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**OPINION PIECE**

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**‘South Africa is not immune from global hunger epidemic’:**

**University of Pretoria academic sounds warning on World Food Day**

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The 2018 UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report reveals a sad and urgent reality: World hunger is on the rise again. The report shows a third consecutive year of increase, with the number of undernourished people worldwide increasing to nearly 821 million in 2017. Additionally, an estimated 1.9 billion people are overweight, with this proportion of the global population facing the accompanying risks of illness, disease and death based on their diet and health status. These alarming figures come at a time when the world actually has the capacity to produce 17% more food per person today than it did 30 years ago.

The situation in South Africa is no better, as poverty is seemingly on the rise. Statistics South Africa's 2016 General Household Survey shows 7.4 million people reported experiencing hunger. One wonders how this is possible, as South Africa is among the top ten most food-secure countries in Africa. This is determined mostly by analysing the percentage of malnourished children and the extent of external food aid. Additionally, the government has tried to support children born from unemployed parents by providing a support grant of R380 per month per child. Even though this is meant to assist in feeding the child, it is never possible as the money goes towards supporting the whole household with nothing to survive. Food security for many where people can feed themselves with dignity, have sufficient culturally available food that can be easily accessed, with enough food to meet the individual's dietary needs only becomes a dream for many living in poverty.

Clearly, the social grants are just not enough for indigent families facing malnutrition, as this is a multi-faceted condition that needs multiple interventions. Malnutrition comes about when the body is in a state where energy or nutrient intake is either deficient, excessive, or is imbalanced, resulting in undernutrition, which includes wasting (low weight-for-height), stunting (low height-for-age) and underweight (low weight-for-age).

The reality is more and more families are finding it very difficult to afford foods from all the basic food groups necessary for health such as: (i) breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles; (ii) vegetables and fruit; (iii); milk, yoghurt, cheese and (iv) legumes, lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs and nuts. Many families survive on the energy dense starchy foods such as maize meal, cooking oil and potatoes which unfortunately have no nutritional benefits when consumed on their own in excess. As much as some of the energy dense foods may form part of the array on the recommended healthy foods list, they are basically of no use without the complementing nutrients of protein, vegetables and fruit which the indigent cannot afford. Living on an energy dense, micronutrient deficient diet leads to the increase in incidences of obesity, diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular diseases (stroke and myocardial infarction). It is becoming very common to see households adopting coping strategies such as buying larger amounts of cereals and cheaper cuts of meat, having smaller food portion sizes at meal times, or even reducing the number of meals consumed in a day, which leads to development of nutrition-related diseases and, in extreme conditions, death.

This situation can have an even worse effect on children, as it impacts on children’s ability to learn. It affects their concentration, and can lead to illness and losing school time. This often leads to children dropping out before they reach high school, sentencing them to a life of poverty, unemployment, low-paying jobs, and an increased likelihood of food insecurity – a cycle that could repeat for generations to come.

Despite sufficient food being produced nationally, this does not necessarily translate into food for all. According to the South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 22.8% of South African households either had inadequate or severely inadequate access to food in 2014. The picture is the same globally – enough food is being produced to feed the world’s population, but this does not translate to food being equally distributed.

The saddest reality about the global food security scenario is that its impact is felt the most by any society’s most vulnerable people – mainly women and children, whose nutritional shortfall can be as much as three times higher than that of men. Hunger seems to be a problem of many inequalities.

How do we ensure that food is delivered to everyone, especially those that need it most? Are we doing enough? Do we have hopes for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 – ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture’ – by 2030?

No one seems to have the answer, but at least one thing is certain: taking action is no longer just an option; it has become an absolute necessity. This means a lot of effort has to go into improving food production systems, by having more people working more closely together, globally and locally. Governments also need to develop policies focused on promoting connections between social protection, sustainable agriculture, nutrition, health, and education. The ways that different sectors and local authorities work together to improve access to nutrition and nutrition education must be significantly improved in order to lower the effects of malnutrition. And finally, while these collective efforts are necessary, individuals also have an urgent role to play – we must all use natural resources more wisely, to produce nutritious diets and reduce our food waste.

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