

# 'We really have to cut down on eating'

## Poverty and food prices

The price of food over the three years leading up to 2008 increased by 83% and prices continue to rise. What effect is this having on poor households? **Katherine Joynt** went into some Soweto homes to find out

**T**hirty-eight year old Nona Nema (not real name), resides in K liptown informal settlement, with six children in a small one-room shack without electricity, its walls made of corrugated iron. When I met her she was washing her laundry in a tub outside her shack with three of her children playing on the dusty ground next to her. Without running water in their homes, Nona and her neighbours make use of a few taps around the sandy informal settlement and leaking portable toilets, a long walk from her shack.

With her husband's running away and leaving them and her sister deceased, Nona supports the six children, including her grandchild. The two child grants for her sister's children make up the household's monthly income of R 420. Budgeting is a source of anxiety for Nona as she must feed the children properly daily, but still 'think for tomorrow'.

Of their monthly income, 91% is spent on food. For Nona this means that even taking a taxi to look for a job in the hope of improving her situation is a risk as the money for transport is desperately needed for groceries. Nona believes that the government must think better than

this given the rapidly increasing cost of living and her lack of a job.

Like thousands of unemployed people in South Africa, Nona is 'stranded' with harsh living conditions and little option to save and improve the well-being and future of herself and children.

### FOOD PRICE INCREASES

South Africa's high level of poverty is worsened by globally increasing energy costs and rising food prices. It is estimated that 35% of South Africa's population is food insecure and one quarter of its children under the age of six suffer from malnutrition.

The food price crisis of 2007/2008 saw global prices increase by 83% in the three years leading up to 2008, while food prices in South Africa increased by 17% between May 2007 and May 2008 alone.

According to the World Bank food price increases are likely to persist, undermining progress made in the last ten years around poverty. The United Nations has warned that continued speculation on agricultural commodities and inaction over biofuels are paving the way for a re-run of the 2008 food

price crisis in 2010 and 2011, making questions of food affordability increasingly relevant.

There has been much research on food price increases at the level of production. But how do poor households cope with food increases? Research conducted in Pimville, Soweto provides a case study on how the poor responded to food price increases in 2008 in a sample of 40 households which were headed by unemployed people or pensioners.

With the rise in food prices, the portion of household income spent on food becomes larger, detracting from the standard of living in poor households.

According to Statistics South Africa, the average national expenditure on food is 14.4% of household income. In this case study, households spent an average of 60% of their monthly income on food and 31% on bread alone. This supports the argument that household expenditure on food is a good indicator of the inequality of wealth in South Africa.

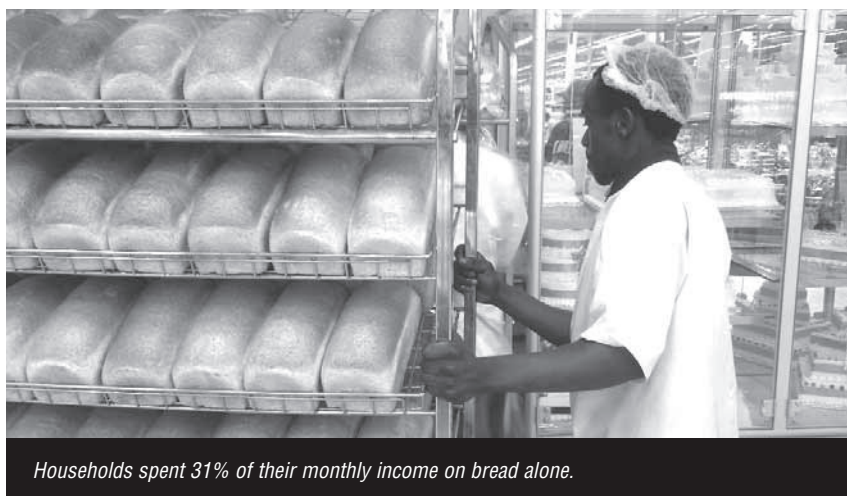
### THE HOUSEHOLDS

In the case study on average there were seven members per household (259 overall) with an average pooled monthly income of R 1 559 (approx. R 220 per member per month). In the sample, 47.5% of the households, like Nona's, relied entirely on social grants for income.

The households were mainly female with two women to every man. Disturbingly 61% of households with children had absent biological fathers.

As with Nona, the responsibility

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*Households spent 31% of their monthly income on bread alone.*

for childcare and providing food typically falls on women. Because of the gendered division of labour, women act as buffers against the impact of food increases by taking on the burden of increased domestic activities such as care for the ill, food-related conflict resolution and money-saving strategies such as sewing or growing vegetables.

To see how the poor responded to increased food prices, I asked questions about behavioural and emotional or subjective responses. Behavioural responses were actions which households had taken to cope with price increases. Subjective responses were about the meaning of increases for people in these households.

### COPING STRATEGIES

Behavioural responses in the household were related to consumption, income or production. With consumption, people reported going hungry and cutting down on meal sizes and particular products. 'I can't get the stuff that I used to buy such as vegetables I used to buy three, now I buy one. There is no money. We don't eat enough now because we must think for tomorrow.'

Income-level responses included

cutting down on 'luxuries' such as sugar, toothpaste, meat, deodorant, live chickens, oil, tomatoes, flour and milk. Some people reported that they had to wait for sales to afford food. Although it was cheaper to buy food in bulk, people said this was not an option because taxis charge as much for a big bag of food as for one person and it is difficult to carry home.

One pensioner said that she is stuck in a cycle of debt. 'From the 20th to the 31st there is no money. It becomes a problem. I needed the 5 kg mealie meal and 12 eggs. The Spaza lady knows me and gives me a loan but I must pay it back when I have money. It is like this every month.'

Finally production-level responses involved income-saving strategies such as making dumplings, sewing old clothes or growing vegetables. These strategies performed by women, highlighted the gendered nature of food price increases. 'I am cutting down, buying the small flour and the small oil. I am baking dumplings instead of buying bread. We eat less meat. I am also gardening to have mixed vegetables. The solution is for us to go back to our culture by planting vegetables.'

The children live on bread... It is so painful when they don't find

bread, then they say where is the dumpling? Then after ironing I must go and make some dumplings.'

Defensive behavioural changes in the household are necessary but unsustainable as they lead to decreased nutrition levels, hunger, a drop in the standard of living, debt and increased burdens on women to maintain households.

### MEANING OF INCREASES

The subjective meaning of food price increases is important because it links people's emotional reactions to the increase with their coping strategies. These responses included anxiety, sense of deprivation, disillusionment, conflict and confrontation and a sense of marginalisation, neglect and isolation.

Anxiety arose about the affordability of not only of food but also medication, rent, electricity and funeral cover. Other costs were often sidelined because food is essential for survival. One grandmother expressed difficulty at having to find an individual solution to the social problem of expensive public transport. 'I can't even afford to go to Bara [Baragwanath Hospital]. The little seven-year-old girl has HIV/AIDS so I must escort her, but the transport is so expensive and it is double transport for both of us. So I put her on my back to go into the taxi - seven years old. Some drivers sympathise, some don't.'

There was also anxiety because many households had only one breadwinner who felt responsible for the entire household.

People described the deprivation of insufficient food. 'We are really struggling. It causes us to starve. We have really cut down on eating. We just have to eat enough everyday to survive.'

The Johannesburg Poverty and Livelihoods Study revealed that only

27% of Johannesburg's population had 'physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs for a productive and healthy life' while 41% were severely food insecure. This significant finding points to a widespread lack of access to food in Johannesburg.

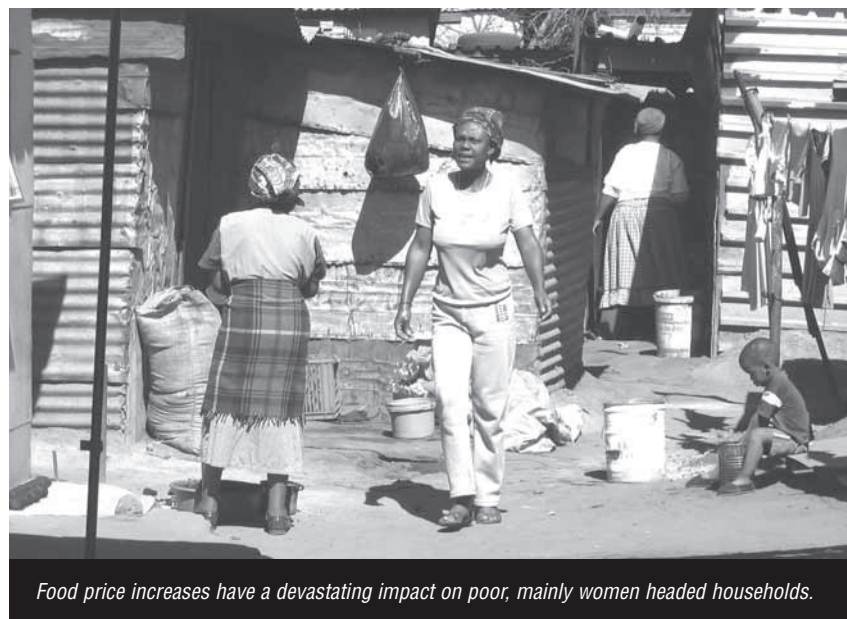
Many people expressed disillusionment because their unfulfilled hopes were increasing with the rise in food prices. 'You can't do stuff you want to do because of the food price. It makes us suffer emotionally. People could not buy what they desired; only what they could afford. This resulted in a lack of choice of food and a lack of nutritional value. They often excluded items such as vegetables and protein, leaving starchy food which was filling but lacked nutritional value.'

For some, the increase in food prices meant confrontation. One person indicated that food rationing had led to conflict amongst the children: 'We don't eat like before. It is too expensive. I have to shout at the children if they eat too much to make sure they leave some for the other one.'

I witnessed this during an interview when children were serving pap and there was not enough to go around because the teenage son had taken too much. The person I was interviewing had to resolve the argument by scolding her son and dividing up the children's servings equally.

Willingness to resist food price increases was frequent. One pensioner noted: 'If you talk of food I'm going to fight. It's hard because money is not enough. R 900 pension, what can I do with R 900? If I buy food I didn't buy clothes. If I buy clothes I didn't buy food... Maybe one day we are going to sleep with nothing. I must still pay rent.'

People felt marginalised and neglected by government and other



*Food price increases have a devastating impact on poor, mainly women headed households.*

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people who 'took no notice' of their situation. One said: 'They (government) don't care about us now. There's nothing we can say. What they have decided on, we must deal with.'

People also felt isolated from their communities and friends as sharing and eating food is central to social interaction. In some cases, the isolation occurred because members felt unable to host visitors. 'It causes problems because you can't invite visitors. Like now it's school holidays so more people come so... it is too much.'

The increase in isolation of households points to a broader problem of fragmentation in the community at a time when solidarity is most needed for people to work together and find solutions to economic pressures.

Councilor Tankiso Fafuli noted two possibilities of what can happen when the poor are struggling and their hopes shattered: 'implosion of the poor' or 'explosion of the poor'. In the first case the poor may turn inwards and fight amongst themselves, become isolated and draw on identity lines such as ethnicity. In the second instance, the poor may organise and rebel against the current system.

There are indications that

increasing isolation of households is occurring due to the increase in food prices. It suggests that households may be turning inwards to seek more 'defensive' survival strategies rather than seeking more sustainable and empowering community-based solutions. This can potentially lead to an 'implosion of the poor'.

The increase in food prices has had a devastating impact on the poor. This can be seen in the household responses that the poor, especially women, have employed to cope with increases. These 'defensive strategies' are necessary but unsustainable as they can lead to social fragmentation.

Yet rising food prices have the potential to act as a unifying factor for mobilisation in poor communities, crossing the boundaries of traditional trade union organisation between those who are employed and those who are unemployed or pensioners. LB

*Katherine Joynt was a Masters student at the University of the Witwatersrand in the Work and Development Institute when this research was done. Part two in the next issue of SALB looks at the potential for mobilisation around rising food prices.*