

# “We’ll fight this little struggle”: alleviating hunger in South Africa

---

**Bright Nkrumah**

*Mphil, Dphil*

*Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of KwaZulu Natal*

## SUMMARY

In post-apartheid South Africa, citizens have on several instances resorted to the use of social protest or public dissent as a means of improving their access to essential socioeconomic amenities. The protection of citizens from chronic hunger has been a dominant theme among policy actors in South Africa, most of whom have expansive mandates to ensure citizens have adequate access to food. However, the number of people facing hunger remains high, giving rise to questions about the best approach to address chronic hunger, specifically, through social protest. Social protest, as used here, consists of struggles or resistance against government actions or inactions. Ironically, while social protest has been used on different fronts (housing, health, education and wrongful eviction), chronic hunger or lack of people’s access to adequate food hardly becomes a pivot around which protesters seek to bring about reform. Based on examples from selected countries, the discussion notes that protest is an effective tool for protecting citizens from food poverty. However, before protest could influence food policy, there is the need for mobilisation of all relevant actors to challenge existing (inadequate) food policies. The paper identified various factors that have contributed to and acted as a hindrance against food protest in various jurisdictions and examined how these factors have prevented widespread food protest in South Africa.

“Every man gotta right to decide his own destiny  
And in this judgment there is no partiality  
So arm in arms, with arms  
We’ll fight this little struggle  
'Cause that’s the only way  
We can overcome our little trouble.”<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

In terms of food sovereignty, South Africa is food-secured, with adequate calories to sufficiently feed its citizens. However, the painful truth is that in reality, it is estimated that 6.8 million South Africans face chronic hunger and malnutrition.<sup>2</sup> This paradox brings to bear two important

---

1 Marley, *Zimbabwe* (1979).

2 StatsSA “The extent of food security in South Africa” 2020 <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12135> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

issues worth examining: are the steps (policies) taken by the state (in)adequate, or are these steps poorly implemented?

Ironically, South Africa which has been dubbed as the “protest capital of the world” rarely use protest to promote one essential human need – access to adequate food. To this end, the paper seeks to provide insight on a more radical, robust approach – social protest – and how it can be used to improve human needs. The discussion also offers an analysis of why food protest is rare and offers recommendations on how it could be triggered in South Africa.

## 2 From discontent to protest

Citizens, when confronted with unjust decisions or laws, or seek to satisfy their needs, often engage in a more traditional form of political activities – including attending political meetings, persuading friends, discussing politics with acquaintances to vote in particular ways, contacting public officials, following politics in the newspapers, and working for political parties and their candidates – to the unconventional and new forms, such as blocking traffic, withholding taxes or rent, wildcat strikes, sit-ins, occupations, boycotts, demonstrations and signing petitions.

In South Africa, the country has been rocked by an increasing number of popular protests. By the end of 2019, this number has escalated to 15 957 incidents of which 11 431 were peaceful, and 3 526 turned violent.<sup>3</sup> Besides workers and students who often participate in these marches, members of political parties, civil society organisations (CSOs), residents of informal shack settlements and townships also engage in protest actions.

Overall, social protest has played an enormous role in enhancing the participation of poor people in decision-making. Although some of the numerous service delivery protests have not been very successful in compelling the government to change policy, it somewhat made an impact in the #FeesMustFall protest.<sup>4</sup> Besides the success of the student protest leading to policy change, there are three cases where social protest has been instrumental in bringing about policy change. First, following a wave of strikes by farmworkers in the Western Cape from August 2012 to January 2013, due to low worker pay of R69, the official

---

3 South African Police Service “Annual Report 2018/2019” (2019) [http://pmg-assets.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/SAPS\\_Annual\\_Report\\_20182019.pdf](http://pmg-assets.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/SAPS_Annual_Report_20182019.pdf) (last accessed 2020-04-20) 151.

4 Laccino “South Africa: Jacob Zuma announces 0% university fee increase following fees must fall protest” <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/south-africa-jacob-zuma-announces-0-university-fee-increase-following-fees-must-fall-protest-1525398> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

minimum wage was increased by 52 percent in order to end the protest.<sup>5</sup> Second, in 2007, the squatters' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo took to the streets in protest against the Slums Act, which sought to eliminate and prevent re-emergence of slums in the KwaZulu-Natal province.<sup>6</sup> After the Constitutional Court declared the Act unconstitutional in 2009, members of the movement continued with their occasional protest until the state abandoned its plans to evict shack dwellers in the province by 2014.<sup>7</sup> Third, while facing a continuing refusal by the state to implement a Constitutional Court order to make antiretroviral available, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in 2002 began a series of marches and civil disobedience campaigns against the state.<sup>8</sup> The movement only suspended its protest action in 2003 when the state initiated steps to operationalise a nationwide treatment plan, which until today, it is still in operation. These cases indicate that social protests have implication in terms of bringing satisfying human needs. It is against this backdrop that the discussion assesses why similar protest has not been directed at hunger, given that millions are chronically hungry.

### 3 Protesting for food

Protesting for food or food protest (as it is commonly called) is a spontaneous reaction to hunger.<sup>9</sup> It may also be defined as an event of mob violence or unrest relating to food.<sup>10</sup> In addition, it could be interpreted as the struggle between the hungry population and government over food.<sup>11</sup> To this end, the paper will define food protest as individuals confronting the state to provide them with (subsidised or free) food. These contentions often take the form of food looting, parading effigies, burning tyres and singing.<sup>12</sup> In order to attract popular support and media attention, these rebellious acts are usually located in common public places, such as busy streets, market places, government departments and the office of the president.<sup>13</sup> This rebellion of the poor can be considered as defensive conducts, used by citizens to enforce

5 SA History "Western Cape 2012 farm workers' strike" <http://www.sa-history.org.za/article/western-cape-farm-workers-strike-2012-2013> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

6 Provincial Act No. 6 of 2007.

7 *Abahlali Basemjondolo Movement SA and Another v Premier of Kwazulu-Natal And Others* (1874/08) [2009] zakzhc 1; 2009 (3) SA 245 (d).

8 Friedman & Mottiar "A rewarding engagement? The treatment action campaign and the politics of hiv/aids" (2005) 33(4) *Politics & Society* 533.

9 Erdkamp "A starving mob has no respect" urban markets and food riots in the roman world, 100BC-400 AD" (1971) 50 *Past and Present* 77.

10 Bohstedt *Riots and community politics in England and Wales, 1790-1810* (1983) 57.

11 Schneider *We are hungry! A summary report of food riots, government responses, and states of democracy in 2008* (2008) 12.

12 Bohstedt *Crowd actions in Britain and France from the middle ages to the modern world* (2015) 103.

13 Patel *International encyclopedia of revolution & protest* (2009) 7.

their constitutionally guaranteed rights, which they consider as being denied by their government.

The next section sets out the factors which might enable or hinder food protest in South Africa by drawing inspiration from other countries. It is divided into two parts, section provides a mapping of the material factors and while section B discusses the procedural factors which could induce or limit the upsurge of food protest. It must be stated that factors set out below are not exhaustive, considering that some individuals could utilise an unrelated (food) protest to press for their right to food.

### 3 1 Material factors

Material factors constitute those circumstances or events that can the foundation for citizens’ discontent. Such factors include food shortage, lack of access to social security, poor food rations and poor socioeconomic condition. The discussion takes a brief look at how these factors triggered food protest and whether such factors are prevalent in South Africa.

#### 3 1 1 Food shortage

Food shortage may refer to scarcity (persistent lack) of food. A lack of access to food, due to cut in crop yields or inability to meet demands for sufficient quantity is a recipe for food protest. This assertion is underpinned by the 1789 French revolution, which was inflamed by a “disastrous harvest and famine”.<sup>14</sup> During the course of the protest, the food poor attacked traders, shopkeepers, and farmers as a means of pressuring them to reduce the prices of their foodstuffs. This approach in the words of Charles Tilly is termed *taxation populaire* i.e. a circumstance where the actors in the food supply chain are forced to pay “popular tax” by incurring a loss or forgoing a profit due to the price ceiling imposed by the protesters.<sup>15</sup>

Equally, British India experienced a sequence of famine from 1860-1877 which caused loss of lives.<sup>16</sup> The resultant high mortality rate created political discontent which generated into full brown food protest in India in 1880. To end the hunger and restore peace, the British officials in 1880 formed the Indian Famine Commission to find short, medium and long-term relief to the hunger situation in the Raj, which led to the adoption of the 1883 Famine Code.<sup>17</sup> The Indian Famine Code was one of the earliest hunger interventions.<sup>18</sup> The Code identifies three phases

---

14 Rudé *The crowd in history* (1964) 18.

15 Tilly “The food riot as a form of political conflict in France” (1971) 2(1) *J of Interdisciplinary History* 25.

16 Bbrennan “The development of the Indian famine codes personalities, politics, and policies” *Springer* 91.

17 Bowbrick “The causes of famine: a refutation of professor Sen’s theory” (1986) 11(2) *Food Policy* 105.

18 Waal “Social contract and deterring famine: first thoughts” (1996) 20(3) *Disasters* 194.

of food insecurity: famine, scarcity, and near-scarcity.<sup>19</sup> “Famine” was defined as the increase in the prices of food to above 140 percent, widespread mortality, and the movement of people in search of food.<sup>20</sup> “Scarcity” was perceived as large populations in distress due to three successive years of crop failure, crop yields of one-third or one-half normal.<sup>21</sup> By presenting an early warning system to detect and respond to food shortages, this famine code was one of the first attempts to predict famine.<sup>22</sup> The Famine Commission also set out in the Famine Code that artisans and agricultural labourers’ loss of wages from lack of employment were principal causes of food shortages and price spikes. The Famine Code further relied on open-ended public works in order to apply a strategy creating jobs for these sections of the population.<sup>23</sup> In independent India, the Famine Code has been updated and renamed as the Bombay Scarcity Manual. Famine or shortage of food is therefore an important trigger of food protest. Unlike these cases, the availability of food in the South African market could be argued as preventing the rise of food protest in the country.

### ***3 1 2 Liberation and redistribution: Social grants in South Africa***

Before and during the early 20th century, while some states (New Zealand and Australia) institutionalised some form of social assistance, which provided financial or direct food supply to children whose parents or caregivers were unemployed, others did not.<sup>24</sup> The burden of providing food for children, in some instances, rested squarely on the aged, disabled and single or widowhood mothers, some of whom found it difficult to provide for their households. A price hike in food therefore worsened their already difficult economic condition and spurs discontent among the already cash strapped households. Three of such food protests occurred in 1917 in New York, 1918 in Barcelona and 1924 in Toronto.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, in the last century, rising food prices without concomitant social welfare sparked food protest in several African countries such as Senegal in November 2007, Morocco in September 2007, Mauritania in November 2007, Madagascar in May 2008, Guinea Conakry between

19 Mayer “Coping with famine” (1974) 53(1) *Foreign Affairs* 98.

20 Stone *Canal irrigation in British India: perspectives on technological change in a peasant economy* (1984) 217.

21 Passmore “Famine in india an historical survey” (1951) 258 (6677) *The Lancet* 303.

22 Sen *The balance between industry and agriculture in economic development* (1988) 105.

23 Kalpagam “Colonial governmentality and the ‘economy’” (2000) 29(3) *Economy and Society* 418.

24 New Zealand established social security as early as 1898. McClure *A civilised community: a history of social security in New Zealand 1898-1998* (2013) 1.

25 For a detailed discussion of these protests, see Frank “Housewives, socialists, and the politics of food: the 1917 New York cost-of-living protests” (1985) 11(2) *Feminist Studies* 258.

January and February 2007, Côte d’Ivoire in March 2008, Cameroon in February 2008, Burkina Faso in February 2008 and Algeria January 2011.<sup>26</sup>

In sharp contrast to the norm of the 20th century New York, Barcelona and Toronto, as well as above African countries, South Africa has a range of social assistance programme, which arguably prevents citizens from taking to the streets in search of food protest. It is important to indicate that the various forms of grants (namely old age, war veterans, grant in aid, child support, care dependency, foster care and disability grants) serve as a means of acquiring some quantity of food and have therefore kept beneficiaries and their dependents off the streets.

### ***3 1 3 Politics of the pantry: Food rations***

In the course of the World War II, there was food protest during the German military occupation of northern France.<sup>27</sup> This particular protest erupted because of the perceived injustices in the allocation of rations, and/or the inadequacy of the allotted food rations. These protests occasionally involved large crowds, ranging from dozens to hundreds of women (and often accompanied by their children) from the immediate village, neighbourhood, or community, who gathered in front of the mayor’s office (locally responsible for the distribution and rationing system).<sup>28</sup> Generally, the demonstrators were (in a limited way) successful, obtaining redress in the form of a temporary soup kitchen or an extra distribution of food. Thus, where a state is responsible for the direct provision of food, and such a provision abruptly stops, the citizens will mobilise themselves into a collective force to demand a continuation of such practice.

Similar factor triggered protest in Venezuela in May 2016. In the case of Venezuela, residents of Caracas were informed the state was coming to provide chicken meat and queues were formed. When two trucks finally arrived, national security guardsmen instructed the trucks to drive to another town, which instantly sparked anger and mass protest for food.<sup>29</sup> However, in democratic South Africa, the government does not directly provide food, but rather indirectly provides rations in the form of

---

26 In the case of Morocco, the government was forced to cancel a 30 percent hike in price of bread. Sneyd, Legwegoh & Frazer “Food riots: media perspectives on the causes of food protest in Africa” (2013) *Food Security* 6.

27 Taylor *Between resistance and collaboration: popular protest in northern France, 1940-45* (2000) 73.

28 Steinert *Food and conflict in Europe in the age of the two world wars* (2006) 266.

29 Felicien, Schiavoni & Romero “The politics of food in Venezuela” (2018) *Monthly Review* 15.

grants and zero-taxation on some food items, which has arguably hindered the protest on grounds of unjust allocation of food.<sup>30</sup>

### 3 1 4 *Hunger Pangs and failure to thrive*

It is important to indicate here, that hunger does not always lead to food protest (with South Africa being a case in point).<sup>31</sup> To some journalists and political scientists new to the field of starvation, food protest is triggered by the hungriest people. This assertion, however, seems to lack proof. To the contrary, extreme hunger appears to weaken the hungry and starved.<sup>32</sup> The non-involvement of the chronically hungry in the 2008 food protests in Haiti underscores this assertion. The centre of the protests was in the city of Les Cayes.<sup>33</sup> Protesters started by looting food markets as well as trucks of grain.<sup>34</sup> Ironically, in the course of this protest, one of the capital's largest slums, Cité Soleil, remained uninterested.<sup>35</sup> One resident when asked about the community's lack of interest explained that "[m]any people just don't have the energy to take to the streets"<sup>36</sup> Yet, in responding to the pressure from the masses through a televised address to the nation, President Rene Préval announced an emergency plan to reduce the price of food by intimating that the "international aid money would be used to subsidise the price of rice and that the private sector had agreed to reduce the cost of each bag by \$3 [15 percent]".<sup>37</sup> The Haitian example demonstrates that hunger can weaken people's physical and mental ability to resist unfair treatment and agitate for reform.

The chronically hungry alone, as shown in the case of Haiti, lacks the energy to mobilise and embark on food protest. In cases where food

- 
- 30 South Africa has zero-taxation on some foodstuffs, namely, lentils, frozen or fresh vegetables and fruits, eggs (from hens), edible legumes and pulses, dried mealies, dried beans, cooking oil (excluding olive oil), canned or tinned pilchards, samp, rice, milk, maize meal, brown bread, and brown bread flour. Yet, these foodstuffs lose their zero-taxation status once they are sold as part of meal, refreshment or prepared further for sale. Therefore, processed fruit or vegetables attract the standard vat rate of 14%. Mzizi "Did you know: only these 14 foodstuffs are zero-rate accounting and tax club" (2014) [www.accountingandtaxclub.co.za](http://www.accountingandtaxclub.co.za) (last accessed 2020-04-20).
- 31 Auyero & Moran "The dynamics of collective violence: dissecting food riots in contemporary Argentina" (2007) 85(3) *Social Forces* 1346.
- 32 Holt-Gimenez & Patel *Food rebellions: crisis and the hunger for justice* (2012) 5.
- 33 Collier "The politics of hunger-how illusion and greed fan the food crisis" (2008) 87 *Foreign Affairs* 67.
- 34 The peacekeepers were perceived as foreign invaders.
- 35 Al Jazeera "Morocco rolls back bread price hike: violent protests force government to withdraw 30 per cent hike in bread prices" (2007) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2007/09/200852514458769269.html> (last accessed 2020-04-20).
- 36 Brown "The great food crisis of 2011" (2011) 10 *Foreign Policy* 5.
- 37 Al Jazeera "Haiti Senators vote to remove PM" <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2008/04/2008614233825448819.html> last accessed 2020-04-20).

protest has been successful like in Egypt, a broad range of actors (students, lecturers, lawyers and NGOs) come together to confront the government on food-related issues. However, since some of the food poor lack the ability to protest, the chronically hungry are demobilised. This perhaps explains the reason why some of the people confronted with chronic hunger have not embarked on food protest in South Africa.

## 3 2 Procedural factors

Procedural factors refer to the actors who galvanise or incite (food) protest, including political representatives, the media, civil society organisations (CSOs), the courts and charismatic leaders.

### 3 2 1 (*Two faces of*) CSOs

The 2007 Egypt food protest was triggered not by spontaneous urban protesters, but by existing labour movements and non-governmental organisations (including students and organised associations).<sup>38</sup> These networks collectively acted to counter excessive price hikes in bread.<sup>39</sup> In this case, when the workers from Mahalla factory complained of inadequate access to bread as a result of its high price, the Cairene opposition movements readily partnered with them to trigger a strike. The protest achieved national prominence when dozens of students and faculty members from Cairo and Helwan Universities joined the strike in solidarity. Members of the Bar Association who joined the protest chanted ‘The strike is legitimate against poverty and starvation’, and spent several hours providing free legal services to arrested protesters.<sup>40</sup> In light of the gravity of the situation, Egypt’s neoliberal prime minister, in just two days rushed to Mahalla to cut a deal for wage increases and renewed food subsidies. Between 2007 and 2008, the government increased its food and fuel subsidies by more than 20 percent.<sup>41</sup> This improvement, in many ways could be interpreted as a tactical victory for social protest.

The Indian experience is also uniquely relevant for this section as it represents a typical role of right to food movement in triggering food protest. On the morning of 16 September 2007, while the leaders of the Communist Party of India were educating the Radhamohanpur villagers in West Bengal on the negative effects of the Indo-US nuclear agreement, the villagers spontaneously requested the party leaders to provide food grains instead.<sup>42</sup> This incident intensified when a CSO, termed the Rights

---

38 Bienen & Gersovitz “Consumer subsidy cuts, violence, and political stability” (1986) 19(1) *Comparative Politics* 25.

39 Beinin *The journey to Tahir: revolution, protest, and social change in Egypt* (2012) 92.

40 Wimmen & Al-Zubaidi *Democratic transition in the Middle East: unmaking power* (2013) 109.

41 Harrigan & El-Said *Economic liberalisation, social capital and Islamic welfare provision* (2009) 85.

42 Birchfield & Corsi “Between starvation and globalization: realizing the right to food in India” (2009) 31 *MJIL* 691.

to Food Campaign (RFC) took to the streets to oppose the rising inflation of food.<sup>43</sup> The RFC was particularly active in this light, especially by given a particular form and visibility to high food prices, which have historically been a political issue in India.<sup>44</sup> As a short-term response, the state government suspended the operations of 113 grain dealers who were accused by the demonstrators as inflating grain prices.<sup>45</sup>

Akin to West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh also had its share of social movement activism around the right to food as well as activating accountability for chronic hunger.<sup>46</sup> Here, right to food movements tied increasing food prices to a range of other issues such as declining access to local food sources and rising cost of living. With malnutrition being an acute issue, the national media on several occasions was used as a platform to draw political representatives' attention to the prevalent malnourishment. The West Bengal riot was rooted in the price difference between market and subsidised grains. In early 2012, prices of wheat (which previously were lower in the market) increased due to inflation, the villagers turned to the state's subsidised wheat. The people, however, became discontent when owners of ration shops alleged that the wheat were unavailable, because of central government's imposition of quotas. Mobilised and led by RFC activists, the villagers protested by accusing ration shop owners of corruption and demanded that they replenish the supplies they had diverted to the open market. The central government responded in a form of a reduction in the price of rice allocated through Public Distribution System (PDS) as well as providing larger allocations of subsidised wheat.

After the protest, the RTC launched a campaign demanding the adoption of a comprehensive food security policy. This campaign did not only gain national prominence, but attracted the attention and support of hundreds of grassroots social movements.<sup>47</sup> The central government's policy response was significant: it finally adopted the 2013 National Food Security Act (also termed Right to Food Act).<sup>48</sup> The major aim of the Act is on the one hand, to convert into legal entitlements existing food

---

43 Niehaus & Sukhtankar "The marginal rate of corruption in public programs: evidence from India" (2013) 104 *JPE* 54.

44 Rah, Gard, Naidu, Agrawal, Pandey & Aguayo "Reaching the poor with adequately iodized salt through the supplementary nutrition programme and midday meal scheme in Madhya Pradesh, India" (2013) 91(7) *BWHO* 540.

45 Singh, Park & Dercon "School meals as a safety net: an evaluation of the midday meal scheme in India" (2014) 62(2) *EDCC* 275.

46 Bhagwan, Rani & Joshi "National food security act, 2013: retrospect and prospect" (2014) 4(6) *ACADEMICA* 171.

47 Hossain, Brito, Jahan, Joshi, Nyamu-Musembi, Patnaik, Sambo, Shankland, Scott-Villiers "'Them belly full (but we hungry)': food rights struggles in Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique" Synthesis report from DFID-ESRC research project "Food riots and food rights" (2014) *Brighton* 21.

48 DDFPD "National Food Security Act 2013" <http://dfpd.nic.in/nfsa-act.htm> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

security programmes, and on the other, provide subsidised grain to around two-thirds of the country’s 1.2 billion population.<sup>49</sup>

The striking feature of the Act are its Midday Meal Scheme (MMS), the Integrated Child Development Services scheme (ICDS) and the PDS. The MMS is a state-run school meal programme designed to enhance the nutritional values of children by supplying free lunches on working days for pupils in lower and upper primary classes in various schools.<sup>50</sup> The programme provides “adequate nutritious food” to 120,000,000 children in over 1,265,000 schools.<sup>51</sup> The ICDS on the other hand is a government welfare scheme, which aims at fighting malnutrition by providing food to children less than 6 years of age and their mothers.<sup>52</sup> The programme seeks to provide nutritional food to mothers of young children, reduce instances of mortality, and raise the health and nutritional level of poor Indian children below 6 years of age.<sup>53</sup> Established by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution, the PDS distributes subsidised food and non-food items to the impoverished.<sup>54</sup> The most basic of these commodities are staple food grains which includes rice, sugar, wheat, as well as kerosene (through a network of ration shops or fair price shops established across the country). Whereas the PDS reaches approximately two-thirds of the population (50 percent in urban areas and 75 percent in rural areas), the MMS and ICDS are universal in nature.<sup>55</sup> The Right to Food Act equally recognises maternity entitlements.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, pregnant women, lactating mothers and certain group of children are eligible for free daily meals.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, 50 percent of the urban population and 75 percent of the rural population are entitled to 5 kilograms for three years at US\$4.5 (R66), US\$ 3.0 (R44), US\$1.5 (R22) per kg of rice, wheat and millet, respectively.<sup>58</sup> It was in this light that Drèze affirmed that the Act

- 
- 49 Pradhan “Fiscal sustainability of India’s National Food Security Act 2013” (2015) 9(2) *Margin* 133.
- 50 Ali & Akbar “Understanding students’ preferences on school mid-day meal menu in India” (2015) 117(2) *BFJ* 805.
- 51 Hrivastava, Shrivastava & Ramasamy “The mid-day meal scheme: a holistic initiative to augment the nutritional and educational status of the children” (2014) 28(1) *JMS* 38.
- 52 Anand, Rahi, Sharma & Ingle “Issues in prevention of iron deficiency anaemia in India” (2014) 30(7) *nutrition* 764.
- 53 Jain “India’s struggle against malnutrition- is the ICDS program the answer?” (2015) 67 *World Development* 72.
- 54 Kishore & Chakrabarti “Is more inclusive more effective? The ‘new style’ public distribution system in india” (2015) 55 *Food Policy* 117.
- 55 Khara “Mid-day meals: looking ahead” (2013) 48(32) *EPW* 12.
- 56 Hossain “Building responsible social protection in South Asia India’s food security act as a new direction” 2014 34(2) *SAR* 133.
- 57 Babu, Gajanan & Sanyal *Food security, poverty and nutrition policy analysis: statistical methods and applications* (2014) 7.
- 58 Jayaraman & Simroth “The impact of school lunches on primary school enrolment: evidence from India’s midday meal scheme” (2015) 117(4) *SJE* 1176.

“is a form of investment in human capital. It will bring some security in people’s lives and make it easier for them to meet their basic needs, protect their health, educate their children, and take risks.”<sup>59</sup>

In sharp contrast to South Africa’s current special needs based system of social grants, one distinguishing feature of the 2013 Act worth citing is its universal approach to food distribution. The focus of the Indian Act (unlike the 2004 South African Social Security Agency Act) is to address the hunger needs of more than 194 million food poor Indians by providing rice, wheat and coarse grains to each individual at subsidised rates.<sup>60</sup> The adoption of similar Act in South Africa would undoubtedly go a long way in addressing the food needs of millions in the country.

The success of local leaders in mobilising the food poor may be linked to their networks with the state and national level actors, which also offered the organisation access to media networks, new repertoires of action (including public hearings), mobilising strategies and new sources of information, which enabled the organisation to punch above its weight. Though lack of nutrition was the main trigger of the protests, political opportunities (rarely predictable) created new spaces for public action.<sup>61</sup> Hundreds of such grassroots groups at the national level provided support and legitimacy to the Right to Food campaign thereby enabling it to press for a comprehensive right to food policy, in the form of the National Food Security Act, which guarantees a range of entitlements to food through government led programmes.<sup>62</sup>

It must be noted that whilst the passage of legislation does not guarantee an automatic eradication of chronic hunger, it has at least moved one step towards the robust food politics, and citizens could invoke the provisions to justify any future legal suit for violation of their right to food. The achievement of this feat by the campaign was partly made possible in light of its simultaneous and constructive stance.<sup>63</sup> Whiles the NFSA has opened up new possibilities in the fight against the eradication of chronic hunger, the country is still a long way from addressing structural inequities (including restrictions on access to natural resources, gender relations, land and agrarian crisis, which are mainly responsible for people’s impoverishment.<sup>64</sup> This development creates the impression that the Food Act was merely to contain popular

---

59 Drèze “The food security debate in India” <https://www.worldhunger.org/the-food-security-debate-in-india-opinion/> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

60 FAO, IFAD & WFP *Meeting the 2015 international hunger targets: taking stock of uneven progress* (2015) 46.

61 Kotwal & Power “Eating words: a discourse historical analysis of the public debate over India’s 2013 National Food Security Act” 23(3) (2015) *On the Horizon* 174.

62 Lang & Heasman *Food wars: the global battle for mouths, minds and markets* (2015) 61.

63 Kaur “Food security in India-some issues and challenges” (2014)4(11) *EIJMMS* 14.

64 Manhas & Dogra “Awareness among Anganwadi workers and the prospect of child health and nutrition: a study in integrated child development services (ICDS)” (2012) 14(2) *Jammu & Kashmir* 172.

discontent rather than ameliorate universal food distress.<sup>65</sup> The Indian experience indicates that to varying degrees, citizens place accountability for hunger squarely at the doorstep of the government; and public authorities, at least rhetorically, acknowledge this obligation.<sup>66</sup> The institutionalisation of such accountability ultimately occurred through the entry into force of the 2013 National Food Security Act.<sup>67</sup>

South Africa, unlike India, lacks effective right to food movements or non-governmental organisation (NGO) which advocates for the right of the food poor. In South Africa, there is arguably no clear-cut social movement or NGO, which advocate or represents the interest of the chronically hungry in South Africa. This factor has limited the prospect of the community of the food poor to mobilise and protest for adequate food in South Africa. It is therefore important that the few CSOs with right to food related mandated (Oxfam, Ekurhuleni Environmental Organisation, Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute) engage in more active engagement with the government to advance the rights of the constituency they seek to represent.

### ***3 2 2 Wave propagation and protest***

The media in Kenya played a critical role in disseminating information and raising awareness on the impact of rising prices of food on the poor in both rural and urban centres. The country suffered from an annual rate of food price inflation as high as 27 percent in 2008, because of poor harvests nationally and rising food prices globally. This, and perceived lack of government intervention, triggered food riots nationwide, the most memorable and visible being the *Unga Revolution* in 2008.

When food prices shot up yet again at the beginning of March 2008, members of the *Bunge la Mwananchi*, (the ordinary people’s parliament’) used the electronic and print media as a tactic to agitate loudly about the rising cost of living, especially food prices. Among the numerous messages advanced by the agitators was that government policies encouraged larger producers of maize, Kenya’s staple food to be exported rather than sold locally for higher profits. It is however not clear whether this argument had merits since Kenya, by 2008 relied heavily on imports from Uganda, Tanzania and beyond for maize in light of its poor local harvest. Nonetheless, the media gave wide coverage to the weekly outdoor debates and campaigns of activist leaders in low-income neighbourhoods. On 31 May 2008, similar campaigns by *Bunge la Mwananchi* in Nairobi and other city centres attracted local residents and

---

65 Khera *Global economic cooperation* (2016) 73.

66 Niehaus & Sukhtankar “The marginal rate of corruption in public programs: evidence from India” (2013) 104 *PubEc* 52.

67 National Food Security Ordinance, No. 7 of 2013, 5 July 2013.

sparked protest when television and radio stations (such as the Citizen, NTV, Kiss FM, and Radio Jambo) broadcasted widely their campaign.<sup>68</sup>

Like in Kenya, the media in South Africa function in an environment where the press is guaranteed the freedom of expression and free from government manipulation. The media has, to some extent, attempted to draw the public's attention to the discontent or protest action of a group seeking to oppose certain measures, which might affect their jobs. An example of such coverage is found in *BusinessDay*, which covered the demonstration of poultry workers belonging to the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) who protested against imports of frozen chicken.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, this demonstration does not meet the threshold of food protest for three reasons: first, the demand did not address the question of lack of food or high food prices; second, it was not directed against the government but the European Union to cease dumping chicken in the country; third, it was composed of only members of FAWU and therefore lacked popular support. The *Sunday Times* published an article, which details how South Africans are being driven into debt because of spiralling food prices.<sup>70</sup> Since this article shifted its focus to unhygienic food rather than emphasis on rising food prices and how this can be addressed, it merely argued that escalating food costs affects diets and the health of consumers', it could not serve as the rallying point around which the food poor could mobilise. Finally, the *Citizen's* story of Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) students demonstrating against the selling of *unhealthy* food in February 2017 was significant. The memorandum of grievances to campus management alleged that the food is "crappy" and "doesn't even look appetising".<sup>71</sup> Although this food related protests were reported by these newspapers, they were not widely broadcasted by the media (specifically TV and radio stations) to transform the local protest into a national (large-scale) food protest.

### ***3.2.3 Courts and hunger: the hollow hope***

With the entry into force of a new Constitution in 2010, the right to be free from hunger, and to have adequate food of acceptable quality' was for the first time guaranteed to all Kenyans. With the failure of the state to fulfill this obligation, the Consumer Federation of Kenya (COFEK) in 2011 filed a legal case against the government for failing to reduce high food prices and looming food shortage. When the court ruled that the

---

68 Downing *Radical media: rebellious communication and social movements* (2001) 43.

69 M Allix "FAWU workers protest against chicken dumping" *businessday* <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/business-and-economy/2016-11-25-fawu-workers-and-their-employers-protest-against-chicken-dumping/> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

70 Govender "Spiraling food prices driving south Africans into debt" <https://www.radiofreesouthafrica.com/spiralling-food-prices-driving-south-africans-debt/> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

71 African News Agency "TUT students protest against 'unhealthy' campus food" (15 February 2017) *The Citizen*.

rising cost of food is not the fault of the state and therefore dismissed the application), urban slum dwellers in the capital, Nairobi, felt a mix of outrage and despair, and therefore thronged the streets calling for lower food prices.<sup>72</sup> The state, in an attempt to calm the situation, lifted the 50 per cent import tax on all grain imports, which subsequently reduced the price of food.<sup>73</sup> In order to avoid a relapse of similar protest, the government instituted (with the assistance of donors) a hunger safety nets programme (in the form of conditional cash transfers) for those living with HIV/AIDS, orphaned and vulnerable children, and the elderly.<sup>74</sup> Besides having a limited coverage (as it excludes other groups such as the disabled, refugees and the unemployed), the heavy dependence of the programme on donors raises serious concern over its sustainability.<sup>75</sup> It is important to indicate that the acceptance of the case by the court in this case served as an eye-opener for the poor, most of who were not aware of their constitutional right to food. Courts therefore have an essential role to play in the interpretation of the right to food to citizens through litigation.

In contrast to Kenya where the right to food was only introduced in the 2010 Constitution, there has not been a single case brought before the South African Constitutional Court or other courts seeking for enforcement of the right to food since the entry into force of the 1996 Constitution. The series of cases which have been brought before the lower courts dealt mainly with social grants or land related issues, but not similar to the *COFEK* case which called on the court to intervene in high food prices. The lack of legal case in South African on the right to food has limited dissemination of information on this right, and perhaps, prevented the rise of food protest. However, as discussed above (specifically in the *Abahlali Basemjondolo Movement SA* and *TAC* cases), some successful protest action in the country has been linked to litigation.

### ***3 2 4 Empowerment and dependency: the leadership factor***

The Mozambique food protest suggests that the involvement of charismatic leaders in society in the fight against hunger can equally trigger food protest. In 2010, after the state’s announcement of price hikes in state-regulated goods such as bread and rice,<sup>76</sup> rap musicians openly satirised government officials as out of touch with the hardships

---

72 Verpoorten, Arora, Stoop & Swinnen “Self-reported food insecurity in Africa during the food price crisis” (2013) 39 *Food Policy* 60.

73 De Janvry & Sadoulet *The global food crisis: identification of the vulnerable and policy responses* (2008) 13.

74 Schiffman “Hunger, food security, and the African land grab” (2013) 27(03) *EIA* 239.

75 Ivanic, Martin & Zaman “Estimating the short-run poverty impacts of the 2010-11 surge in food prices” (2012) 40(11) *World Development* 3.

76 Bertelsen “Effervescence and ephemerality: popular urban uprisings in Mozambique” (2016) 81(1) *Ethnos* 29.

of the people, and thus, called for the advent of “people power”.<sup>77</sup> Voices of dissent began to flood online social networks and heard across the previously pro-government news media. According to one protester, the collective action “was for the government to relax the prices, because it’s the prices that are killing here in Mozambique. It’s the chapa, the rice, the charcoal. Basic things that are very expensive.”<sup>78</sup> Although the government initially tried to suppress them, it eventually made concessions, which ended the protest. The state did not only extend subsidies to bakers, but also reduced customs duties on the import of sugar and third grade rice, expanded the District Development Fund to the urban districts, and announced the introduction of a “basic basket” of subsidised goods.<sup>79</sup>

The Brazilian experience also provides a useful lesson for understanding the role of charismatic leaders in triggering food protest. The key actor to consider in this context is the 1950s contributions made by the Brazilian geographer, sociologist and physician Josué de Castro.<sup>80</sup> He avowed the fight against hunger requires better food distribution and that the state should adopt adequate measures towards equitable distribution of wealth.<sup>81</sup> Following his death, the military regime in 1964 adopted a series of repressive measures to silence his adherents who advocated for adequate food for the poor.<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, social protest did emerge. In the late 1970s, in light of the food price hikes which affected millions of Brazilians, his followers’ mobilised workers and housewives to resist rising prices. In view of the indifference of the military regime to tackle the price hikes, approximately 1.3 million signatures were collected and a large protest was staged to coerce the government to act.<sup>83</sup> While the protesters were not specifically successful in their demand; the collective action laid the foundation for the launch of fundamental food security policies and programs. Two of such programs were the *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger) and the *Bolsa Familia* programmes which many policy makers have hailed as ‘magic bullets’ for rapidly reducing chronic and absolute poverty.

The *Fome Zero* aims to ensure attendance at schools by fostering joint responsibility between the government and families, thereby specifically

---

77 Bumich “Politics after the time of hunger in Mozambique: a critique of neo-patrimonial interpretation of African elites” (2008) 34(1) *JSAS* 112.

78 Cunguara “An exposition of development failures in Mozambique” (2012) 39(131) *ROAPE* 167.

79 Walton & Seddon *Free markets and food riots: the politics of global adjustment* (2008) 24.

80 Kesavan & Iyer “MS Swaminathan: a journey from the frontiers of life sciences to the state of a ‘zero hunger’ world” (2014) 107(12) *Current Science* 2037.

81 Wittman & Blesh “Food sovereignty and fome zero: connecting public food procurement programmes to sustainable rural development in Brazil” (2015) *JAC* 97.

82 Hall “Brazil’s bolsa familia: a double edged sword?” (2008) 39(5) *Development and Change* 799.

83 Menezes *The fome zero (zero hunger) program: The Brazilian experience* 250.

placing the onus on parents to educate their children. Besides being regarded as a break away from clientelism, the *Fome Zero* “has been heralded as an alternative to more traditional, paternalistic approaches to social assistance and has helped counter criticisms of [conditional cash transfer] programmes as handouts”.<sup>84</sup> However, irrespective of its enormous potential for addressing the chronic hunger situation, the *Fome Zero* was riddled with several constraints only a few months into Lula da Silva’s administration.<sup>85</sup> First, there was no overall co-ordination, leading to independent operationalisation of each of the sub-projects (with separate banking arrangements, beneficiary selection methods, administrative structures and reporting procedures).<sup>86</sup> This lack of coherence resulted in duplication and high implementation costs of the project.<sup>87</sup> There were in addition widespread allegations of political manipulation in the selection of recipients, harking back to the 1990s during the *cesta basica* food distribution scheme. In light of the constraints, a group of beneficiaries took to the streets and bemoaned the failure of the project in addressing chronic hunger and poverty. It was against this backdrop that in October 2003, the government consolidated the four separate sub-projects under the new brand *Bolsa Familia* (Family Grant) which arguably remains the largest conditional cash transfer globally.

Although *Bolsa Familia* has had a noticeable impact of decreasing school dropouts and improved the share of total household budget spent on food, it enforces the stigma that all beneficiaries are poor. Thus, given that the cash assistance does not cater for individuals but only poor families (if they fulfill certain conditions), president Lula da Silva in 2004 signed into law the basic income bill, titled Law of Citizen’s Basic Income (LCB) which ‘guarantees the right of all Brazilians, regardless of their socioeconomic status, to receive an annual cash transfer.’<sup>88</sup> Since then the LCB has been implemented through the *Bolsa Familia* program.<sup>89</sup> In sharp contrast to the LCB, South Africa’s social security system only addresses the special needs of a specific group and therefore limited to those who are unable to work due to ill health, disability or age (children and the aged). It is imperative to note that opinion leader in South Africa have not demonstrated a strong commitment to improve the plight of the food poor, although there are many chronically hungry people across the country. For example, whereas the famous activist and film director Zackie Achmat represents the rights of people living with HIV and AIDS,

---

84 Rawlings “A new approach to social assistance: Latin America’s experience with conditional cash transfer programs” (2005) 2(3) *ISSR* 139.

85 Kesavan & Swaminathan “2014 international year of family farming: a boost to evergreen revolution” (2014) 107(12) *Current Science* 1974.

86 Gas (Ministry of Mines and Energy), Cartao Alimentao (*Fome Zero*), Bolsa Alimentacao (Ministry of Health) and Bolsa Escola (Ministry of Education).

87 Ansell & Mitchell “Models of clientelism and policy change: the case of conditional cash transfer programmes in Mexico and Brazil” (2011) 30(3) *BLAR* 305.

88 Suplicy “Citizen’s basic income” (March 2007) *LAPSR* 2.

89 10.835/2004.

former University of the Witwatersrand SRC president Mcebo Dlamini for the #FeesMustFall movement and, Archbishop Desmond for the gay community, the food poor lack such voices. The lack of such leadership has played a role in relegating the needs of the chronically hungry to the background.

### ***3 2 5 Political parties' wrongs and food poors' rights***

Political parties play a key role in the mobilisation and agitation for adequate food for citizens. The food protest in Barcelona, the food market boycott in Toronto and the protests in northern France were led by Radical Republican Party, the Jewish Communist Movement and the French Communist Party respectively.<sup>90</sup> Also in April 2010, the main opposition party in India, Bharatiya Janata Party led a mass protest across New Delhi demanding the Congress-led government reduce (rising prices of) grains, sugar and lentils.<sup>91</sup>

In stark contrast to the above protests, opposition parties in South Africa (such as the Congress of the People, Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Democratic Alliance (DA)) have arguably been immune to the plight of the food poor. The few instances that these parties have attempted to advance the right to food may be linked to three specific cases. First, is the EFF's call for broad nationalisation and expropriation of land without compensation. This theme has since 2013 gained considerable political attention leading to parliament's approval of the land expropriation Bill in May 2016.<sup>92</sup> The Bill, which sets out the requirement for the government to lay claim to land for public interest or purpose, has attracted criticisms from economists that the untimely redistribution of land (especially as the country is emerging from a major drought) could lead to low rate of food production (similar to farm seizures in neighbouring Zimbabwe).<sup>93</sup> Second, is the political parties' criticism of Bathabile Dlamini (then minister for social development) for stating that an amount of R753 (approx. \$65) social grant was sufficient to provide for an entire household the whole month.<sup>94</sup> The parties failed not only to take this debate further, but by mobilising affected individuals to demand for more grants. Third, is the DA march to the Department of

90 Bohstedt *Crowd actions in Britain and France from the middle ages to the modern world* (2015) 101.

91 Majumdar "India's opposition leads price hike protest" *China Daily* (22 April 2010).

92 GovSA "Expropriation Bill" [http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/b4-2015\\_150213\\_edited.pdf](http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/b4-2015_150213_edited.pdf) (last accessed 2020-04-20).

93 Stoddard, Macharia & Roche "Zuma's radical transformation: South Africa will allow expropriation of land without compensation" <https://www.fin24.com/Economy/zuma-vows-to-fast-track-land-expropriation-without-compensation-20170224> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

94 Digital "DA challenges Bathabile 'R753 is enough' Dlamini to accept invitation to go shopping for basics" <https://www.polity.org.za/article/da-bridget-masango-says-da-challenges-bathabile-r753-is-enough-dlamini-to-accept-our-invitation-to-come-shopping-for-basics-2016-06-19> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

Social Development in Tshwane in the hopes of ensuring social grants are paid to beneficiaries after 1 April 2017.<sup>95</sup> Although this march, may to some extent be perceived as food protest (given that some beneficiaries rely on social grants to access food), it could not be clearly classified as food protest since it was not directly targeted at either food prices or lack of access to food. The likelihood of an upsurge of food protest (as a response to the state’s failure to pay grants) was diminished when the Constitutional Court made a landmark ruling by instructing the South African Social Security Agency and Cash Paymaster Services to continue paying social grants.<sup>96</sup> Thus, the lack of interests of existing political representatives or parties to trigger large-scale food protest to ensure the poor (and not only beneficiaries of grants) is also a contributory factor why food protest has been rare in democratic South Africa.

## 4 Conclusion

Citizens’ enforcement of their right to food through food protest faces many barriers. Food protest as its name suggests reflect the struggle of the food poor against governments to provide more food or reduce the cost of the food basket. In order to respond to the overarching question of “why food protest is rare in South Africa”, selected factors, which enhanced or hindered similar protest in other countries, were examined in order to determine whether such factors were prevalent in democratic South Africa. These factors range from the (a) availability of food in the market, (b) payment of social grants (though inadequate), (c) the absence of government’s food rations, (d) the impact of extreme hunger; (e) lack of active CSOs, (f) the negative role of the media in addressing hunger, (g) lack of legal action around chronic hunger, (h) lack of leadership to mobilise the chronically hungry, and (i) lack of opposition political parties’ commitment to address chronic hunger. The paper specifically discovered that the commitment of key actors such as political parties, charismatic leaders, lawyers, the media, courts and social movements in mobilising and agitating for improved access to food in other places is missing in South Africa. The food poor therefore lack activists or leaders who would mobilise them to confront the government to comply with its constitutional obligation to food. In sum, in order to effectively promote the rights of the chronically hungry (outside the courtroom), it is important that right-to-food related NGOs, partner with an opinion leader and mobilise the food poor as well as members of opposition political parties, social movements, students, lawyers, lecturers, community leaders and the food poor, to call for the inclusion of the unemployed into existing g social grants or provide them the means to earn income (perhaps through job creation).

---

95 ENCA “In pictures: da marches for social grants” <https://ewn.co.za/2020/04/09/social-grants-to-be-paid-out-earlier-in-may> (last accessed 2020-04-20).

96 Nicolaides “Concourt instructs SASSA, CPS to continue paying social grants” <https://ewn.co.za/2017/03/17/concourt-instructs-sassa-cps-to-continue-paying-social-grants> (last accessed 2020-04-20).