

# Nourishing food crucial for health

World Food Day raises awareness of those who go hungry, nutrition and lifestyle diseases

Scott Drimie

**O**VER the past two decades, South Africa has urbanised at a rapid pace as people move to the cities in search of work opportunities and better living conditions.

According to StatsSA, more than 70% of our population is under the age of 40 and more than 60% live in and around the big cities.

Hand-in-hand with urbanisation comes a significant change in lifestyle in all forms – the nature of jobs, housing, community and food.

The diet of urban dwellers is distinctly different from their rural counterparts. Typically, changes include an increased intake of high-fat foods, refined grains, sugar, processed foods and takeaways, exacerbated by a decrease in exercise.

In informal settlements with little space for food gardens, nutritious food is costly and less available. Spaza shops are limited in their supply and refrigeration for storage, and grocery shops often require costly travel. Readily available are fast-foods and convenience foods that are high in calories and taste, but low in nutritional value.

Today is World Food Day, which is aimed at promoting awareness and action for those who suffer from hunger and for the need to ensure food security and nutritious diets for everyone.

Whether or not South Africa has a hunger problem is a question of debate. Nationally we produce enough food and millions do go hungry, but the extent is difficult to quantify. What is undisputed, however, is that we have a serious health problem linked to the nature of our diets.

Non-communicable (NCDs) or lifestyle diseases are among the top causes of death in the country (at around 40%) and are responsible for considerable premature mortality, with more than a third of NCD-related deaths occurring before the age of 60.

NCDs like cardiovascular diseases (eg heart attacks and strokes), cancer, chronic respiratory diseases (eg chronic obstructed pulmonary disease and asthma) and diabetes are directly linked to poor dietary intake and minimal exercise.

In 2008, more than 40% of men and women had raised blood pressure, while 46% of men and 56% of women were physically inactive and the prevalence of overweight and obesity was 58% for men and 71% for women. Raised blood cholesterol was 31% for men and 37% for women. By 2010, the number of deaths due to NCDs was similar to the number from HIV/Aids and tuberculosis combined.

Perhaps most tragic is that one in four



**IN NEED:** It's tragic that one in four South African children under three years experience stunting –reduced height for age, which is the result of poor nutrition and predisposes to later obesity, ill health, poor educational outcomes and poor earning potential, says the writer.

PICTURE: ANTOINE DE RAS

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**IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS, THERE IS LITTLE SPACE FOR VEGETABLE GARDENS, HEALTHY FOOD IS EXPENSIVE AND NOT READILY AVAILABLE WHICH CAN AFFECT PEOPLE'S HEALTH**

South African children under three years experience stunting –reduced height for age, which is the result of poor nutrition and predisposes to later obesity, ill health, poor educational outcomes and poor earning potential.

Calling on individuals to change their diets is not without merit, but in a nation like ours where millions rely on social grants to make it through the month, it's not that simple.

According to the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action (Pacsa), in order for a low-income family of seven to eat nutritiously, it would cost a monthly minimum of R4 197.31. StatsSA's latest Labour Market Dynamics Survey (2015) put the median monthly earnings for black South Africans at just R2 900. When you're scarcely living above the breadline, you're going to feed your family whatever you can afford to fill

them up.

Nevertheless, the high rate of NCDs in South Africa represents a real cost to the country. Not only does it burden the health system, it impacts on employment, social services and the GDP. In short, the issue of NCDs cannot be ignored.

Tatjana von Bormann of Worldwide Fund SA says: "Faulting consumers alone for making poor choices ignores the power of corporations to manipulate markets, prices and even taste buds."

"Recognition of the food industry's expertise at nudging people into buying and consuming its food products gives a clearer picture of why this large-scale shift towards a sugar-laden, processed-food diet is occurring. Most people are influenced by the targeted marketing, eye-catching labels, on-pack claims and the availability of many of these food products.

"Processed food and beverage companies are also genius product engineers. While sugar is found to have some of the same addictive effects on the brain as drugs, producers often go a step further and formulate products that will lead to increased consumption."

Urbanisation is a given. But what if we could change the nature of urbanisation to one that favours health? Certainly the state of health in this nation is costly enough to warrant real effort towards this end. We need all the role players – from business and civil society through to government coming on board to find a way to transform a food system, which operates sub-optimally to one that supplies nutritious, affordable food for a growing population.

• Dr Scott Drimie is director of the Southern Africa Food Lab based at Stellenbosch University

