

Rising food prices

Why no protests?

In the previous *Labour Bulletin* Katherine Joynt looked at the devastating impact of food price increases in some Soweto homes. Here she examines why, if there is a willingness to take action, people do not do so.

The previous *SALB 34.2* article showed how the impact of the increase in food prices on 40 poor households in Pimville, Soweto had been devastating. Although household strategies to cope with this rise are essential it can lead to greater isolation, household conflict, increasing demands on women's time and energy, malnourishment and disillusionment, and a sense of deprivation, marginalisation and neglect.

But is there something that can be done? I look at community strategies for addressing food price increases in Pimville and the potential for mobilisation around this issue.

WILLINGNESS TO PROTEST

The overwhelming majority of people I interviewed in Pimville were in support of protest action over increased food prices. Most believed that the community should protest to government, local council or politicians who would know why the price of food was increasing. As one said, 'We must march to Trevor Manuel. He is the person who increased everything. But he increases the food only... he doesn't increase the salary of the people.'

Others drew on their experiences of previous protests they were

involved in: 'We must go to the civic like we did for electricity and water meters. We toyi-toyed [militant chant and dance] and for that because it was too expensive and they listened to us. People go to Shoprite and when they see they have increased the price of bread and eggs they retreat. It is a suffering community.'

'It is important for the country to realise people are suffering. There is too much starvation. But sometimes striking is meaningless, like in Kimberley when we were students in 1948 we struck for rights and it never changed. It just got worse and worse every day.'

Some people were more hesitant about protesting because people would complain or things would remain the same: 'I am sick so I am scared to toyi toyi. Other people will complain. We get what we get. But yes, the community should, but who are they going to do it for? Mbeki doesn't care... he is too busy with Mugabe and in China. And Mandela? His birthday costs millions but we see nothing. What can I do when no one is listening?'

However, although 35 out of 40 people were willing to protest, 36 had not been involved in any food protests or community meetings. There are three reasons that help to explain why there was so little action on the ground around the

devastating increases in food prices.

Firstly, although there was some organisation in the community, it was minimal and top-down. Secondly, there was a lack of understanding about reasons why the food prices were increasing which would make it difficult for people to direct their struggles. Finally, the community was socially fragmented along the lines of class, gender and age divisions.

TOP-DOWN ORGANISATION

Most communal strategies to deal with the increases were top down.

The Methodist Church played a role in cooking community meals once a week for anyone, but especially orphans and HIV/AIDS patients. Their fruit and vegetables were reportedly donated by Pick n Pay and the metro police who donate food that they confiscate from hawkers trading illegally on pavements.

Food aid also came from the African Children's Feeding Scheme and the Department of Social Development who gave out food packages. The food packages from Social Development were only given to those in squatter camps and to households with members who were HIV/AIDS positive.

This left some residents bitter because they felt their situation was as desperate but were refused food

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"And Mandela? His birthday costs millions but we see nothing."

parcels. One resident was a pensioner living with her daughter and ten grandchildren on a monthly household income of R1 780. She expressed frustration that her household of 12 members was not entitled to food parcels because they lived in government housing and not a shack.

This points towards differences between living conditions of those in shacks and those in households. Households living in shacks usually had fewer members due to limited space and lack of resources such as electricity or water, while poor households living in government housing housed more members (sometimes up to 15), making living conditions crowded and resources over-stretched.

One community strategy to cope with food increase was urban agriculture in which households and schools grew vegetable gardens. This strategy was adopted by the Department of Social Development, the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Environment and the Pimville branch of the national African Children's Feeding Scheme.

Yet there has been criticism that it

is the women and elderly who usually plant and maintain vegetable gardens. This drains more of their time and energy making the social problem of increased food prices an individualised and largely gendered solution.

Nine households grew their own vegetables. However, many households living in rented backyard shacks or in the squatter camp had no land available to grow vegetables. Thus the strategy of growing vegetables needs to be implemented at a community level if it is to benefit the most marginalised groups of people. Communal gardens are more advantageous because they provide a socially-based, less isolating solution to the increase in food prices.

Almost all people who had attended councilor, church and South African National Civic Organisation (Sanco) meetings noted that their focus was on job creation and the schools in the area. These meetings were rarely on the issue of food price increases. In some cases these meetings were of no use to respondents who stopped attending.

UNDERSTANDING INCREASES

There was little understanding about the reasons behind the increase in food prices which is important information for the poor to direct their struggles and understand them as social rather than individual problems.

Some people blamed the government for the increase, believing that it was using the money to build stadiums for the Soccer World Cup. Other people attributed the increase to individual problems because they could not make enough money to afford everything they needed.

Some people were extreme, saying 'the world is coming to an end' or 'They want us to die because if we

don't eat they will find lots of people lying on the street or in the house - they just died because they have got nothing in the stomach'.

The fact that most people did not understand the reasons why the food prices were increasing is an indication that this information, along with information about government strategies to deal with increases had not been explained effectively. This resulted in frustration and furthered a sense of marginalisation and neglect.

SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

Another reason for a lack of grassroots organisation could be social differentiation amongst the working class in Pimville.

The church, which was prominent in the community, was one place which highlighted differences between the older and younger generations. One grandmother expressed her discontent with the younger generation who she believes go to church just to show off their wealth with flashy cars and fancy outfits instead of being together to worship God.

This relates to a shift towards material, individualistic thinking amongst the younger generation. Television and radio are a significant pastime for the unemployed and pensioners. In this context, media and advertising play a powerful role in aspiration building as most advertisements encourage consumption and individualism.

South Africa's high level of unemployment, particularly amongst the youth, means that profit-driven media hype often build a sense of false-hope leading to disillusionment due to the inability to attain these materialist goals. Individualism is also destructive at a time when social networks and unity are most needed as a buffer against socio-economic hardship.

Along with youth unemployment,

another social issue which contributes to crumbling social cohesion is the growth in the numbers of child-headed households. In some households grandparents looked after their grandchildren with no parents present, often due to HIV/AIDS. One grandparent, speaking about child-headed households in the area, noted: 'There is no work for the children and they struggle so they go into crime. You need experience for work. You must be 60 for a grant, but now people die young... 40. Grandmas used to maintain their grandchildren with their grant money but now it is not like before. Thanks God for the little I have but I must be with the people who need. The trouble is now the small children looking after all the grandchildren.'

One researcher, Claire Ceruti argues that social differences lie as much across gender and generation as across class. In her research, all three lines of social differentiation were present amongst the people interviewed. The extra burden placed on women was evident in the gendered division of labour within the household. The clashing ideologies between the older generation and the younger generation were evident at the church. And class differentiation even within the working class was evident between those in government housing with electricity and access to more land and those who were living in the informal settlement or in rented backyard shacks.

CONCLUSION

Ceruti argues that there is a need to 'build bridges between a divided class consciousness' by looking for a 'wider background to the immediate problems' faced by a community as a whole. This research indicates that one issue



Many houses had no land to grow vegetables – vegetable gardens need to happen at a community level.

faced by poor communities is rising food prices, an issue which cuts across gender, generation and the class divisions which exist amongst the poor.

Organisation is the key to developing this common identity amongst the poor. Yet unfortunately, the devastating impact of the increase in the price of food at household level in Pimville has been compounded by weak community-based organisation. This is contributing to social fragmentation and social unrest in the community which has the potential to implode amongst the poor, as seen in South Africa's xenophobic attacks in 2008.

In addition, the poor are disempowered as the reasons for food price increases, as well as government's strategies to deal with the increases, are not communicated effectively to the public. Engagement with communities on such issues is also essential for finding out how people are experiencing the food price increases and what solutions would be most effective in dealing with them. The local state must play a key role in performing this

communication and engagement.

Organisations such as Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and Sanco are important for empowering the poor. While the poor are often viewed as victims in the international political economy, 'the local' is a site of contestation and struggle, allowing for the poor to mobilise and reshape economic and social conditions. Cosatu's food protests in relation to food prices increases illustrates such mobilisation.

In the long term, the frustration about the food price increases needs to be channelled into sustainable initiatives such as community gardens and local projects which promote job creation. Community networks have the power to bind people together at a time when economic hardship and widespread poverty threaten to break up the most basic unit of our society, the household. LB

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