12.9 (±4.9)
Western Cape	21.4 (±4.5)	13.7 (±3.5)
Northern Cape	17.6 (±5.1)	9.7 (±3.8)
Eastern Cape	16.6 (±5.5)	10.2 (±4.6)
South Africa (Average)	**23.6 (±1.8)**	**14.9 (±1.5)**

Source: Statistics South Africa Report (2022)

The table above shows the differentiated and regionalised nature of pandemic-induced food insecurity in South Africa's provinces. On the one hand, it is important to note that in 2020 the two poorest provinces (i.e., Northern Cape and Eastern Cape provinces) were less affected by moderate to severe food insecurity and severe food insecurity than the remaining seven provinces. On the other hand, one of the poorest provinces (i.e., Limpopo) and one of the wealthiest provinces (i.e., Kwazulu-Natal "were the worst affected provinces

by moderate to severe food insecurity and severe food insecurity in 2020" (Statistics South Africa Report, 2022: 9).
Overall, the pandemic worsened hunger and food insecurity crises in South Africa. The Statistics South Africa Report (2022: 8) pointed out that "23.6% of the South African population was affected by moderate to severe food insecurity, while 14.9% reported severe food insecurity in 2020. The high food insecurity levels were mainly driven by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This indicates that the prevalence of food insecurity, particularly severe food insecurity, was higher in South Africa in 2020 compared to 2019.

Employment and income situation following the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant containment measures caused unprecedented economic contraction globally, causing more than 170 countries to revise their economic growth rates downwards (IMF, 2020), with the World Bank (2020) predicting a 5.2% contraction of the global GDP in 2020. In Sub□Saharan Africa, the IMF (2020) projected a 2.8% economic contraction, "eroding much of the progress in economic development made over the last ten years on indicators such as poverty and inequality" (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2020: 3). Thus, South Africa was not spared the serious economic, political and social disruptions caused globally by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures adopted and implemented to contain its spread. In South Africa, originally projected to grow by 0.9 (ILO, 2020; Wills et al., 2020), the IMF (2020) projected an 8% economic contraction in 2020. This made the country's economy the hardest hit by the pandemic in Africa, possibly because South Africa was the continental hotspot of the virus at the time and one of the global hotspots. Corroborating with these findings, the UNDP (2020) projected that the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdowns were expected to decrease the country's GDP by a minimum of 5.1% and a maximum of 7.9%.

The stringent earliest lockdown measures hit the labour market hard, causing widespread business closures, job losses and underemployment. Concerning the employment situation, as a result of the lockdowns, between the first and second quarters of 2020, more than 2.2 million South Africans lost their jobs, in the process worsening the already high unemployment rates, i.e., up from 39% before COVID-19 to 42% by the second quarter of 2020 (Statistics South Africa, 2022; Devereux, 2021). The NIDS-CRAM Synthesis Report Wave 1 (2020: 3) put the number of people who lost their jobs between March and April at 3 million as "[t]he weighted NIDS-CRAM 2020 Wave 1 data identifies that 17 million people were employed in February 2020 but only 14 million people were employed in April 2020." Using the 95% confidence interval, according to this Report, between 2.5 and 3.6 million South Africans lost their jobs from February to April. Corroborating with this finding, Schotte and Rocco Zizzamia (2021: 4) estimated that "40 per cent of South Africans who had been employed in February 2020 were not actively employed during the Level 5 lockdown, with half of this decline in active employment appearing to be due to permanent lay-offs or business closures." This situation led to one in three (or 33%) of South African income earners losing their source of income between February and April 2020.

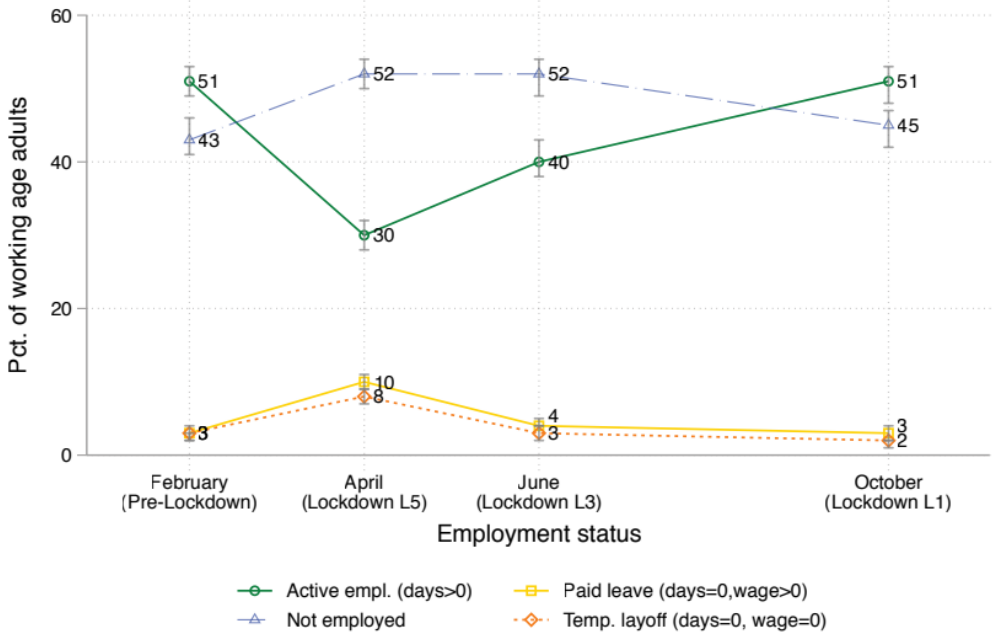
Bassier, Budlender and Zizzamia (2021) have noted however that a significant job market recovery that was almost close to its pre-lockdown level in February 2020 was witnessed in October 2020. The difference here is statistically insignificant as the October active employment point estimate is 0.15% lower than the February estimate. Figure 1.3 below shows the employment status of working South African adults aged between 18 and 64 years during the four periods, i.e., February pre-pandemic, (b) April Level 5 lockdown, (c) June Level 3 lockdown, and (d) October Level 1 lockdown. Figure 1.4 below shows the cross-sectional employment status in South Africa for NIDS-CRAM Waves 1-5.

The graph below (Figure 1.6) shows the adult employment status of the South African working population between the Level 5 lockdown and Level 1 lockdown. Active employees were the most affected compared to other groups, as the lockdown measures required them to stay home.

The following graph (Figure 1.7) shows that the differences in the percentages of unemployed and employed

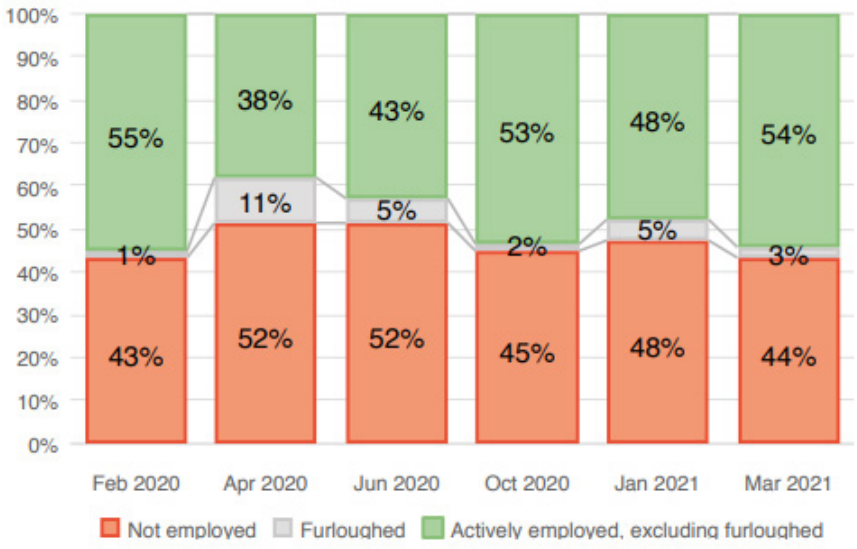
South Africans between February 2020 and March 2021 are largely due to those who were forced to leave their jobs and either asked to come for work or not.

Figure 1.6: Employment Status for Working-Age Adults (18-64 years) during the four periods



Source: Bassier et al. (2021)

Figure 1.7: The cross-sectional employment status in South Africa for NIDS-CRAM Waves 1-5



Source: Daniels et al. (2021) and NIDS-CRAM Wave 5 Synthesis Report (2021)

It should also be noted that an additional 1.5 million South Africans were temporarily laid off, with more than 40% failing to get their jobs back when the economy reopened (Devereux, 2021; Jain et al., 2020).

The disadvantaged groups, such as informal traders, women, manual workers, unskilled workers, and the poor in general, were the hardest hit as compared to their counterparts, the professionals, men and non-poor groups (The NIDS-CRAM Synthesis Report Wave 1, 2020; Devereux, 2021; Jain et al., 2020). Commenting on this, the following submissions from the researchers who contributed policy briefs and working papers from the NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 survey results are illuminating and illustrative:

> *In comparison with formal workers, those in the informal economy have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. A larger share of the informal economy (relative to formal employment) was locked out of employment during the month of April. Moreover, for the typical informal worker that was employed in both February and April the hours worked per week decreased by as much as 50%. Decreases in typical working hours were particularly large for women and workers in self-employment and for informal casual workers. Therefore, across several measures, informal workers, and particularly women, experienced substantial decreases in both the ability to work and in the hours that they spent in employment in April (Rogan & Skinner, 2020: 21).*

> *The adverse labour market effects of the pandemic and lockdown have been disproportionately borne by individuals in lower-income households. Although we estimate that overall employment decreased from February to April by about 2.8 million, employment loss for individuals who live in the poorest 20% of households accounts for more than a third (35%) of total employment loss (or over 970,000 fewer people employed). The percentage of individuals employed in the poorest 10% of households was 55% lower in April relative to February – the largest relative change across the distribution (Köhler & Bhorat, 2020: i).*

> *The overarching finding from this analysis is that the job losses were not uniformly distributed amongst the different groups. In particular, groups that have always been more vulnerable – such as women, African/Black, youth, and less educated groups – have been disproportionately negatively affected (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2020: 1).*

These disadvantaged groups, i.e., the low-income earners (mainly women), include about 650,000 farmworkers, notably the temporary, seasonal workers; one million domestic workers; vendors and hawkers; car guards; beggars; and service sector employees (Devereux, 2021). These findings reveal a significant effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdown measures on household poverty in the country. It has been found that two-thirds of the South African population lost their primary source of household income during the initial lockdown (i.e., Level 5 lockdown from March to April 2020) (Wills et al., 2020). Further to this, evidence has shown that almost every second household in South Africa failed to obtain money for food during April 2020 (Schotte & Rocco Zizzamia, 2021; Wills et al., 2020). Levels 4 and 3 lockdowns, which saw a partial recovery in the country's labour markets when commercial activity recommenced, did not help much to ease the COVID-19-triggered food insecurity and poverty challenges. Only about half of the jobs lost during the Level 5 Lockdown were recovered by June 2020 (Jain et al. 2020b). This means that half of those previously employed and food secured before the COVID-19 pandemic remained jobless, and therefore food insecure.

Accordingly, the pandemic profoundly affected South Africa's food security and nutrition. In South Africa, like every part of the world, the pandemic seriously affected food systems, presenting an existential threat to people's capacities and capabilities to access food. "Food systems include all the activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food. The three constituent elements of food systems are: food supply chains, food environments, and consumer behavior" (FAO, 2020: 1). Consequently, the 2022 survey results of Statistics South Africa and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) revealed that food insecurity, hunger and poverty increased significantly in the country after the government declared COVID-19 a national state of disaster and the ensuing lockdowns. For example, in 2019, 17.3% (i.e., about 10.1 million people) of the South African population experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, while 7.0% (i.e., about 4.1 million people) experienced severe food insecurity.

In 2020, the percentage of the population that experienced moderate to severe, or severe, food insecurity rose to 23.6% and 14.9%, respectively (Statistics South Africa Report, 2022). The findings from the HSRC survey have revealed that close to half (46% to be precise) of South Africans living in informal settlements would go to bed hungry during April 2020 (Devereux, 2021). Comparatively, at the national level, people who went to bed hungry during April increased from 28% in 2019 to 34% in 2020 (ibid).

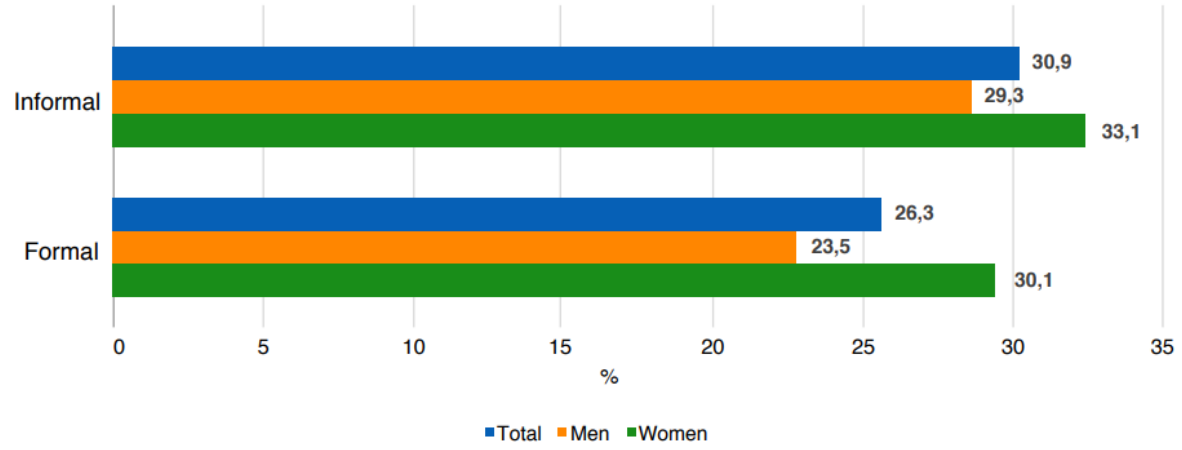
At this juncture, it is important to note that, in South Africa, food insecurity tends to follow the characteristics of uneven development: geographical/regional, income, racial, gender and scalar inequalities.

The gendered nature of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered food insecurity

Findings have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the gendered effects of pandemics. According to the findings from the NIDS-CRAM Survey Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, and Rogan and Skinner (2020), women were sitting at the intersection of challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 Synthesis Report (2020: 5) revealed that "women face a double disadvantage: of the approximately 3 million net job losses between February and April, women accounted for 2 million, or two-thirds of the total, even though in February they only accounted for less than half of the workforce (47%)." It is also important to note that close to half of all women employed in February and March were said to be working fewer or no hours in April. What further put women at a 'double disadvantage' or intersection of challenges during the pandemic was the fact that among the disadvantaged groups in the labour market (i.e., informal workers, Black Africans and less educated\unskilled workers), women disproportionately suffered the largest share of job losses.

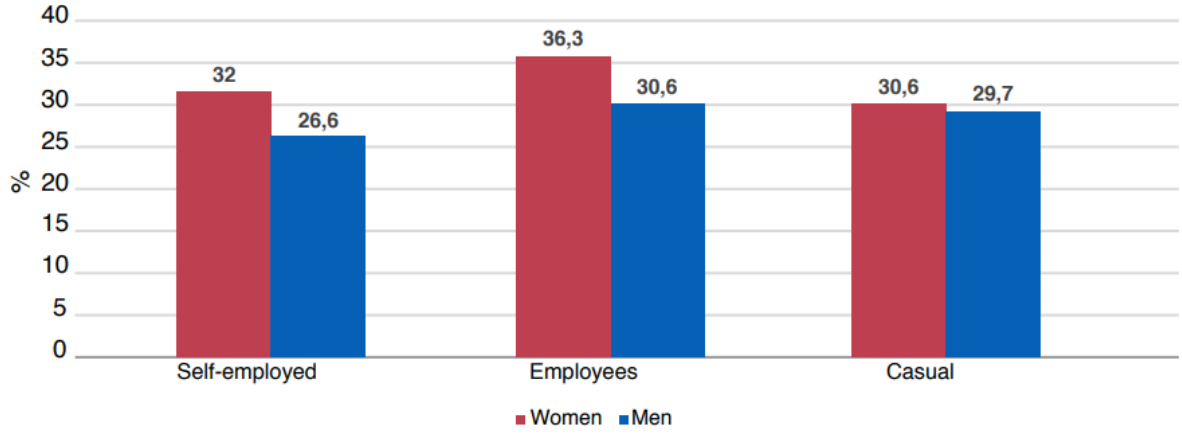
As shown in Figure 1.8 and Figure 1.9 below, women were also the hardest hit by job losses in both the formal and informal sectors.

Figure 1.8: Percentage of men and women who lost their jobs in informal and formal sectors by April 2020



Source: Rogan and Skinner (2020) and NIDS-CRAM Synthesis Report Wave 1 (2020)

Figure 1.9: Percentage of men and women who lost their jobs in the informal sector by April 2020, by sector of employment



Source: Rogan and Skinner (2020) and NIDS-CRAM Synthesis Report Wave 1 (2020)

The two graphs above show the gendered dimension of employment loss during the lockdown periods: wom-

en, in both the formal and informal sectors, were the most affected by job losses compared to their male counterparts. The reason is that women invariably occupy menial jobs requiring them to always be on site.

On average, moreover, informal workers lost 50% of their weekly working hours, with women being the hardest hit among them: a 49% loss as opposed to a 25% loss among men (Rogan & Skinner, 2020; NIDS-CRAM Synthesis Report Wave 1, 2020). Between February 2020 and April 2020, women in informal self-employment had their typical earnings reduced by close to 70% (NIDS-CRAM Synthesis Report Wave 1, 2020). About 37% of those in informal self-employment reported zero earnings in April 2020 (ibid). Overall, the gender gap in earnings in the informal economy widened noticeably between February and April" (Rogan & Skinner, 2020: 3).

The regional unevenness of job and income losses due to COVID-19

While the jobs and incomes of residents in all South African regions (i.e., metros, cities/towns, peri-urban and rural areas) were heavily affected by the pandemic, the rural areas were the hardest hit. Commenting on this, NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report (2020: 4) revealed that "between February and April, all regions lost about one-fifth of their jobs; however, between April and June, metros and cities/towns started to recover while rural areas seemed to lag behind." The nuances and fine details of all this are illustrated in Figure 1.10 below, which shows that more job losses were witnessed in metros, followed by cities and rural areas which were the least affected, for the simple reason that there are fewer employment opportunities in the rural areas.

Figure 1.10: Regional unevenness of job losses due to COVID-19 in South Africa

Source: Visagie and Turok (2020) and NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report (2020).

Findings have further shown that South Africans residing in the peri-urban and rural areas experienced a sustained high unemployment rate compared to their counterparts in the cities/towns and metros. By June 2020, the unemployment rate in rural areas stood at a staggering 52%, followed by cities/towns at 43% and then metros at 35% (NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report, 2020). Furthermore, among the urban residents, those residing in the suburbs were less likely to be unemployed (i.e., 24% likely to be unemployed), while peri-urban residents were highly likely to be unemployed (i.e., 52%). "Put differently, 1-in-2 people in rural areas and peri-urban areas who want work, have work; compared to 2-in-3 people living in metro areas and 3-in-4 people living in suburbs" (NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report, 2020: 4).

Corroborating with these findings of the regionalised nature of the pandemic-triggered unemployment, the Statistics South Africa Report (2022) revealed that in 2020 the provincial unemployment differentials were staggering. The rural provinces recorded high rates while urban provinces recorded relatively low rates. For example, the following are the provincial percentages of households with no members who were employed in 2020: Limpopo (47.8%), Eastern Cape (47.3%), Free State (45.3%), North West (43.0%), Mpumalanga (38.5%), Northern Cape (34.5%), KwaZulu Natal (33.4%), Gauteng (24.3%) and Western Cape (24.0%) (Statistics South Africa Report, 2022). This makes the last two provinces the only ones with unemployment rates below

the national average of 34.1% during the pandemic. Hence, the rural provinces were the hardest hit by food insecurity and hunger during the pandemic due to their high unemployment rates.

Social protection responses and COVID-19-induced food insecurity

Following the COVID-19-triggered lockdowns, South Africa was one of the first countries to introduce social protection services targeting vulnerable populations and businesses (McCandless, 2021). The government announced a COVID-19 stimulus package of R500 billion ($US30 billion) in April 2020. The sole purpose of the package was to augment SASSA's existing social safety nets that were already catering for the monthly food and other basic services of about 11.3 million South Africans. At this stage, it is important to note that "pre-lockdown, over 60% of people in South Africa and 80% in rural areas were living in a grant-receiving household" (Wills et al., 2020: 28).

The government introduced a raft of protection services ranging from well-designed stimulus packages, grants and safety nets. To cushion these vulnerable groups from the heavy blow delivered by the COVID-19 pandemic, on 26 March 2020, in cognisance of the president's declaration of COVID-19 as a National Disaster and in terms of Regulation 10(8) of the National Disaster Act, the Minister of Employment and Labour, Thembelani Waltermade Nxes, introduced a social insurance scheme called the COVID-19 Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme (TERS) (Department of Labour Notice 215, 2020). Administered through the contribution-based Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), this scheme was created to cater for employees who had been laid off due to COVID-19 lockdowns and whose employers were practically and economically incapable of paying them their salaries during the period of National Disaster. Commenting on this, Department of Labour Notice 215 (2020: 7) submitted the following:

> *Should an employer as a direct result of Covid-19 pandemic close its operations for a 3 (three) months or lesser period and suffer financial distress, the company shall qualify for a Covid19 Temporary Relief Benefit. The benefit shall be de- linked from the UIF's normal benefits and therefore the normal rule that for every 4 (four) days worked, the employee accumulates a one day credit and the maximum credit days payable is 365 for every 4 (four) years will not apply. The benefits will only pay for the cost of salary for the employees during the temporary closure of the business operations.*

The Minister of Employment and Labour capped the TERS salary benefits per employee to a maximum amount of R17712.00 per month. Under the UI Act, employees were paid these salary benefits based on the income replacement rate sliding scale of 38% to 60% (Department of Labour Notice 215, 2020).

On 21 April 2020, close to a month after the TERS were introduced, the government introduced a raft of social assistance measures. The sole purpose of the measures was to provide relief to families who were not beneficiaries of any employment-related insurance schemes. For example, one of the social assistance measures was the swift introduction of the Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRDG) of R350 per month. This new social grant was introduced in May 2020 to cushion vulnerable unemployed groups who were not the beneficiaries of any other grant or UIF, and it was terminated in March 2022. According to the Department of Social Development Report (2021: i),

> *The criteria for the grant were: South African citizens, permanent residents or refugees registered with Home Affairs; resident within the borders of the Republic of South Africa; above the age of 18; unemployed; not receiving any income; not receiving any social grant; not receiving any unemployment insurance benefit (UIF) and does not qualify to receive UIF; not receiving a stipend from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme(NSFAS); not receiving any other government COVID-19 response support; and not a resident in a government-funded or subsidised institution.*

The Report further revealed that many beneficiaries of the SRDG used it to buy food "as reported by 93.3% of surveyed applicants" (ibid: iii). According to the findings of the Report, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) received 9,537,077 applications between May 2020 and November 2020 and, after removing duplicate applications, saw 6,449,916 (67.6%) approved. Notably, the two most populous provinces, i.e., Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal, recorded the highest numbers of applications: 21.4% and 21.1%, respectively.

The NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report (2020) indicated that, of about 11.3 million South Africans who applied for the SRDG grant, nearly two-fifth were successful. Significantly, "for every individual who lived in quintile 5 households and received the grant in June, nearly four who lived in quintile 1 households received it" (NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report, 2020: 11).

The gendered nature of the social responses campaign

Also illuminated by the findings of the Report is the gendered reality of how the social grant was distributed. More men benefited from the SRDG than women: 67.9% of the beneficiaries or 4,379,331 approved applications were men, as opposed to 32.1% or 2,070,585 women (Department of Social Development Report, 2021). Still on this reality of gender unevenness of social grants distribution, the Department of Social Development (2021, para. 4) went on to say that "the top-up of social grants, the Child Support Grant (CSG), primary caregiver allowance and Special COVID-19 SRD grant translated to unequal treatment of men and women." Youths (i.e., those aged between 18 and 34) constituted the majority of SRDG applicants who received the grant: 69.5%. Black Africans accounted for 82.8% of all beneficiaries, with Coloureds constituting only 10.6% (Department of Social Development Report, 2021).

This reality speaks of the gendered, racialised and age-specific COVID-19 pandemic-triggered hunger, food insecurity and poverty in South Africa, that percolated into the country's structural inequality differentials and distinctiveness. The grant top-ups went a long way in easing the brutal hunger and food insecurity crises among poor South Africans. The Child Support Grant (CSG) was increased by R300 for one month in May 2020, followed by another increase of R500 per month for three months (i.e., June to October 2020), and all other existing social grants (e.g., disability grant and the old age pension) were increased by R250 per month until October 2020 (Statistics South Africa Report, 2022).

As established by Bassier et al. (2020), about 64% of South Africa's informal workers lived in a household that received a CSG, making this group the biggest beneficiary of the CSG as it represented the poorest of the poor that were targeted by this grant. However, the fact of increasing the CSG per caregiver, and not per child, did not achieve the intended aim of addressing hunger and food insecurity crises (The Institute for Economic Justice, 2020a & 2020b). The reason was that doing so meant that "almost one-third less support to the poorest people, and an additional 2 million people below the food poverty line" (Rogan & Skinner, 2020: 10).

Findings have established that the social protection measures introduced by the South African government played a significant role in mitigating the impact of hunger and food insecurity during and after the lockdowns. The evidence from a survey conducted by the Department of Social Development in 2021 when assessing the extent to which the COVID-19 grants assisted the beneficiaries is pertinent and illuminating in this regard: "When asked if the Special COVID-19 SRD grant made a positive difference in their lives and those of members of their household, roughly 80% confirmed that the grant made a positive difference in their lives and those of their household" (Department of Social Development Report, 2021: iii).

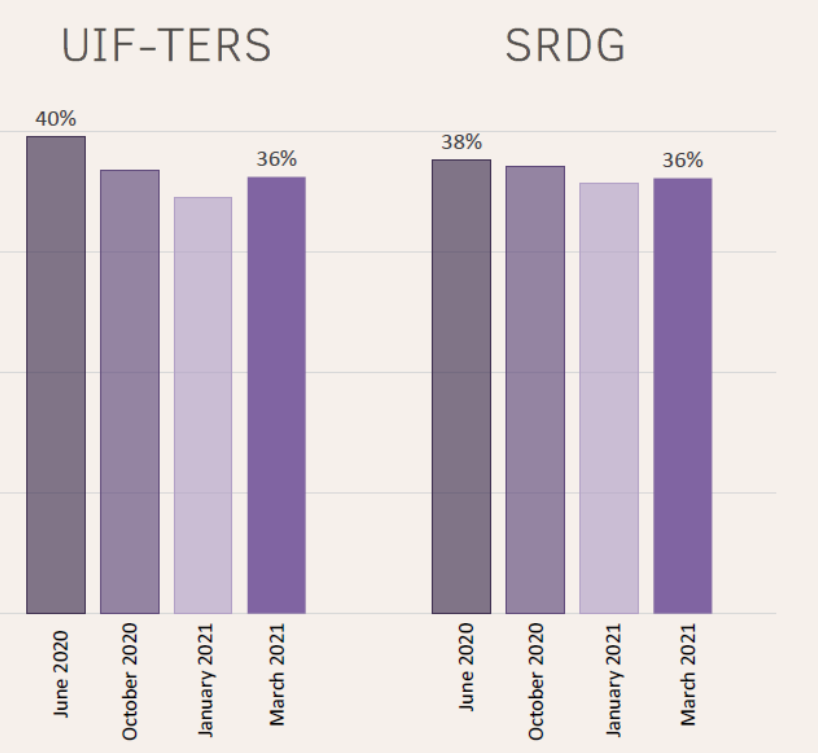
It was therefore against this background that, according to the Department of Social Development (2021), 88.14% of the SRDG recipients (and 73.85% of those whose SRDG applications were rejected) agreed that the means test should not be the criterion to determine the beneficiaries of such grants. The fact that, of late, the cost of living in South Africa is high and that the country is home to a significant number of poor people was mentioned by many participants (i.e., 77.10% of the SRDG recipients and 76.06% of those whose SRDR applications were refused) as cogent and convincing reasons for everyone who applied for such grants to get them (Department of Social Development Report, 2021).

Gendered and regional unevenness of the SRDG grants distribution

Findings have established that there was apparent gendered and regional unevenness in the SRDG grants distribution. While women constituted 58% of net job losses during the pandemic – making them more vul-

nerable and food insecure than their men counterparts –, women accounted for only 34% and 41% of the SRDG grant recipients and UIF/UIF-TERS beneficiaries, respectively (NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report, 2020). Furthermore, findings have shown that although women constituted 47% of South African workers in February 2020, between February and June, they still constituted 58% of net job losses. Yet women accounted for only 41% and 34% of those who benefited from the UIF/UIF-TERS and SRDG grant in June, respectively (Rogan & Skinner, 2020). Findings have furthermore shown that by the end of June 2020, 67% of the 2.7 million recipients of the Special COVID-19 Grant were men (ibid). As shown in Figure 1.11 below, while women accounted for many of the unemployed people and furloughed workers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, they received less social support in the form of grants than did their men counterparts.

Figure 1.11: Percentage of women who received UIF-TERS and SRG COVID-19 grants



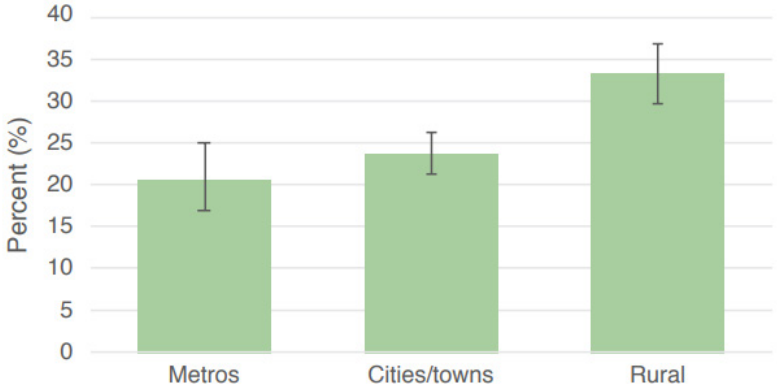
Source: Casale and Shepherd (2021) using data from NIDS-CRAM Waves 2, 3, 4 and 5

The graph shows the gendered dimension of the distribution of the COVID-19 grants (i.e., the UIF-TERS and SRG) throughout the lockdown period, with women receiving less than 50% of the grants. Significantly, findings have also established a glaring regional unevenness in the distribution of these COVID-19 grants. For example, rural dwellers disproportionately benefitted more from the COVID-19 grants than did the inhabitants of peri-urban areas, metros and cities/towns. "Nearly three out of five rural participants (59%) lived in households receiving social grants in June 2020, compared with less than half in cities/towns (47%) and one in three in the metros (32%)" (NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report, 2020: 10). The reason for this regional unevenness in grant distribution is worth noting here: as most rural dwellers were unemployed, they had no other means of survival when lockdowns were instituted.

When the pandemic hit, the government therefore saw it fit to prioritise these rural communities to compensate for the lack of a strong and vibrant local economic fabric offering employment opportunities. Within the cities/towns there were also regional differentials regarding these COVID-19 grants, as township and peri-urban residents were more likely to benefit from these grants than their counterparts in the suburbs. Findings from the NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report (2020) have established the following: 54%, 45%, 40% and 26% of peri-urban, townships, shack and suburban, respectively, residents received these grants. Figure 1.12 below illustrates the regional unevenness of the COVID-19 grants distribution in South Africa. From the findings, it can be deduced that the government had to concentrate the grants among the more vulnerable

and exposed groups.

Figure 1.12: Regional unevenness of COVID-19 grant distribution



Source: Visagie and Turok (2020) and NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report (2020)

The graphs above show the geographical unevenness of COVID-19 grant distribution, with the rural areas receiving almost double what the Metros received. This is because a large percentage of social grant recipients are rural residents, due to their economic marginalisation. As the COVID-19 grants were also means-tested, the findings have revealed a massive under coverage of these grants, to the extent that some of those who were left out of the beneficiary equation were the most deserving as they were among the poorest of the poor. For example, about 1,758,000 applicants for the Special COVID grant were mistakenly rejected (Rogan & Skinner, 2020), making them face the brunt of hunger and food insecurity challenges before their applications were finally accepted and their money paid in full later. Furthermore, by June 2020, "a total of nearly 6.5 million individuals were eligible for the COVID-19 grant but did not report receipt, and half of these individuals (3.1 million) live in the poorest third of households" (NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Report, 2020: 11). This sad reality put many of the deserving poor people at the intersection of precarity and vulnerability; first, most of them were not employed before February 2020; second, lockdowns shut down all the avenues they used to sustain their livelihoods; third, despite being part of the deserving population, the under coverage of these grants left them out; and fourth; the government could descend on them with a heavy hand whenever they tried to go out and hustle, for violation of the COVID-19 lockdown measures. Ultimately, this reality created a 'precarious normality' among these vulnerable and exposed groups as food insecurity worsened without any help from the government.

The situation was further worsened by grand corruption, mismanagement and fraud cases that characterised the COVID-19 grants and their distribution. For example, food parcels meant for vulnerable groups were reported to have gone missing, and contracts to supply food were doled out to friends and relatives of politically exposed persons (PEPs) (Chutel, 2020). Furthermore, some food parcels allocated to cater for unemployment insurance were said to have been pocketed by political cronies (Chutel, 2020). While bemoaning corruption relating to the distribution of the COVID-19 stimulus package of R500 billion in a letter addressed to the African National Congress (ANC), the governing party he leads, President Cyril Ramaphosa said the following: "This is an unforgivable betrayal for the millions of South Africans who are being negatively affected by the impact of COVID-19, experiencing hunger daily, hopelessness, and joblessness" (Mogoatlhe, 2020, para. 10). This was against the background of media reports (e.g., Oliver 2020 and Mogoatlhe, 2020) that close to R450 billion of the R500 billion COVID-19 stimulus package had disappeared into thin air of corruption. Agreeing with above analysis, Wills et al. (2020: 14) argues that there was "politicisation, corruption and lack of coordination in food distribution."

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper examines the impact and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdowns

on South African food security. It argues that the pandemic and the measures adopted and implemented to contain it exacerbated the economic vulnerabilities and exposures that preceded the pandemic among poor South Africans, particularly Black Africans. In the end, the pandemic-triggered hunger and food insecurity were racialised, gendered, regionalised and wealth/income specific, pointing to the structural and persistent inequalities and inequities that have characterised South Africa since colonialism and apartheid to the present day. The findings of this desktop research are presented and discussed in three superordinate themes and sub-themes. The superordinate themes are: (a) hunger and food security following the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) employment and incomes following the COVID-19 pandemic; and (c) the impact of the social protection responses on the COVID-19-induced food insecurity.

The COVID-19 pandemic-triggered economic and social vulnerabilities sustained severe poverty, hunger and food insecurity crises in South Africa, notably among those in the economic and social margins of the society. The massive disruptions of the pandemic, which made it difficult for the wheels of the economy to turn smoothly, manifested in unprecedented job losses and business closures. This compromised households' income-generating activities in the short to medium and longer terms.

This paper furthermore argues that several challenges concerning the distribution and management of the COVID-19 grants had a net effect of worsening hunger and food insecurity among many South Africans. These challenges include massive under coverage of these COVID-19 grants which saw many poor South Africans left out of the beneficiary equation. Grand corruption, mismanagement and fraud cases that characterised the COVID-19 grants and their distribution and management are some of these challenges that make the government's concerted efforts to address hunger and food insecurity in the country during the pandemic elusive and untenable. This paper argues that plugging these holes will go a long way in making these grants impactful in the fight against hunger and food insecurity during pandemics.

The study concludes that the pandemic worsened economic vulnerabilities and exposure as it disrupted the labour market, shut down businesses, and led to massive job and income losses, which in turn led to deepened hunger and food insecurity challenges, notably among the poor. What further worsened the situation is the fact that the lockdowns, especially Level 5 Lockdown, undermined people's coping and resilience mechanisms to confront and mitigate the impact of the hunger and food insecurity challenges brought forth by the pandemic.

This paper therefore recommends that to build back better the disrupted food systems and prepare for future pandemics, the South African government should take a paradigmatic turn in the country's food production, distribution and supply. In other words, the paper recommends that the government adopt and implement a '*Do-it-Yourself Africa (#DTYAfrica)*' approach in food production, distribution and supply. To this end, the paper recommends that the South African government firmly capitalise on and embrace the African Development Bank's $US1.5 billion African Emergency Food Production Facility that provides fertilisers and agricultural seeds to 20 million farmers growing wheat, rice, maize and soybeans, across the continent. The facility was introduced in light of Africa's lack of food sovereignty revealed by the food insecurity triggered by the Russian-Ukrainian war. Like many regions of the world, Africa overly depends on Ukraine and Russia for wheat, vegetable oil, blended fertiliser and potash (The African Development Bank Group, 2022a & 2022b). This is because these two countries alone produce 20% of the world's potash, close to 50% of its blended fertiliser, and 30% of the global wheat supply (The African Development Bank Group, 2022a). Russia's invasion of Ukraine had a corresponding effect of fertiliser prices rising over fourfold and wheat by over 50% (The African Development Bank Group, 2022b).

Thus, "the African Development Bank Group's African Emergency Food Production Facility is a short-term intervention to raise the production of wheat, maize, rice and soybean to compensate for the supply deficit due to the war in Ukraine. The plan will result in the production of 37.6 million tonnes of these staple food crops, an increase of about 30% in local production" (The African Development Bank Group, 2022a: 1). It is therefore against this background that as the Bank's US$1.5 billion facility is projected to support the pro-

duction of 37.6 million tonnes of food, valued at about US$11.5 billion, South Africa must capitalise on this facility to strengthen its initiatives of building back better the food systems disrupted by both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war.

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