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When "Slow Violence" Collides with Visceral Hunger

COVID-19 and the Current and Future Food System of Cape Town, South Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated both the unsustainability and the fragility of our current food system, across multiple scales. COVID-19 has proven to be the litmus test for the current industrialized food system, one that has, in certain circles, been championed as being the only way in which society can ensure adequate global food supply (see Borlaug 2000). COVID-19 has demonstrated in very graphic ways, with dire consequences, that this enthusiasm and market dogma is flawed. For many, hunger is of greater concern than contracting COVID-19. These fundamental flaws in the food system, particularly in urban food systems, have prompted calls for drastic changes in how the food system functions.

This post blends three different food system discussions that have emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It uses these three lines of discussion to pose questions about the food system changes imagined in statements such as "building back better" and the "new normal". As a conceptual frame to support this discussion, this work borrows from the environmental writer, Rob Nixon, and his work "Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor" (Nixon 2001). The term slow violence is particularly apt as it applies directly to the current plight of many Capetonians, and South Africans more broadly. Slow violence describes the unseen, often private, inequality-driven suffering encountered by many of the poor in Cape Town. The use of the term slow violence is, however, not applied in the environmental sense, but rather as a means to highlight the outcomes of a highly unequal food system.

The concept of slow violence aligns directly with the three thematics discussed here: high levels of urban food insecurity, the historical normalization of food poverty, and

how these two issues were overlooked in the South African government responses to COVID-19, where regulations have arguably created a situation where hunger, and the resultant prospect for increased development challenges, have been exacerbated. The post concludes with a caution to overly simplistic imaginations of COVID-19 driven ruptures that ultimately result in improvements in the current food system.

COVID-19 in Cape Town

At the time of writing, Cape Town is the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa. By 11 June 2020, Cape Town had recorded 29,710 infections and 960 deaths. To put this into context, the total South African infections were 58,568 with 1,284 deaths. This meant that Cape Town had recorded just over 50 percent of total South African cases – and 13 percent of all the infections recorded across Africa (PGWC 2020, AA 2020). Initial infections were largely confined to wealthier members of society, many of whom contracted the illness while traveling internationally. However, this soon shifted to poorer communities, many living in densely packed informal settlements where community transmission took hold (Abdool Karim, quoted in Wroughton & Beara 2020). Complying with calls for social distancing and isolation is just not possible in these environments. It is the poor communities in Cape Town that are now facing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic (Joubert 2020). It is in these poor communities that apartheid histories of segregation and marginalization, a lifetime of exclusion, disenfranchisement and political neglect, encounter COVID-19. It is here where slow violence confronts the pandemic.

Slow violence is a form of violence that is incipient, that is intergenerational, where, even before being born, children are disenfranchised as a result of dietary deficiencies in the first 1000 days (Smith & Haddad 2015). Violence is often seen in instant and sensationalized ways, but ‘slow violence’ is experienced in private,

incremental and accretive ways – in ways that are often invisible (Nixon 2001: 2). This is particularly evident when one considers the state of food insecurity in Cape Town and South Africa.



Chicken traders transporting produce through dense semi-formal neighborhoods. Copyright: Masixole Feni, for Consuming Urban Poverty, reproduced with permission.

Food insecurity in Cape Town

It is important to differentiate between food insecurity and hunger. While hunger

may denote the absence of food, food security is a broader concept, described by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) as a situation that "exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO 2001: 1). It includes that there is sufficient food available, that this food can be accessed, through the market or through other forms of exchange; that utilization of food is assured through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met; and that there is suitable stability to enable planning and budgeting (FAO 2001: 1). The Cape Town case addressing food insecurity is not about ensuring that enough food is grown, it is about understanding the outcomes of the wider food system, the urban system and the urban food system.

In Cape Town, a survey applying the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale, conducted in poor communities in 2007 found far higher levels of food insecurity compared to figures provided by the state (see Shisana et al. 2013) with 80 percent of households either moderately or severely food insecure, a figure that rose to as high as 89 percent in Khayelitsha[1] (Battersby 2011: 13). Importantly the survey also enquired as to the sources of food, finding that:

"very few households (less than 5%) obtain food by growing it themselves. The dominant source of purchased food turned out to be supermarkets (patronized by 94% of all households in the previous year), followed by small shops (75%) and street food sellers (66%). … Although more households purchase food at supermarkets, daily and weekly purchases are far more likely to be made at small shops or from informal outlets" (Battersby 2011: 25).



Spaza shop (or corner shop), often the only easily accessible food retail outlets in poor neighborhoods. Copyright: Masixole Feni, for Consuming Urban Poverty, reproduced with permission

More recent surveys have found similar levels of food insecurity and market access strategies within poorer communities in Cape Town (Crush et al 2018). Despite these very high levels of food insecurity, urban areas have no urban food governance mandate, with the responsibility of food security being assigned to the national and provincial agriculture departments.

The normalization of food poverty

With such high levels of food insecurity, the logical question is: Why has there not

been civic action contesting this situation, even food riots? While this is a complex question, my position on this is that food poverty (and as a result food insecurity) has been normalized over generations. This is the result of a systemic restructuring of the economy dating back to the discovery of diamonds and later gold. This prompted laws and policies that drove land dispossession, colonial labor systems, apartheid disenfranchisement and exclusion. The end result is that food poverty has been a way of life for generations. Despite the production focus of national government, and the existing policy architecture, South Africa's food system, is in fact an urban system, one designed to ensure cheap staple foods to enable low wages in industrial jobs in cities (Bundy 1972, Greenberg 2017, Wolpe 1972). Secondly, South Africa was an early adopter of the supermarket revolution (das Nair 2018, Weatherspoon and Reardon 2003). The resultant consolidation and downstream food system changes, across almost all value chains, was facilitated by the structural changes within the South African food system that stemmed from the combined industrial policy and later Apartheid state enabled (white) farmer support structures. The deliberate apartheid and colonial dispossession and spatial management processes enabled an accelerated industrial food system transition (Greenberg 2016). "Historical injustices of people in South Africa remain geographically, socially and economically isolated from the conversation the country is having about healthy food options" (Mbalati 2019). The end result is that food poverty is so normalized that for generations a poor diet, food insecurity and the challenge of making difficult compromises to feed families, is seen as part of the everyday.

The State response to COVID-19

It was the formal and industrial food system that the South African Government, and their advisors, saw as the food system that would respond to the food needs of the country during lockdown. So much so that access to food through the informal sector, despite a wealth of evidence demonstrating the centrality of this sector in enabling food access, was expressly prohibited. The assumption was that the poor

would be able to access the food needed through the formal sector (Haysom 2020). While some of these restrictions were later lifted, the perception that the formal and industrial food system was "good" and the informal "bad" was telling. This binary was further amplified in the brutal manner that lockdown regulations were enforced through the police, with the informal sector being directly targeted (Adams 2020). However, the decline in employment, the severe restrictions placed on livelihood generation and the dramatic shrinkage of the economy has meant that many Capetonians have fallen from food insecurity to hunger (AI 2020, PLAAS 2020). The rapid fall into hunger reveals significant weaknesses in the Cape Town and South African food systems. It also asks far deeper questions of policy. It is here that the misalignment between food security policy and the lived realities of many South African households is laid bare (Caesar 2020).

Building back better and changes to the urban food system

Internationally there have been many calls for food system change, calls to disrupt the dominance of so-called big food and to actively consider more local and sustainable food systems (see Clapp 2020, IPES-Food 2020). These are essential and COVID-19 has provided a unique platform for these discussions.

However, in the case of South Africa, real caution is required. We cannot simply call for change. Far more reflexive engagement is required, engagement that considers, deeply, the structural racism, the deep injustice and the intergenerational disenfranchisement that has come before. Idealistic notions of miraculously creating local and sustainable food systems will not be possible, despite their importance, unless the social capital and solidarity that has been built in responding to the COVID-19 crisis (Rodrik & Stantcheva 2020) is effectively harnessed to find ways to actively dismantle the structures, laws, and even perceptions that reinforce the status quo.

The South African lockdown regulations effectively served to reinforce the dominance of the large food system actors. In the past this has gone unchallenged with civic agency and voice silenced as a result of normalization processes. In a perverse way, the consequences of slow violence have seen the poor themselves blamed – for making poor food choices, for ignorance, for the lack of physical activity.

The immediacy of hunger, brought on by COVID-19, accelerated as a result of poorly formulated and inadequate food system policy responses, has provided a unique opportunity to imagine a just, fair and sustainable food system. Action is required to turn these imaginations into reality. The question who drives this change is essential. The drivers of change need to be those subjected to decades of slow violence. The challenge, however, is that COVID-19 has resulted in many Capetonians falling deeper into poverty. Priorities now are to find work, support families and even survive. Placing the responsibility for re-engineering the food system on these Capetonians, those already burdened as a result of COVID-19 is equally unjust. Does the state need to step up? History demonstrates that this will not be the case.

Food system change can only come once poverty, inequality and injustice – and a racially disproportionate burden that the majority of Black South African's carry – are addressed. Equally poverty, inequality and injustice will only be addressed when the food system is more just.

How then does the food system build back better? What is required now is far greater critical interrogations of the colonial and apartheid DNA that runs through the current food, urban and economic systems. These systems need to be subjected to far greater critique before simplistic aspirations of food system change can be realized. The food system offers a unique lens to view the slow violence that permeates many communities today.

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Footnotes

[1] Khayelitsha was established in 1985 and large numbers of people were forcefully

relocated there. Today Khayelitsha is a mix of formal and informal settlements on the Cape Flats – on the outskirts of the City of Cape Town. The name is from isiXhosa meaning *Our New Home*. Khayelitsha is reputed to be the largest and fastest-growing township in South Africa.

#Witnessing Corona

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