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# FOOD SECURITY IN SOUTH AFRICA: PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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*This paper examines the role that local government might play in promoting food security for people living with HIV in a democratic governance context. It examines local government's role in food security through interviews with local councillors in the Tshwane area. Councillors are representatives of communities and have knowledge of both institutional mandates and community needs. Six councillors agreed to be interviewed for this research and a member of a provincial legislature added some views based on experience from years as a councillor. Of the six councillors interviewed, four were in their third terms. Their input is therefore solidly based on experience of the needs in communities.*

Approximately 240 million out of 925 million people in food insecure conditions live in Africa, around 25% of the World's total (FAO, 2010), and over 60% of the world's HIV cases occur in Africa. Around 90% of the 2.5 million children under the age of 15 living with HIV globally, are in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 2010). About 40% of children in Africa who are younger than five suffer from malnutrition, a deficiency of fat, protein and micronutrients essential for releasing required energy and maintaining physical health (IRIN, 2010). Malnutrition is deepened in HIV-positive adults as their energy requirements increase by 30% while the nutritive requirements of children double (UNAIDS, 2008a). The need for nutrition is heightened when people living with HIV go onto antiretroviral treatments. Drug regime adherence is considerably lower when food security is tenuous and nutritional content of food is low. What complicates this is the growing body of evidence that points to ART being more efficacious when people simultaneously access nutritious and healthy food (WFP, 2010a, FAO, 2009). This requires coordination between government departments to ensure that people accessing and adhering to ART treatment obtain nutritional support where necessary.

In furtherance of human security and good AIDS governance, the United Nations passed a special resolution committing governments to act on HIV (UNGASS). This was further augmented by the Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS (A/RES/60/262, para. 28) which commits signatory states to providing nutritious, safe and sufficient food suitable to people living with HIV. South Africa is a signatory of the declaration.

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## Defining food security

According to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the right to food is universal. The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) defines this right as “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. The four pillars of food security are availability, stability of supply, access and utilization” (FAO, 2005). The focus on people living with HIV within the context of food security is of particular importance as people who acquire HIV and AIDS are among definable vulnerable sectors of society (Gillespie and Drimie, 2009). According to the FAO, the purpose of food policy is to protect the most vulnerable sectors of society through integrated and comprehensive measures (FAO, 2009).

The dominant approach in the FAO document pursues the right to food in the context of self-provisioning. It recognises that individuals cannot be passive, but must actively participate in the process of self-provisioning based on a human rights approach. Furthermore, article 8.3 of the FAO food security policy guideline makes provision for people living with HIV in that it commits governments to take measures to protect their livelihoods by means of guaranteeing access to resources and protecting personal assets. The right of self-provisioning is qualified: When no other means exist, the state obligates itself to provide the means to obtain nutritious food to people living with HIV (FAO, 2005).

This places responsible and far-sighted state action at the centre of food security. The inclusion of food security into national constitutions as a right has become an issue of growing importance to food activists. The South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) stipulates in section 27 that citizens have a right to access nutritional food and places a burden on the state to make good on this right within available resources.

All the councillors interviewed for this article agreed that the right to food is an observable entitlement and that citizens living with HIV and AIDS had the same entitlement as those who are not. Aside from the universality of right, councillors indicate that people who are HIV-positive ought not to be denied their basic human rights to nourishing food.

## Lessons from the Tshwane Metro Municipality

The Integrated National Food Security Strategy (2002) suggests that greater coordination in food programming can bring about higher degrees of food security in local communities. The strategy states that “[e]nhancing intergovernmental relations and improving co-ordination among Regional, National, Provincial and Local governments in support of food security goals” would result in the necessary institutional reform required to enhance strategic food security coordination.

The indigent policy that guides local government interventions in South Africa states that, “...it is not the responsibility of local government to address the inability of the indigent to access private goods (food and clothing in particular). To the extent that the state can, or should, do something about the access to private goods by the

indigent, this is the function of national government through poverty alleviation, social security and welfare programmes” (DPLG, 2005).

From a national food security policy perspective, cash grants administered through the Department of Social Development (DSD) are seen as instrumental tools in alleviating poverty and ensuring households are made food secure. Local government does not have a clearly defined policy mandate to address food insecurity systematically in the same way as line ministries. Some municipalities have contributed to food security through various small-scale initiatives. However, these actions would be more considered special projects or community-based empowerment rather than a systematised attempt of local government to integrate itself into the national policy frameworks governing food security. Based on a simple yes or no answer, none of the councillors interviewed thought that the food security strategy was used in governmental business or that national government used its resources effectively to promote food security among the general population or among people living with HIV.

The reasons for this are many. Some of the councillors saw a lack of intergovernmental cooperation. One councillor said that it was necessary to “coordinate at all levels of government” to bring about food security for people living with HIV and AIDS. While one councillor thought that local government used its resources effectively to promote food security among the general population, another thought that unfunded mandates remained the core issue, and often service delivery functions are delegated to local government without corresponding finance. The councillor said:

*“Local government does not have sufficient monetary means to take up this matter (food security among people living with AIDS) on an organised level. In Tshwane, the previous Executive Mayor started a food bank with this idea but due to no specific obligations I think it was not a success.”*

One of the councillors said that local government can promote food security if “it has (an) allocated budget to be able do that. Local government is overregulated and it (food security for people living with HIV and AIDS) is not their core function”. While this is true, the national government tackles food insecurity through cash grants but there are large sections of the population in Tshwane that fall through the national welfare net with the mayor estimating that 213 563 households are not serviced by the national grant scheme and require some form of food aid (Ramokgopa, State of the City Address, March 8, 2011).

## Tools of local government: LEDs and IDPs

Where local government has tended to act on food security has been through Local Economic Development (LED) strategies and Integrated Development Plans (IDPs). Local government, in planning for food security, sometimes builds activities promotional of food security into their IDPs.

The New Growth Path in Tshwane’s LED mentions food insecurity and the depth of human poverty in the region but its focus is on promoting economic activities and coordinated corporate social investment. It mentions much of the social

dynamics of food insecurity but little in the way of substantive actions on the part of the Tshwane Metro.

While attaining food security in an urban setting is problematic due to the scarcity of land and the pressure that human settlements place on other natural resources, such as water and land, the general consensus is that prior local economic planning has made some provision for food security in Tshwane. The MPL interviewed for this article said:

*“Although it must be highlighted that municipalities do get involved in food garden projects under its local economic development arms, the focus is not necessarily on (people with) HIV/AIDS per se. In a lot of cases it focuses on school children. I would argue that it should not fall under LED as it is not an activity that promotes LED but should fall under the health and social department as it is a social development project. This might be a part of the problem why food security is not addressed properly by local government.”*

The Tshwane Metro IDP 2010-2011 mentions in a strategic objective that it plans to start agrarian reform and promote self-provisioning for the purposes of food security (Tshwane IDP 2010:16). Food security projects have been touted in designated zones in Rooiwater, Stinkwater, Mamelodi and Shoshanguve but these programmes have been aimed at self-provisioning. In an environment in which cash grants are the preferred mode of dealing with indigent citizens, food security among HIV-positive citizens who are unemployed and do not receive grants are left outside of state measures to assist needy individuals.

Two of the councillors interviewed indicated that food security was included in the Tshwane IDP. The remainder thought that food security was not included in the IDP. This suggests that there may be a divergent understanding of food security. Food security might be seen as a localised issue, separate from the general national characteristics of the agricultural sector, in which food parcels are doled out through the municipal welfare offices or in which food security is locally promoted through urban food gardens. The member of the Gauteng Provincial Legislature (MPL) acknowledged that the area of responsibility for food security resides with national government and “it is unfair to expect local government to fill this void as it [food security] is not part of its mandate”.

While communal assistance is enlisted to deal with HIV and AIDS-affected people in the IDP through prevention, care, support and treatment education, greater involvement of people living with AIDS in their own livelihood projects is apparently neglected. The perception among some councillors was that “government and local government are very dependent on NGOs providing the nutrition required by HIV/AIDS patients in communities”.

These views tend to support a notion that government departments and local government do not coordinate or assign responsibilities in the area of food security in a systematic way. This further frustrates local government’s issues in resource mobilisation in the absence of a clear policy and legal directives. Councillors interviewed generally tended to see targeted resource mobilisation to address community food security as poor at both national and local levels. While councillors may have different views, based on reasons of ideology or perceived assessments of performance, they regarded resource usage as ineffective. This negative view existed despite the existence

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of social security grants. Only one councillor thought that national government did right by people living with HIV and AIDS in the area of food security but it was not determined in the interviews if food security was linked in the minds of councillors to grant provision by national government.

## Challenges and way forward

Councillors generally were of the opinion that “everyone should be aware of the detail of the (food security) policy and it should be part of the IDP”. However, the view of the councillors was that “unfunded mandates of national and provincial governments are a serious financial burden to local governments in general”. It would therefore be unreasonable to burden local government with an additional function without providing an additional and sufficient income grant earmarked for the intended purpose.

It is also clear that levels of collaboration between local government and NGO service providers should be refined, as government resources are widely acknowledged to be limited. The IDP calls for targeted corporate social responsibility programmes because many mandates are underfunded at the local level. To remedy this, one councillor spoke of the ideal of collaboration among civil society, government and citizens, and said, “welfare organisations and NGOs must be directly involved (in food security for people living with AIDS) as partners of the municipality”.

One councillor made the observation that the lack of public participation was a reason why food security for people living with HIV and AIDS was not a mandated local government activity. The councillor said “public participation in meetings can help make them aware”. This points to the broader governance issue of public participation and wider collaboration between citizens and local government to solve problems such as food insecurity. Citizen participation is necessary to create the necessary political will for far-sighted action on this particular issue. The majority of the councillors interviewed were not sure if there was sufficient political will at a national level to bring about the desired end of food security in general or for people living with HIV and AIDS.

Some councillors saw food security as a national issue and expressed the opinion that there was hostility from the national government towards commercial farmers. One councillor said that “the current atmosphere at all government levels is negative and even hostile”. Another said that farmers were part of food security and the government neglected this vital economic constituency for ideological reasons. A councillor said farmers “form the foundation of all food production in the country, and therefore the foundation of any food security plan of government, local as well as national”. This councillor also suggested that violence towards farmers and the current insecurity of land tenure due to land reform and transformation policies have led to a sense among the white commercial farming community that they are not welcome in the country.

While government line departments can distribute food, and local governments can create enabling environments, it could be inferred from the councillor’s viewpoint that productive commercial farmers form the foundation of food security. Self-provisioning is intensive in terms of time and resources and individuals cannot do this as effectively as commercial enterprises. More attention needs to be paid to a coherent national

food security policy in which the roles and responsibilities of all the actors involved are clearly spelled out, understood and carried out through a policy that operates in a stable land tenure environment.

The need for institutional reform in order to bring about food security in communities is acknowledged in many commentaries and studies (Malan, 2010, Ruysenaar, 2010).

Local government only has some rough guidelines regulating its involvement in national food security and to navigate its way through the constitutionally mandated, albeit somewhat limited, obligation to provide food security. These guidelines are obtained from the National Food Security Strategy. Still, there appears to be a lack of policy to guide local government practitioners in how they go about pursuing the objectives set out in the National Food Security Policy, particularly in relation to people living with AIDS. According to Ruysenaar (2010) and Malan (2010), local government is crucial to the management of national food security but the issues at stake that influence outcomes at local level are institutional design, political will, unrealistic objectives and policy integration.

Local government has tended to think “local” in its food security obligations but there is some evidence that councillors think that food security should be approached through a coherent national framework which is presently guided by a national food security strategy. This national strategy has not made it into the policy and planning frameworks of local government and there is also somewhat of a mismatch between which local government planning instrument or strategy is used to promote local food security. Placing food security into LED strategies instead of the IDP shows some of the ambiguity around local government’s interpretation of its role in food security. This clearly suggests that local government, through the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) or the Cooperative Governance and Traditional Authorities (COGTA), should drive the national food security policy in collaboration with civil society interest groups such as associations of people living with HIV and AIDS to bring about policies responsive to the needs of local communities served by local government.

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The councillors’ solutions to food insecurity among those affected by HIV and AIDS in the Tshwane Metro can be broadly divided into three categories:

- Food security could be located in an institutional arena. This entails clear mandates, funding for those mandates and coordination between tiers of governance. This could be done through a mechanism whereby essential foodstuffs would be stockpiled for distribution to the needy in harsh economic times. As far as people living with AIDS are concerned, food security could be facilitated by means of a voucher system, with food vouchers being issued with ART medication. This would mean that the Department of Health retains its current function despite its capacity stresses.
- A partnership response between local government and civil society was seen as a way of encouraging food security among the general population and people living with AIDS, as CSOs were seen as instrumental in providing nutritional support to people living with AIDS.
- A national policy framework that supports food security at a strategic agricultural level was suggested to support any institutional or civil partnership.

The interviews with the councillors generally demonstrate that food security is not something that local government is mandated to do. While this may be true in the legislated sense, there are social obligations that local government has taken upon itself through uncoordinated initiatives in the Tshwane Metro. The Mayor established a food bank which, although a new development with some way to go in proving its effectiveness, is part of an unfunded mandate steered by no particular policy. There is not much in the way of collaboration or coordination between tiers of governance to bring about general food security or food security among people living with HIV. There is also a lack of systemic inclusion of people living with AIDS into food security activities. Teaching people to grow their own food in urban food gardens as part of an unfunded mandate is one thing, but addressing all the nutritional needs of people living with HIV and AIDS through their inclusion into the public representation in planning and execution frameworks is quite something else and this should be addressed.

## Conclusion

To meet the nutritional needs of people living with HIV and AIDS, more emphasis should be placed on coherent national food strategies. Although somewhat limited in scope, the use of the Tshwane Metro as a case study highlights the inadequate resources at its disposal to motivate for the food security of communities in its geographical area. In addition, government programmes, such as welfare under the DSD or the Department of Health can only distribute existing food products. They do not in themselves create national food security or guarantee the right of food security among people living with HIV.

Local government has no specific mandate with regards to food security and if this mandate is generalised, there cannot be an effective sectoral mandate definition and execution as embodied by HIV and AIDS. It is clear from the information provided by the councillors that food security for people living with AIDS is not a mandate of local government. If this is the case, the collaborative partnerships in which local government forms a coordinating role between national government, local civil society organisations and welfare groups should be driven by the local governments and SALGA to ensure that national government is responsive to local needs.

The space for local government to engage national government in a collaborative and cooperative way is there, providing local government has champions that see the need to promote deeper collaboration on the issues of food security. This is tied to issues of data availability at the local level and the “know your epidemic” campaign so that planning for food security among people living with HIV can be effected. Ensuring that people who live with HIV have access to nutritious food is part of the national government’s international obligations and its legislatively defined mandate. A failure to push this agenda is a neglect of a fundamental right to food and human security.

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