

Growing our own food

Nosimilo Ndlovu reports on community efforts to deal with the food crisis

Salaminah Motsoagae (23) is a single mother who lives in an informal settlement in Orange Farm, Gauteng. She lives with her mother, who is a domestic worker and the only income earner in the family.

Rising food prices have put a financial strain on Motsoagae's family, leaving them with less money than before to buy food. "We are down to two meals a day," she says.

"Things are especially tough on people in my community who are HIV-positive because they must eat a nutritional meal each time they have to take their antiretrovirals (ARVs). Most of the time there just isn't enough for them to eat and they become very ill. Our government needs a wake-up call because we cannot continue to live like this."

Motsoagae and her family are among the estimated 1.7-billion people worldwide lacking basic food security as prices soar.

It was against this background that a public policy debate was organised recently ahead of the Southern African Development Community summit in Johannesburg to raise awareness on the extent of the food crisis and explore policy options for urgent action.

Speaking at the panel discussion on food security in Southern Africa, Professor Sam Moyo says: "Food security is not about the physical availability or scarcity of food at the national and household level, but also the qualitative degree and temporality of access in relation to nourishment, social resilience and vulnerability."

Moyo says domestic food production and consumption per capita have declined and led to persistent chronic food insecurity among at least 40% of the regional African population. "These are extremely poor, both as a cause and effect of food insecurity."

Jemina Mkhize, a pensioner from eMpendle, a small rural area in KwaZulu-Natal, says she believes the government should support small-scale farmers and improve rural development as one of the main solutions to the food crisis. "I have a



fairly big yard and my house is not that big, so I am left with quite a lot of space to grow food to feed my family. I have spinach, potatoes, cabbages and pumpkin growing in my own backyard," she says with pride.

"I couldn't afford to take a bus to town every weekend to buy food — the transport was getting expensive, the food was getting expensive. I could see starvation getting closer for my grandchildren, so I decided to spend my money buying seeds to plant the food myself. Now I not only feed my own family, but other people in my community who go hungry because they cannot afford the high-priced food."

Mkhize says the people in her community are working together to secure land they can use to farm food to feed the community, adding that more and more people are opening their gates to allow community members to use their land to

Food scarcity: Salaminah Motsoagae and her family, who live in Orange Farm, are down to two meals a day.

Photograph: Oupa Nkosi

plant vegetables.

"This poverty is contributing to more people getting sick. People are weak and falling ill easily, therefore not being able to work at a time when they need all the money they can get to feed their families. If the government wants to solve [the problems of] crime, unemployment, HIV/Aids and TB, it must look at solving the food crisis."

Beatrice Mkwaila of the National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi, says the country's economy is almost entirely dependent on agriculture, which provides 85% of the population with its livelihood. She says while the estate sector is a significant contributor to the economic picture it is not the largest, "for in Malawi the largest producers are the smallest".

Smallholders constitute 90% of Malawi's farmers, but they face a range of challenges includ-

ing poor infrastructure, lack of resources, lack of access to value-adding technologies, dependency on rain-fed agriculture, increasing costs of production and unreliable produce markets.

Smallholder farmers have also been exposed to a greater incidence of droughts and floods, which have had a tremendous effect on food security. Mkwaila says, however, they are considering a number of strategies in response to these challenges, including changing the crops they grow and growing patterns, the purchase of maize at harvest time when the maize is plentiful and prices are low because of high supply and low demand, and growing drought-tolerant crops such as sweet potatoes and cassava.

Mkwaila says: "If we are to resolve the food crisis more attention and support should be provided to smallholder farmers."

There are numerous people and organisations working to end poverty, to varying degrees of success. By talking to each other and working together, we are able to multiply efforts aimed at eliminating poverty in southern Africa.

The Southern Africa Trust was therefore established in 2005 to promote and facilitate regional policy dialogue for an inclusive approach to the challenges of poverty reduction in the SADC region.

Call us on +27 11 318 1012
or go to www.southernaficatrust.org for more details.

Overcoming poverty through inclusive policy dialogue

Southern Africa Trust
Influencing Policies To End Poverty