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Cape Town's food crisis – report reveals alarming high food insecurity levels

[The State of the City Food System Report](#), by the University of Cape Town (UCT) researchers Gareth Haysom and Associate Professor Jane Battersby, has revealed alarmingly high levels of food insecurity in the city, which are compounded by spatial inequities. The report studied Cape Town's food system and whether Capetonians have suitable access to good, nutritious food.

The report found that accessing food was a constant uphill battle, especially for those who don't have nearly enough to feed themselves and their families.

"The report argues that there is more than enough healthy food in the food system, but food is inaccessible to those who need it most," said Haysom, a senior urban food systems researcher at UCT's [African Centre for Cities](#) (ACC). Haysom and Battersby co-lead the Urban Food System Research Cluster, which produced this report.

Understanding the supply, availability of food

The report is one of 15 that aim to analyse and engage with urban food systems across various cities. According to Haysom, the research was conducted in northern, western, eastern, and southern Africa, making the first time these reports have collectively contributed to a review of this magnitude.

Focusing on Cape Town, Haysom explained that the report aimed to understand the city's food supply, availability, and residents' immediate access to food. He further said the report also intended to explore key issues related to food utilisation and nutrition challenges, as well as the stability and sustainability of the urban food system. Haysom noted that the ACC's goal was to demonstrate how the city's urban food system is integrated into its broader urban infrastructure – comprising buildings, transportation, energy, power, and water supply – and how these systems influence each other.

"The report worked from the premise that each city's food system has a history, and that history is linked not only to food histories, but the successes and viabilities of the city, changes in governance, politics and so much more. So, to understand the current food system, we also needed to understand and acknowledge the historical trends in the system of that particular city," he said.

Food is out of reach

The General House Survey published by Statistics South Africa in 2021 revealed that almost 250 000 households in Cape Town experienced hunger – the highest levels among the country’s metros. To make matters worse, Haysom said, dietary diversity remains very limited in the city. As a result, many Capetonians may not be experiencing hunger, but their diets lack balance and nutrition.

Does this then mean that there’s an insufficient food supply in the Cape Town food system? Definitely not, Haysom said. There was actually an abundance of healthy food available, but it remained inaccessible to most Capetonians. One of the main reasons for this was the exorbitant cost of essentials like transport and electricity.

“Not only are monthly incomes constrained, the cost of transport, data, rent and other infrastructure services and its constant price increases mean that households’ food budgets are under increasing pressure. Limited access to infrastructure affects food security outcomes and drives residents to opt for food choices that are far from nutritious. This means that these households are in a constant state of stress because they always need to make a plan,” he said.

“This is where the city does have a direct mandate and can shift costs associated with all these aspects.”

Accessing food

But how do Capetonians source food? While some residents can afford to shop at supermarkets, less fortunate Capetonians only buy from these stores once a month. Throughout the month, they rely on informal vendors in their communities. These purchasing habits reveal distinct food systems in action throughout the city. Haysom pointed out that for upper- to middle-income households, with access to refrigeration and storage, supermarkets offer “great convenience”. However, for households with limited or no access to electricity and appliances like refrigerators, the situation is very different.

“In these cases, what happens is that the informal trader becomes the fridge, the stove and in many cases, even the pantry,” he said.

The report found that the Cape Town Fresh Food Produce Market in Epping was one of the city’s key food system assets. The market supplies fresh fruit and vegetables to residents at the lowest possible prices and offers producers the best market systems.

Involve city governments

In summary, food insecurity exists at high levels in all African cities covered during this research study. Similarly, Haysom said, residents in all these cities also reported that while they would love to follow a nutritious diet, they simply can’t afford it. What’s high on the priority list is balancing the budget to cover rent, transport, and electricity, and getting food into their tummies.

Therefore, to ensure thriving cities, he said, municipalities needed to start playing a much bigger role in food systems governance and lose the notion that they were not responsible for the city’s food mandate. What’s needed, he said, are food governance approaches that embrace multi-level and multi-sectoral governance.

"This doesn't mean that national governments should relinquish their role. National government should acknowledge that this mandate of delivering food security will work well if they plan and work alongside cities. A majority-urban country like ours needs to pay far more attention to the city's food systems, and cities need to be given the revenue and the governance mandate to get this right," he noted.

"As South Africans, we need to act as well. The current lack of empathy towards those going hungry and the high levels of hunger cannot and should not be tolerated. How else do we transition and move forward?"

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News

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