



Child Hunger and Malnutrition Policy Brief Report



Executive Summary

Overview

The policy brief delves into the pervasive issue of hunger and malnutrition in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, focusing on systemic and historical causes that have entrenched poverty and food insecurity in the region. The document highlights the provincial government's attempts, through programs such as the Integrated Mother and Child Development and Support Programme (IMCDSP), to address severe acute malnutrition, especially in children under five. The policy brief examined the effectiveness of these interventions, noting significant gaps in policy, coordination among stakeholders, and the lack of comprehensive data to inform strategy. The ongoing challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the urgent need for more effective, community-driven, and sustainable interventions to alleviate hunger and malnutrition in the region.

Introduction

The Eastern Cape province of South Africa is characterized by severe food insecurity, with a significant portion of its impoverished population. This situation is deeply rooted in historical and systemic issues, including the legacy of apartheid, which disrupted traditional agricultural practices and led to widespread dependence on a cash economy. The policy brief further explores the province's structural poverty, unemployment, and inequality and how these factors contribute to the high rates of food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition, particularly in rural areas.

The Eastern Cape's severe acute malnutrition (SAM) rate has more than quadrupled in the previous 18 months. Last November 2023, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) revealed the findings of its investigation into child malnutrition and the right to food in the Eastern Cape. According to the research, 116 children in the Eastern Cape died as a result of starvation between April 2021 and March 2022. They were among the 1,087 youngsters who developed SAM throughout that time span. Between September 2023 and August 2024, 2,758 children in the Eastern Cape suffered from severe acute malnutrition, according to Mkhululi Ndamase, a spokesman for the MEC of Health. This is an increase of more than 1,600 documented cases since the HRC report. The new statistics concern HRC regional manager Dr. Eileen Carter, who oversaw the malnutrition study. "We are deeply concerned about the alarming increase in severe acute malnutrition cases in the Eastern Cape," she told the audience. "While this policy brief welcomes the government's continued actions and acknowledges the increased attention of government and non-state actor's players", it is evident that combined efforts are not yet achieving the anticipated effects.

The Research Problem

The problem analysis focuses on the critical issue of hunger and malnutrition in the Eastern Cape, particularly in rural areas. The problem is exacerbated by shifting from subsistence farming to a reliance on monetary income, compounded by systemic neglect and inadequate policy responses. The research highlights how these issues have worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted livelihoods, increased food insecurity, and placed additional strain on already vulnerable communities.



Objectives

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1. The primary objective of this policy brief was to assess the effectiveness of the provincial government's interventions in addressing malnutrition and hunger in the Eastern Cape.
2. To provide a critical analysis of the current strategies by:
 - a) Identify gaps in policy formulation and implementation.
 - b) To map out actors and stakeholders involved in the formulation and implementation
3. Propose more effective approaches informed by the lived experiences of the affected communities.

Methodology

A combination of ethnographic data, stakeholder interviews, and an analysis of existing policy frameworks was used in this policy brief writing. It draws on historical research, recent studies, and government reports to build a comprehensive picture of the food insecurity crisis in the Eastern Cape. The research emphasises the importance of community engagement and the inclusion of local knowledge in designing and implementing effective interventions.

Examination of Findings



Cwebe Rural Community- Mbashe LM- 03/04/24

The findings reveal significant shortcomings in the current approach to tackling hunger and malnutrition in the Eastern Cape. Despite various government initiatives, the impact on the ground has been limited, with many communities still experiencing severe food insecurity. The report identifies key issues such as the lack of accurate data on vulnerable households, poor coordination among government departments, and the over-reliance on social grants to solve poverty and hunger. The shift towards a money-based economy has undermined traditional agricultural practices, further entrenching food insecurity.

As highlighted in the ethnographic data, hunger and malnutrition have emerged as significant issues, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, research sites, notably in Cwebe and Kwelera, already dealt with challenges related to malnutrition. Factors such as poverty, limited access to food, and inadequate healthcare services contributed to the prevalence of malnutrition within these communities. Many families struggled to afford or access balanced meals, resulting in unfriendly health outcomes, particularly among vulnerable groups such as children and pregnant women.



Cwebe rural women and girls attending the project Community Workshop on Hunger and Malnutrition- 03/04/24



Findings

This policy brief is a concentrated investigation of the severe issues surrounding child malnutrition in the Eastern Cape, and the urgency of solving this issue cannot be understated. The areas we are particularly concerned about, like Cwebe, are very remote, far away from town and other resources. These areas rely on social grants, particularly the child support grant (CSG), which is crucial in supporting families. However, as we may be aware, these grants often face limitations regarding various needs, especially in the context of poverty and economic instability.

These issues worsened with the onset of the pandemic. The grants are stretched thin, forcing families to prioritize certain expenses over others, including food, healthcare, education, and other necessities. It's important to note that we're talking about families with an average size of around five per household. Therefore, these grants can only go so far, primarily when only two or three household members are supported by the child support grant, leaving the others without assistance.



Cwebe Rural Community- Mbashe
LM- 03/04/24

The researchers also noted that the pandemic exacerbated existing challenges, especially those related to hunger and malnutrition. It has been well-documented that lockdown restrictions on movement and disruptions to economic activities resulted in job losses, reduced income, and increased food insecurity in the Eastern Cape and across the country.

Additionally, the closure of schools disadvantaged children of access to school meals, stressing the significance of the school nutrition program, particularly in Cwebe. This further worsened the issue of nutrition and hunger, generally among vulnerable populations. Moreover, the pandemic strained healthcare systems, limiting access to essential prenatal and nutritional counselling services.

The lack of access to markets where fresh produce and other nutritious foods are available. A few things contribute to this, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families' ability to buy food. Poor transport and roads in remote areas like Cwebe add to the challenge, as it is expensive for families to travel to town to buy food. Despite receiving social grants, the money is often not enough to cover all expenses, leaving families unable to prioritize farming or other means of sustenance. Ethnographic data also showed that women only receive nutritional counselling services when they visit clinics due to ailments or during antenatal appointments.



However, these services are not readily available in rural areas or villages. Prior to the pandemic, an NGO in Cwebe operated independent programs addressing these issues. Due to financial constraints worsened by the pandemic, the centre closed. This closure left a gap in the communities it served, particularly in identifying individuals without access to clinics or unable to visit them. The lack of education and awareness about proper nutrition and healthcare practices also contributes to malnutrition. Across all research sites, families often lack knowledge on providing adequate nutrition.



Cwebe Rural Community- Mbashe LM- 03/04/24

Even when they possess this knowledge, financial constraints limit access to nutritious foods. Additionally, water and sanitation issues exacerbate the problem, with communities lacking access to clean water and proper sanitation. These findings are consistent across all research sites and underscore the pressing need for intervention in these areas.

The deliberations with the government stakeholders were then based on the introduction given above while learning about the programs each government department offers. This was to find areas of common interest and collaboration before going to the community workshops. The following, therefore, is the response of the various government departments that were part of the engagement.

Child malnutrition is an important and serious issue in South Africa's Eastern Cape area, requiring our collective attention. The Eastern Cape, with its distinct mix of cultures and landscapes, is confronting a crisis that endangers the health and future of its children. This policy brief seeks to untangle the many elements contributing to child malnutrition and shed light on the problem's urgency. Child malnutrition is more than a health issue; it is a fundamental violation of the rights and well-being of our society's most vulnerable citizens. The children of the Eastern Cape represent the province's future, and their health and nutrition are closely tied to its growth and advancement. Providing for their well-being is a constitutional and moral responsibility and a critical step towards creating a more equal and prosperous Eastern Cape.

This policy brief also discovered that FoodForward South Africa presented a study that shed light on the severe food poverty and malnutrition issue in the Eastern Cape, one of South Africa's poorest regions. Their non-profit organisation has been aggressively combating this issue by expanding its services to rural areas outside of Nelson Mandela Bay. This policy brief also found that Food Forward SA has successfully delivered healthy food to over 100,000 needy people in the Eastern Cape by pairing up with over 230 registered non-profit organisations (NPOs).



For the Eastern Cape Province Policy and Decision-Makers

1. Strengthen Household Profiling and Data Collection:

Establish a more rigorous system for identifying vulnerable households, especially those suffering from malnutrition. Accurate and up-to-date data is essential for targeted interventions and monitoring ongoing programs' effectiveness.

2. Expand and Support Agricultural Initiatives: Invest in programs that promote home gardening, communal farming, and sustainable agricultural practices to reduce reliance on social grants and increase food self-sufficiency. Collaboration with local agricultural research institutions should focus on improving soil fertility and crop yield.

3. Improve Stakeholder Coordination: Strengthen the coordination between provincial departments (e.g., Health, Social Development, Agriculture) to create a unified response to hunger and malnutrition. This includes integrating various programs and sharing resources for maximum impact.

4. Increase Public Health and Nutrition Education: Promote nutrition education in rural areas through public health campaigns and clinics. Ensure communities understand the importance of diversified diets and sustainable food production, especially post-pandemic.

5. Infrastructure Development: Enhance rural infrastructure such as roads, water systems, and sanitation, critical for food distribution and health services, especially in remote areas like Cwebe.

6. Based on a review of the current literature on Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM), this policy brief paper concludes that the Education and Training Committee is focused on educational and training efforts connected to food security and child welfare.

7. Furthermore, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) was discovered to be committed to increasing awareness of gender-based violence, assisting victims, and engaging with males to address fundamental causes and encourage healthy relationships. The Ethics and Clean Governance Committee promotes ethical behaviour and clean governance to eliminate food poverty and child malnutrition.



For the South African National Government

- 1. Create a National Framework for Hunger and Malnutrition Alleviation:** Establish a comprehensive national strategy for tackling hunger and malnutrition, ensuring it is adaptable to provincial needs and realities. This framework should include clear guidelines for inter-departmental collaboration, monitoring, and reporting.
- 2. Increase Funding for Rural Development Programs:** Allocate more resources to provinces like the Eastern Cape for addressing systemic poverty, particularly in rural areas. Increased funding should be directed towards initiatives promoting sustainable agriculture, infrastructure improvements, and long-term solutions to food insecurity.
- 3. Revise Social Grant Systems:** Review and enhance the structure of social grants to ensure that they effectively support the nutritional needs of children and the most vulnerable households. Implement stricter monitoring to prevent misuse of grants.
- 4. Support Agricultural Innovation and Climate Resilience:** National agricultural policies should prioritize innovation, research, and training in climate-resilient farming techniques, ensuring that provinces like the Eastern Cape can mitigate the effects of climate change on food production.



For Civil Society, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and the Private Sector



- 1. Partner with Local Communities for Sustainable Projects:** NGOs and private-sector companies should collaborate with local communities to support projects such as food production cooperatives, nutritional education programs, and community-led health initiatives.
- 2. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Rural Development:** Private sector organizations should prioritize CSR activities in rural areas, focusing on supporting education, healthcare access, and infrastructure improvements that directly impact food security and malnutrition.
- 3. NGO Advocacy and Research Support:** NGOs should advocate for policy reforms by providing government agencies with data and research highlighting gaps in current interventions. They can also play a key role in piloting innovative programs in the hardest-hit areas and scaling successful models.
- 4. Invest in Agricultural Technologies and Training:** The private sector, in partnership with NGOs, can support the introduction of modern farming technologies, soil improvement techniques, and capacity-building workshops to enhance food security and increase agricultural productivity.



Conclusion and Overall Policy Recommendations

- These recommendations focus on creating a more sustainable and coordinated effort to address the deep-rooted challenges of malnutrition and food insecurity across South Africa, particularly in the Eastern Cape.
- The policy brief further, concludes that current strategies to combat hunger and malnutrition in the Eastern Cape are insufficient and call for a more holistic, community-driven approach. It recommends the following policy actions:



Policy Action #1
Enhanced Data
Collection



Policy Action #2
Promotion of Sustainable
Agriculture



Policy Action #3
Integrated Multisectoral
Approach



Policy Action #4
Focus on Community
Empowerment



Policy Action #5
Review and Update
Legislative Frameworks

1. **Enhanced Data Collection:** Implement comprehensive household profiling to accurately assess the extent of food insecurity and malnutrition in rural areas.
2. **Promotion of Sustainable Agriculture:** Revitalize traditional agricultural practices and support home gardening and communal farming as sustainable solutions to food insecurity.
3. **Integrated Multisectoral Approach:** Strengthen coordination among government departments, NGOs, and community organizations to create a more cohesive and effective response to the hunger crisis.
4. **Focus on Community Empowerment:** Engage local communities in designing and implementing interventions to ensure they are culturally appropriate and address the population's specific needs.
5. **Review and Update Legislative Frameworks:** Modernize outdated policies and ensure they reflect current realities, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural livelihoods.

This policy brief was prepared

by

This policy brief underscores the need for urgent and sustained action to address the deep-rooted issues of hunger and malnutrition in the Eastern Cape, advocating for a shift from short-term relief to long-term, sustainable solutions.

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