

# Report on World Food Day Symposium 2015: University of the Western Cape

Written by Thembi Bongwana,  
Rudo Chikara and Ayesha Ludick

## Introduction

The World Food Day Event on Friday 16 October was hosted by the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) (in conjunction with the Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE) at the University of the Western Cape. The event focused on the question; “Whose food system is it anyway?” which saw both participants and speakers grappling with key issues and debates regarding food security and the food system. The presentations and discussions encouraged everyone to think about the food system in different ways. As expected at an event focusing on food, we were treated to an exciting lunch (ground beef and bean salsa, couscous and smoked chicken or a vegetable curry) served in vegan edible bowls (made from wheat and bran).



This event was highly publicized, but needed to compete with several other World Food Day events organized in Cape Town. The tone of this event was scholarly, with the aim being able to create a platform for critical discussion of some of the ongoing challenges, gains and blind spots in existing research, policy work and practice around food security. In fact, many presenters raised critical comments about mainstream food security practice and research, with many criticizing in particular the following:

- the neglect of urban and peri-urban areas in global work on food security in rural areas
- the emphasis on specialist and top-down approaches to “solving” food insecurity

- the over-riding emphasis on technical and specialist methods for dealing with hunger and poverty around the globe.
- the sidelining of socially marginalized groups as creators of knowledge and solutions to world hunger.

### Professor Andries du Toit

As the convener of this event, Prof Du Toit, director of PLAAS, highlighted its key objectives and emphasized the theme which needed attendees to delve into the question of “Whose food system is it anyway”? This was done by using an image to illustrate stereotypical discussions pertaining to agriculture and food growth, science and technology. Some of the key misconceptions that Prof. Du Toit discussed were;

- Food insecurity as the temporary interruption in food production.
- Imagery of poverty and deprivation as the only forms of depicting current food systems.



In developing his discussion, Du Toit argued for examining food systems in terms of livelihood. . The food security of some depend on the food insecurity of others. This point was elaborated on through an image of a Checkers truck transporting food to the rural outskirts of the Transkei, a paradoxical case of taking food to the food growers after this food was processed, marketed and priced in ways that make its accessibility very difficult for poor people. Questions were raised around who has laboured for this food? Who benefits from this food? This was linked to the following sub-themes:

- ❖ Importing food from overseas;
- ❖ Informal sector and how it relates to agriculture
- ❖ Small farmers vs. large commercial farmers
- ❖ What food is getting onto people's tables
- ❖ What food low income households typically require

- ❖ What food is available to people in different places and at different times



The concluding remarks around this section highlighted the need to be able to start explanations with the people at the centre; the food securers/ poor people need to be foregrounded to find out from them what food systems look like before we can begin answering the questions which have come up. There is a deep need to hear the perspectives of the poor in defining what food systems are and who they are for and what they should look like.

**Prof. Desiree Lewis and MA Students, Thembi Bongwana, Ayesha Ludick and Rudo Chikara**

Prof. Lewis' discussion tried to reach beyond what is usually covered or spoken about in food security studies. The presentation had two key objectives;

- To raise some ideas about the kinds of work that can be done around food that compliment and builds on the work that is usually done in food security.
- The second aim was to introduce a project that she has been working on which is located in the Centre of Excellence. This is a Humanities project on food studies. Lewis's presentation was therefore framed within the title of feminism and food.

Feminism and food as opposed to gender and food security is usually imagined as something broadly concerned with power, social meanings and social processes. There is a wide assumption that feminist studies focus only on gender and often even only on women there is a broad body of work on feminism and food especially in terms of global thought.



As shown in her presentation, the image of a rural woman who is a victim of food scarcity and deprivation is highly problematic. The message that usually comes along with this is that ‘she’ is in need of salvation by food security discourses, and a huge array of knowledges and projects that are set up to save her.

1. The first goal of the feminist project that Lewis is driving is the kind of humanities work that needs to be taken into account in order to contest this controlling image the tendency to focus on so-called “bread and butter” issues in isolation misleads us by suggesting that certain (usually victim-oriented) processes are all that socially marginalized people’s lives are about.
2. The second goal of the project is to highlight how different forms of knowledge needs to be taken into account, without any discipline claiming superiority or special expertise for work on food,. Lewis spoke about her own initial tendency - as a humanities scholar - to sideline critical work in the sciences and social sciences, acknowledging that much of this work is very strongly aligned with humanities work. .
3. The third objective is to create a research community that will enable connections among scholars and knowledge producers across disciplines. An important result of an established research community would result in scholars feeding off and learning from each other.
4. The fourth objective is to develop socially engaged and critical research. This should be distinguished from politically instrumentalised research, which often works simply to support the agendas of certain donors, governments and other stakeholders. Socially engaged research tries to e far more attentive to difficult and awkward questions about power and struggle.

The presentation raised the way that food brings people together and builds a sense of community, a sense of national identity. The kind of studies that are often neglected in food security work are studies that draw on history, literary, popular cultures, especially urban globalized popular culture studies, art history, philosophy. This is often dismissed as frivolous or self-indulgent, yet this work can amplify our understanding of the complex roles that food play in society.

By referring to the Humanities Project's new website in progress, students' presentations raised the importance of:

- Students and emerging researchers writings around feminism and food
- Writings around issues of power in food spaces, class and gendered dynamics around food production
- Visual and artworks that embed meanings and knowledge around food but are often neglected in the academy
- Class and gendered dynamics around food production.

Invitation to students across disciplines to take up the challenge of expanding existing work on food and reflecting on how their own research interests might be connected to the vast field of food studies.

### **Dr Arundhatie Kundal: Street food economies in the Global South**

Dr. Kundal defined the street as a social platter to open up ways of seeing and talking about food. She showed that there is a need to define what street food is and what it is not, and this is often dependent on context. Exploring street food allows us to explain, the role food plays in shaping our identities. Kundal mentioned three broad theoretical approaches that attempt to map ways of thinking and defining food and its role; a dualist, structuralist and a legalist approaches. She discussed the limits of these, especially in perpetuating divides between rural and modern, or assuming that street food traders can be protected mainly or only by legal interventions. Kundal argued that multiple lenses are needed to understand how street food vendors are socially marginalized and how the "big food" context in which they operate affects them. She also referred to the stigmas about street food, including the assumption that it is "unclean" and "not nutritious", Kundal raised many ideas for further reflection. In particular, she suggested that more collaboration needs to occur between researchers from different parts of the global South. As an Indian scholar with a history of research on urban and peri-urban women vendors in India and currently working on street food vendors in Cape Town, she is well-placed to pursue such collaboration.



## **SESSION 2: Plates and Baskets, Shelves and Streets**

### **Prof. David Sanders: 'Big Food' and Consumer food environments**

Prof. Sanders started off with an introduction to public health and proceeded to detail of the social, economic, and political prevalence of social insecurity. He highlighted that South Africa is performing very badly in terms of meeting health standards globally and cases of malnutrition remain high in this country. Sanders noted that malnutrition is a hidden and underlying cause of child mortalities; breastfeeding as a solution and a major form of food security continues to be less common than it should be. Sanders also looked at risk factors resulting from obesity as the “other side” of malnutrition: the increase in the prevalence of obesity and associated diseases in South Africa is often a result of the fact that healthy food often costs more than unhealthy food. More so, South Africans are consuming vast amounts of takeout food and thereby importing obesity into the region as South Africa brings. This is what he calls the “Tsunami of health related diseases”. The risk factors which he mentions as a result of unhealthy eating are *biological, behavioral, societal and structural*. Sanders calls on the government to act in this regard in order to combat food insecurity and the increase in diseases associated with unhealthy foods and ends off with highlighting the need for society to look at food security from a different perspective.

### **Dr. Jane Battersby: Urban food insecurity in a rapidly changing food system**

Dr Battersby looked at food insecurity in a rapidly changing food system and argued that we need to consider urban food insecurity as well as rural manifestations in context like South Africa. She said that we need to do away with traditional solutions for solving new problems related to health and food security issues, and also called for the need to look beyond the household, nutrition education and poverty

alleviation as these factors of “poor education”, “ignorance” or “lack” are not the primary causes of hunger and poor nutrition; instead the problem of inequality and unequal resources are important underlying problems. She therefore argued that we need to look at the systemic drivers of nutritional insecurity in relation to:

- ❖ Housing
- ❖ Urban geography
- ❖ Retail system” how food items are priced and marketed
- ❖ Shelf space analysis: what is in the supermarkets and where
- ❖ Where is the stock going
- ❖ Mobility and retail opportunities

Battersby concluded that we need to think about how systems and arrangements around food interact in terms of power, as well as how people navigate these systems and arrangements.

#### **Dr. Wanga Zembe: Child Support Grants: Mothers' experiences of accessing food for their children in Langa, Cape Town**

Dr Wanga dealt with a study conducted in rural site of Mount Frere in the Eastern Cape and Township site of Langa in Cape Town. This study described care-givers roles and difficulty in making decisions about accessing food because of their challenging socio-economic status. As a result, surviving on credit is a recurring burden as a cycle of borrowing from different Somali shops and paying back when the grant money is received is never ending. What interviewed households alluded to was the fact that Somali spaza shop and U save store outlets are usually cheaper, give credit, or sell inferior products at low costs. Other indicators noted in these households were issues of distance to be travelled to access food or groceries, convenience of the store, credit facility available, flexibility of Somali store owners versus Xhosa owners, cheaper pre-packed combos and so forth. The perpetuating cycle of poverty traps households into lifestyles of unhealthy food consumption, household diet dependent on affordability. Women's agency to make sure the little they have is enough for their family is limited, but they exercise some agency in exchanging and sharing food in desperate times. A particular problem is when women get trapped in debt from loan schemes which accumulate interest, and they cannot afford to pay these back with their social grant entitlements. The presentation therefore illustrated that children's limited nutritional resources are crucially connected to the cycles of poverty and limited state grant-giving that women caregivers are caught up in.



**Ms Matisetso Tlali (Health worker in Khayelitsha): Realities of choice in an unhealthy food environment**

Ms Matisetso highlighted the struggle faced by health educators in advising people about healthy eating that may prevent Type-2 Diabetes. Even if people are aware of the health choices they should make they still make decisions that are bad for their health in terms of the food they eat. She stated that the only choice that many have is to purchase the cheapest foodstuffs for their families, and these are often detrimental to their health. Access to healthy food in the poor communities is limited and the food found there is unhealthy. She claimed that educating communities about health in relation to nutrition is as much-needed as education about HIV.

**SESSION 3: Farm, fields and laboratories**

**Prof Ben Cousins: Land reform, small farmers, and agriculture innovation**

Prof Cousins's discussion centered on the possibilities of improving food production systems, and showed that there is a lot that can be done to regulate food systems and the food production system. Cousins provocatively explored thought-provoking questions around;

- Are there alternative forms of food production that can be introduced?
- What is a “farmer”, what do we mean by “farming”?
- How can we define and analyse the agrarian structure of South Africa, and the composition of “small -scale” and “large-scale farmers”?
- How do and can we track and describe, farming on redistributed land, farming in communal areas?
- How can issues around land reform and agrarian reform reflect rapid socio-economic, environmental, social-geographical and other changes?
- How can we gather sufficient data on agriculture to do justice to current complexities and avoid the traditional research and policy formulae?
- How can the complexities uncovered by research encourage efficient ways to increase food production in SA?
- How can measures for working with local farmers be introduced to combat the challenges faced in the food production systems



### **Prof. Voster Muchenje: The role of meat in food security**

Prof Muchenje drew attention to the role of meat eating in discussions about food security. He argued that we usually look at the consequences of excess of meat in the body and focus less on the lack of meat and what that means in terms of health. Prof. Muchenje addressed many misconceptions about meat

within food security and nutritional health. Meat in most instances is perceived to be a symbol of class or wealth which is usually interpreted as one that is living well. There have been a lot controversies around meat consumption, and this has led to a dismissal of meat in some diets. In challenging this, Muchenje further takes us through meat science: its composition, nutritional value, wholesomeness and consumer acceptability Muchenge, also looked at meat production in relation to climate change and suggested cloning as a viable alternative.. Although he spoke positively about the importance of meat, he also pointed out the health implications of excessive meat consumption and concluded with a take home message that *'too much or too little of anything is not a good thing'*

