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COVID-19, Food Insecurity and a Government Response: Reflections from South Africa

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Abstract. The goal of this paper is to examine how life, already hard before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has further deteriorated and compounded the difficulties South Africans experience in accessing food. As a point of departure, the paper argues that while food insecurity has always been a feature in South Africa, COVID-19 has laid bare the ineffective policy response by successive governments over the years. Food insecurity in the country is not new, but the government's ineffective response has allowed COVID-19 to intensify poverty and inequality among the most vulnerable. To explore how COVID-19 has exacerbated the food insecurity problem in the country, this paper employed a qualitative research approach where secondary data was collected through a review of the literature. From the outset, it was observable that government responses to COVID-19 were not only going to cost jobs and further entrench poverty and inequality, but were also going to exacerbate the food insecurity problem in the country. Even though government measures to cushion the poor and vulnerable have largely been welcomed, they have been tainted by corruption, thus clouding their overall effectiveness. It is recommended that the government be proactive rather than reactive in addressing issues around food insecurity.

Keywords. Poverty, Development, Growth.

1. Introduction

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented socio-economic devastation. From an economic perspective, Nagarajan (2020) predicts that the pandemic is likely to cost the global economy \$82 trillion in damage over the next five years. From a political perspective, Schmieding (2020) contends that the pandemic caught governments off-guard and by the time they reacted, it had already inflicted extensive socio-economic and, by extension, political damage. It has given rise to nationalism and populism and, as one can observe in times of need, it becomes a matter of every nation for itself. From a social perspective, the pandemic has changed the way we live our lives. It has exerted unprecedented pressures on public health systems and food systems and has undone years of progress with regard to reducing poverty and global inequality (Bakalis et al., 2020).

One cannot deny that the pandemic has far-reaching socio-economic implications. Globally, millions of people are already out of work, which increases their likelihood of falling

deeper into poverty. The pandemic has increased global inequality, with the poor getting poorer. There is likely to be an increase in the number of undernourished people. The World Bank (2020) revealed that, 690 million people were undernourished in 2020, and this number was likely to increase by 132 million by the end of 2020. It is estimated that with a global workforce of 3.3 billion nearly half are likely to lose their jobs. Those who are employed in the informal sector are expected to be the worst off as they are vulnerable, lack access to social and welfare services and do not have access to healthcare or any own other resources which are vital for one's survival. In South Africa, the effects of the pandemic can be seen all over. Even before the pandemic, the country was seen as the most unequal country in the world, with the richer getting richer and the poor getting poorer (Hundenborn, Woolard & Jellema, 2019).

The socio-economic inequality in South Africa between the haves and the have nots has been observed as a barrier to inclusive development. The richest 20 percent in South Africa control 70 percent of the resources, thus entrenching inequality and the socio-economic divide. With high rates of unemployment, inequality, poverty, institutionalised corruption, rampant crime and service delivery issues, South Africans were already battling to survive before the pandemic, and while it is imperative to mention that the pandemic alone did not give rise to food insecurity in South Africa it undoubtedly exacerbated the already dire situation.

For Mlaba (2020), environmental factors and farm attacks have been other often-ignored drivers of food insecurity. The Anadolu Agency (2020) contended that 20 percent of the county's population (an estimated 12 million people) have been confronted with extreme food insecurity since September 2019. While COVID-19 has been largely being responsible for the worsening food security situation, COVID-19 mitigation measures, coupled with an increase in droughts, slow economic growth and an increase in the price of food have been other factors driving food insecurity. This paper seeks to examine how COVID-19 has exacerbated the food insecurity problem amongst South Africans. It seeks to comprehend how the government has responded to this problem and, finally, examine the effectiveness of such responses.

2. Methodological approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted through a review of the literature to answer the interrogations supporting this paper, i.e. how COVID-19 has worsened the food insecurity issue in South Africa, how the government has responded to this problem and how effective these responses have been, especially with regards to cushioning the poor and vulnerable. This approach was considered appropriate as it allowed for the gathering of data from a local, regional, and international perspective, which was vital, considering how the pandemic has overwhelmed the socio-economic lives of millions of people globally. This approach was employed to contextualise the problems of food insecurity in South Africa and demonstrate how the pandemic has pressured food production, distribution and access systems around the world. The approach was made even more effective because of the rapid growth of COVID-19 literature concerning food insecurity.

Thus, taking into account the historical debates and narratives around household food insecurity in South Africa, the literature review was thought likely to provide sufficient and latest data regarding COVID-19 and food insecurity.

3. Theoretical Approach

The so-called sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) seeks to study ways in which the lives of the poor can be improved. The approach is people-oriented and endeavours to understand how people operate, what their strengths are (be it capital endowment or assets) and how they

can work together to work to convert these into positive livelihoods (Shen, Hughey, & Simmons, 2008). The approach is underpinned by the belief that for people to have positive livelihoods, they ought to acquire a range of assets. All of these assets are equally important to ensure the positive livelihoods of the people. The literature describes five types of assets that are important for one to make a positive living; these assets apply to people in general not just the poor.

1. Human capital – which includes knowledge, skills and the capability to labour and maintain good health. (N.B. Good health does not mean earning a living only, but is rather an end in itself).
2. Social capital – which entails the relationships and resources that people draw strength from in times of need. These include relationships of trust, support and reciprocity, which the poor can draw on in times of need.
3. Natural capital – namely, natural resources that can be used to support people in their livelihoods. These include water, air, and land amongst others.
4. Physical capital –i.e. infrastructure, transport, telecommunications, energy, water and sanitation systems.
5. Financial capital – principally concerned with access to finance, i.e. the availability of cash to ensure one has adequate purchasing power (Serrat, 2017).

4. The sustainable livelihoods approach and Food security

Jessup-Varnum (2018) contends that because food is a basic need for one's survival, with whatever income families get, they are likely to prioritise the purchasing of food. This, therefore, consolidates the thinking that food access is undeniably linked with one's livelihood. For Maxwell (1996), the need and ability of a household to purchase food largely depend on the control the household has over its resources and the access they have to household income. Food security should not be viewed as just having the ability to access food, but rather should be understood as a requirement for one's personal survival and development. Chakona & Shackleton (2019) noted that in South Africa, even before the pandemic, there was growing concern with regards to the inability of households to access food. However, one can argue that it is not about accessing food as such, but about accessing the right type of food. Accessing the right types of food has become a challenge for most South Africans who have become retrenched and left without an income, and is even worse for those who were in no formal employment in the first place.

Food insecurity in South Africa, therefore, cannot be relegated to the back door or viewed in isolation, rather one needs to understand barriers that prevent people from accessing food. South Africa produces enough food to ensure that the entire population is fed, yet 26 percent of the population regularly experiences hunger. Poverty and unemployment are the two leading contributors of hunger in South Africa, caused in part by the 2008 global economic crisis, which limited job creation opportunities and the purchasing power of South African households. Moreover, the unemployment rate which currently stands at 32.5 percent coupled with massive job losses and the inability to grow the economy has increased the number of adults and children suffering from hunger and malnutrition (Heneck, 2021). Therefore, the difficulty of ordinary South Africans to access food eventually affects their livelihoods, which then condemns people to poverty and inequality. To compound the issue, South Africans were already facing a deeper crisis as food prices were on the rise.

Even though the constitution of South Africa acknowledges the right to food, incoherent policies as a result of the government's failure to enact specific legislation on food rights has resulted in incoherent food policies, which then hinders accessibility for the most vulnerable. Therefore, with food becoming more scarce for the poor and vulnerable, this will inherently change their livelihoods, thus affecting the ability to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

5. Food Security and Insecurity in South Africa

A universally accepted definition of food security remains greatly debated and contested, with scholars and organisations alike having attempted to define the concept. When the concept emerged in the 1970s, the World Food Conference (1974) defined food security in terms of food supply - assuring the availability and price stability of basic foodstuffs at the international and national level. The World Food summit in 1996 agreed on the definition that a nation is food secure when at all times, people have access to food that is safe, sufficient, meets their dietary needs and allows them to live a healthy lifestyle (World Food Summit, 1996). The concept and its definitions have changed greatly over the years, Clay (2002) & Heidhues et al., (2004) revealed that the concept of food security has evolved in the last thirty years as a result of new policy approaches which propose new ways of understanding the concept.

Napoli, Dae Muro & Mazziotta (2011) note that the concept has become multidimensional, i.e., the definition has been reviewed to include the household and the individual, which signals a policy-oriented approach. Ayala & Meier (2017) define food security as the availability of food and the means for people to have access to it. This definition incorporates a household element. A household is considered food-secure when its occupants do not live in starvation or fear of hunger. From the above, the understanding is that when people have access to food, it can be said that they are food secure, but while the above definitions capture the holistic meaning of food security, they fail to reflect on the type of food people ought to have access to. The term itself is broad and multidimensional, but, basically, when people have access to food, one can say they are food secure. However, the type of food they have access to seems not to carry much weight as an important element in the definition.

Indisputably, food inaccessibility is a global problem that warrants international cooperation and coordination. Breen (2016) cautioned that the food security issue cannot be taken lightly as by 2050, when the global population is estimated to be 9 billion, the demand for food will be 60% greater than it is today. The lack of trade integration, the lack of well-developed infrastructure, policy incoherence, and climate change have become barriers to food security, especially in the developing regions. Guaranteeing the availability of food is not a problem, rather countries need to invest in the way they plan, implement and monitor food production and access.

6. Food insecurity

In 2019, an estimated 135 million people faced life-threatening food insecurity, according to the World Food Program (WFP), the UN food assistance agency. In less developed countries, food production has decreased, while the price of food has increased (Maisonet-Guzman, 2011). The U.S. Department of Agriculture contends that food insecurity happens when individuals or households lack sufficient income to purchase food, thus affecting their livelihoods (United States Department of Agriculture, 2020).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture further reveals that food insecurity is not an isolated event, but rather a result of a multitude of factors such as lack of housing provision,

health-related problems, high and unaffordable medical costs, and unsatisfactory wages. Grouped together, these factors greatly affect the livelihoods of people. In low income countries food insecurity has been classified as a cause of malnourishment. Undernutrition, which has become a policy nightmare in the developing world, refers to people who do not physically or economically have access to nutritious, safe, adequate food which meets their dietary requirements (United States Department of Agriculture, 2020). However, apart from availing the right types of food, it is also important to remove the barriers that restrict or hinder people from accessing food.

Folaranmi (2012) reflects that nations that fail to ensure food security and accessibility tend to experience devastating socio-economic repercussions. From an economic perspective, food insecurity weakens a country by consolidating disability and increases the possibility of diseases of breaking out. It increases the economic impact as nations struggle to deal with the health consequences of malnutrition. In the same vein, malnourished children make poor students and are more unlikely to finish school. Malnourished people are less likely to become productive and contribute towards socio-economic development, thus increasing the burden of underdevelopment and lack of growth. However, apart from the above deliberation, it becomes imperative for one to discuss the causes of food insecurity.

7. Causes of food insecurity

As argued above, food insecurity greatly affects human and economic development. Thus it becomes important for policy development to address issues that give rise to food insecurity. Food insecurity is driven by a combination of factors mostly located in the political, economic and environmental domains.

1. Population growth

As populations grow, this exerts pressure on food production and accessibility. Heaney et al., (1992) contend that access to water resources, and the availability of arable land for agricultural development are the three most obvious factors that need to be present for a country to be able to feed itself. The problem today is that in developing regions the population is growing rapidly, often outpacing the available water resources and arable land and this means there are fewer resources to meet basic needs. Fróna, Szenderák & Harangi-Rákos (2019) note that an increase in the population increases the demand for food which, in turn, requires the use of additional arable land and water. The Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations predicts that if the population reaches 9.1bn by 2050, there will be a need to increase food production by 70 percent. The FAO admits that as overpopulation takes centre stage, producers will find themselves under pressure to meet the amplified demand for food, thus exerting pressure on food production and distribution systems.

2. Climate change

Undoubtedly, climate change has become a threat to the global food production chain. In fact, it has become a threat to humanity itself. As the climate worsens, so will food production and accessibility. Climate change threatens an already fragile global food system that has been struggling to cope with an increase in the population. Even though great strides have been made in the last decade to ensure food accessibility there has actually been an increase in the number of chronically hungry people. Today, one in nine of the world's population, i.e. 821 million people, are malnourished. (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, 2018). The

effect of climate change on agricultural development varies with regards to geography. Sova (2019) maintains that climate has already been linked to a wide range of devastating observations, for example, the increase in sea levels, increases in temperatures and the changing trajectory of diseases and agricultural pests. Food security most affects food production through the loss of arable land, changes in crop yield, temperature increases and rainfall variability. Singh & Singh (2012) argue that climate change will result in weather extremes, rising temperatures, higher levels of carbon dioxide, a warmer, more acidic ocean and a rise in sea-level, all of which affect food production.

3. Water scarcity

With population growth, the demand for water intensifies, thus creating cross-border conflicts. Globally, water shortage is becoming another problem that needs immediate attention. Water- stressed regions account for 28 percent of the world's agriculture, a significant figure given that to produce a kilogramme of wheat requires 1500 litres of water and 16000-litres is needed for the production of one kilogramme of beef (Breene, 2016). In 2050, the world will need twice as much to feed a growing population, which will require an increase in food production. Royal HaskoningDHV (2021) reveals that more than 70% of the world's total freshwater is used by the agricultural sector (for the production of meat, cereal, fruits, and cotton etc.). The ever increasing use of water in the agricultural and industrial sectors exerts considerable pressure on the demand for freshwater. Undoubtedly the increasing usage and demand for freshwater will in the coming decade leave some regions battling to feed a growing population.

In support of the above, Mancosu et al., (2015) warned that water scarcity is a global problem that warrants global coordination. Without freshwater, there will not be food as the agricultural sector will not have the required resource to take care of crops, but it is clear that the need to ensure food security is also hampered by a plethora of other factors that give way lead to food insecurity. From a Sub-Saharan perspective, Dodo (2020) argues that conflicts and never ending violence, lack of political commitment, neglect of development of the agricultural sector and the lack of policy coherence are other factors that have become impediments to ensuring effective food provision.

South Africa shows that being food self-sufficient at a national level does not translate into being food secure at a household level. The fact that the majority of people are drowning in poverty, are in increasing debt and are jobless, coupled with an unequal economy and crumbling health infrastructure build huge barriers for the poor concerning food accessibility (Tsakok, 2020). In South Africa, ever since the political transition in 1994, the country has strived to ensure food access to the previously disadvantaged. This was imperative as the new South Africa aimed at ensuring inclusive socio-economic development, underpinned by food accessibility.

The South African government did not anticipate how COVID-19 would undo the years of work the country has taken to address food insecurity and food access. The pandemic has entrenched food insecurity, people have lost their jobs, and thus their income, hence families were unable to access food which is key for their livelihoods.

8. Covid-19 and Food Insecurity in South Africa

In a much broader context, the World Bank argues that the pandemic will impact economic livelihood throughout the continent. It estimates that agricultural production in Africa could contract by 7%, directly impacting family incomes and their investment in education, health, and other necessities. Many poor and marginalised communities across the developing world may now fear hunger as a greater or more immediate threat than the coronavirus (Vota, 2020). Statistics South Africa (2019) has revealed that COVID-19, coupled with job losses and loss of income is likely to drive millions into poverty and inequality and as a result, this will exert pressure on already fragile government resources. The nationwide lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus has pushed millions of families into food insecurity. A survey undertaken by the Human Sciences Research Council (2020) found that up to 30% of South Africans have been experiencing hunger during the subsequent lockdowns. This number could increase as rising unemployment means that people cannot afford food. Furthermore, Stephens et al., (2020) explain that the coronavirus has not only impacted food systems and food production, it has also widened the gap between the rich and poor. In South Africa, it has revealed not only the extent to which South Africans are food insecure at the household level, but has also demonstrated that food insecurity has devastating implications and thus requires government and all other stakeholders to work together. Food insecurity has also been linked to domestic violence, as food insecurity affects our mental health and relationships (Hatcher et al., 2019).

While hunger in South Africa has not caused by COVID-19 alone, measures introduced to reduce the spread of the virus have entrenched poverty and unemployment and, by extension, stifled economic growth. Agri South Africa reflects that it is not a problem of food supply per se, but rather that the lockdown regulations greatly affected food distribution and access even though food retailers were deemed essential services and could thus operate during the lockdown. As argued above, the problem in South Africa is not food production as the country is producing as much food as it was before COVID-19. The problem of food insecurity is driven by a combination of factors such as high food prices, lack of resources to purchase food, economic decline, and the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the mitigation measures applied to curb the spread of the pandemic (European Commission, 2021). While the government initially received support from stakeholders with regards to curbing the spread of the virus through a series of regulations the government did not foresee that such regulations would severely alter the food security status of households. During the peak of the pandemic, violence, loss of family income, closure of businesses and an incoherent response from the government contributed to food insecurity within households in South Africa.

The United Nations Development Programme (2020) argued that the pandemic has unearthed growing inequality globally where the vulnerable, poor and those in the informal sector are unable to escape the devastating effects of the pandemic. A study focusing on the effects of COVID-19 in South Africa conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that there was an increase in the number of households that sank below the poverty line who were from the so-called middle class. The study revealed that 54 % of people who have been pushed out of permanent jobs have found themselves working in the informal sector, as a coping mechanism and the need to generate income (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Households which were headed by females, people who only possessed a primary school education, people without any form of social welfare, majority-black households, and the breadwinners of families who are now in informal employment are some of the categories of people who have been hit hard by the pandemic (United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

9. Government responses to Covid-19

When the government announced the first official lockdown, which was to begin on the 27th of March 2020, there were fears emanating from what society perceived as a lack of engagement from the government. However, it was how the government was going to protect the poor and vulnerable that society was more concerned about. It became clear that people were going to lose their jobs, businesses were under a pile of debt and a government response was needed. The response from government took the form of a series of measures (described below) to cushion South Africa from the devastating effects of COVID-19.

While the pandemic was new and caught many governments off-guard, when one looks at the reaction rate, South Africa fared much better compared to countries such as Mexico, the United States and Brazil. South Africa was quick to implement a lockdown, close all borders and restrict internal travel. The country implemented a lockdown in just 23 days from the first infection (de Villiers, Cerbone & Van Zijl, 2020). The government published a set of regulations (on the 20th of March 2020) that were meant to guide South Africa's response to the pandemic. Under the Lockdown:

1. The movement of people internally was restricted between 23:59 Thursday, 26 March and 23:59 Thursday, 16 April 2020.
2. People were at all times (observing the curfew time) to remain in their homes. Only those certified as undertaking essential services were allowed to operate. These included medical service, food supplies, and social grants collection.
3. People were not allowed to travel from province to province.
4. Gatherings were not allowed. Those attending funerals were to be no more than 50.
5. The use of public transport was prohibited apart from taxis, buses, e-hailing and private vehicles that were only transporting those who were providing essential services. Even so, these vehicles were only allowed to carry 50% of their licensed capacity, while private cars were permitted 60% of their licensed capacity.
6. The distribution and consumption of alcohol was banned (Makou, 2020).

The above responses were designed to stop the spread of the virus, hence restricting movement was key, however these responses did not address the food insecurity question.

10. COVID-19 and food intercity: A government response

Apart from stopping the spread of the virus, the government devised other mechanisms to cushion the poor and vulnerable against COVID-19. Food parcels, the Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme, an increase in social grants and a R350 month COVID-19 grant were some of the measures devised.

1. Food parcels

One measure to cushion the poor against the pandemic was to distribute food parcels to needy families. Felix (2021) reveals that the government spent R170 million on distributing food parcels to South Africa's most vulnerable during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces received the lion's share of this budget, indicating the level of vulnerability of people in these provinces (Felix, 2021). The distribution of these food parcels was soon expanded to include people who had been hit by natural disasters, or if a breadwinner had passed away in the past year. Food parcels were also provided to

families where everyone was unemployed, child-headed households, and to people who had been unable to work for six months for medical reasons. Gauteng premier, David Makhura highlighted that in times of need, the government must do all it can to protect the poor and vulnerable and food parcels were seen as important in this regard.

2. Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme

The Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme (TERS) was emergency funding introduced in March last year (2020) to provide support to employees whose possibility for work or providing services was curtailed during the strict lockdown (Mabuza, 2021). It enables the retention of employment by such companies in a manner that has little cost to the employer and which ensures employees continue to receive an income. It also gives companies the maximum opportunity to recover during the temporary relief from distress and to re-absorb employees into ordinary work at the end of the TERS (Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration, 2020). As of March 2021, the government has spent more than R58 billion on providing temporary relief to millions of workers who lost jobs during the COVID-19 lockdown.

3. Increase in social grants

Another support stream to cushion the poor saw the government top-up social grants for the poor and vulnerable. Child support grant beneficiaries received an extra R300 in May 2020, and from June to October they received an additional R500 each month (Webb & Vally, 2020). All other grants (grants for older persons and disability grants, grants for war veterans and persons older than 75 years, foster child grants, care dependency grants and child support grants) received an extra R250 per month for the next six months, (May to October 2020).

4. The special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant

The special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant (at R350 per month) was to be paid to individuals who are currently unemployed and do not receive any other form of a social grant or UIF payment. The above measures were implemented by the government to reduce hunger and social distress amongst the most vulnerable and poor (Mabuza, 2021). A study by Wills et al (2020) found that The Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme was particularly vital in lifting many households out of food insecurity between July and August 2020. The study concluded that such government interventions must continue alongside existing social insurance, like the Unemployment Insurance Fund, and the Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme as well as social relief efforts like the distribution of food parcels. Such efforts must continue until there is consistent evidence of economic recovery and stabilisation in households (Wills et al, 2020).

11. Successes and Challenges of addressing Food Insecurity in South Africa

While government interventions have been welcomed, going forward it is important to understand the full picture with regards to South Africa's food insecurity problem. The Department of Agriculture (2002) and Chakona & Shackleton (2019) communicated that South Africa faces five major food security challenges. Firstly, there are inadequate safety nets; poor households are characterised by few income-earners and many dependants. Secondly, there are weak support networks and disaster management systems - South Africa does not yet have a structured system of dealing with food security disasters, such as droughts or flood. Thirdly, there is inadequate and unstable household food production; hunger and malnutrition in South

Africa stem from insufficient, unstable food supplies, at the household or intra-household level. The fourth challenge is lack of purchasing power; the majority of households in South Africa lack the cash to purchase food. Finally, there is the challenge of poor nutritional status, with one child in four under the age of six years (translating to approximately 1.5 million children) being stunted due to chronic malnutrition. These challenges, at a broader level, are affecting South Africa's ability to ensure food security for its growing population.

Apart from the above, the challenges government faced concerning curbing the spread of the virus and cushioning the poor were unprecedented. Mlambo & Masuku (2020) argued that poor governance and lack of public accountability during the pandemic have been among the main causes hindering South Africa in effectively confronting and eliminating the spread of the virus. The biggest threat to the government's response to the pandemic was corruption. The corruption was not only observed within the context of awarding tenders but also when it came to cushioning the poor against starvation. Concerning food parcels, many people in some parts of the country, including government officials – councillors in particular – have been accused of stealing food parcels. Some have been accused of only giving parcels to their relatives and members of their constituencies, thereby sowing serious divisions within communities (Mahlangu, 2020). With regards to the Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme, a report by the civil society group Corruption Watch revealed how bribery, corruption, fraud and breaching of labour laws were crippling government's TERS programme (Dlamini, 2021).

In these cases, it found not just mere administrative errors, but rather deliberate acts amounting to fraud and misappropriation of resources. Inspectors were also reported to have been taking bribes to ignore labour rights breaches. Some employers in the report were alleged to have claimed the TERS using ID numbers of employees that were no longer employed by them while others were alleged to not be contributing to the insurance fund for their employees (Dlamini, 2021). The R350 special relief grant was mired in controversy. For example, it was reported that nearly 40,000 public service employees applied for the R350 special relief grant. Apart from that, more than 1,500 directors of companies doing business with the state received grants during the pandemic.

Notwithstanding the above challenges, the government's quick reaction to the pandemic undoubtedly saved thousands of lives. The government's response to the pandemic with regards to cushioning the poor has also been largely welcomed as they have been able to ensure families have the access to food that is vital for their livelihoods. However, the pandemic also revealed that South Africa still lags concerning good governance and ethical leadership in the public sector. While the relief measures have had a positive impact, they would probably have been more effective had they been administered in a corruption-free environment.

12. Conclusions and way forward

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa at a national level was food secure but the same could not be said for the household level. The South African government was quick to react to the pandemic, closing all borders and restricting the internal movement of people. However, such regulations also revealed how vulnerable in terms of food insecurity South Africans are. Lockdowns resulted in people losing their jobs, and thus income, and this meant fewer South Africans were able to afford necessities vital for their survival. While the government's response allowed for people to have access to food, they were however marred by corruption, thus limiting their true impact. Of importance however has been the observation that South African households are chronically under pressure, and that loss of jobs hinders their ability to overcome poverty. Even though the government hoped to ensure that no one would

be left behind, efforts at delivering relief floundered amid widespread allegations of fraud and mismanagement.

Hunger and food insecurity in South African households are at disturbingly high levels. However, with concerted, committed and long-term policy interventions that involve the government, civil society, community and faith-based groups, the private sector and philanthropic organisations, there is ample opportunity for the country to reverse this worrying trend. It is recommended that the government should explore additional mechanisms that would ensure food security for those who are vulnerable beyond the measures already introduced to fight COVID-19.

There is a need to revitalise the agricultural sector, increase investments and invest in new technology to ensure the sector's resistance to climatic changes. To ensure food security at a household level, a collective effort underpinned by cooperation and dedication by all stakeholders is the first step towards ensuring that the vulnerable are cushioned against future pandemics.

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