



Understanding urban food security and purchasing patterns

Urban food insecurity is one of the emerging developmental challenges associated with population growth in urban areas. Often international, regional and national policy agendas are more concerned with food security in rural areas, while food security of the urban poor is left unattended and under researched. *Charl van der Merwe* studied the patterns and sustainability of food retail and purchasing in the inner cities of Durban, Pretoria and Johannesburg.

Directly linked to this apparent focus on rural food security is the perception that food insecurity in cities can be solved by simply increasing the levels of agricultural production in rural areas. The argument goes that South Africa produces enough food, and the assumption therefore is that the country is food secure at a national level. However, this cannot be assumed at a household level. Household food insecurity in urban areas is an issue of availability and access, which mostly takes the form of food purchases. This study assessed food retail and purchasing patterns in South African cities, and patterns of unsustainability in food security.

Study sites and methodology

The study was conducted in February and March 2012 in the inner cities of Durban, Pretoria and Johannesburg with a total of 154 respondents. These respondents were selected randomly and interviewed in front of various food outlets in what is called intercept interviews. The outlets were selected according to the different types of food retail outlets available, namely large supermarkets such as Shoprite; smaller supermarkets such as Checkout Supermarkets; and informal traders and street vendors.

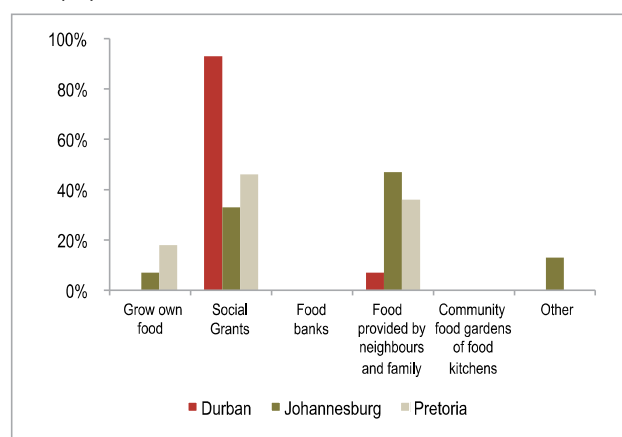
Findings

Food sources of the unemployed

Respondents who indicated that they were unemployed at the time of the study were asked what means or sources they used to obtain food on a daily basis (Figure 1). The significance of social assistance grants in this respect should be highlighted.

A surprising number of respondents in Pretoria (18.2%) indicated that they grew their own food. However, none of the respondents in Durban indicated that they grew their own food while only 6.7% of all respondents in Johannesburg indicated that they did so.

Figure 1: Sources of food for respondents who indicated they were unemployed



Source: Van der Merwe, 2012

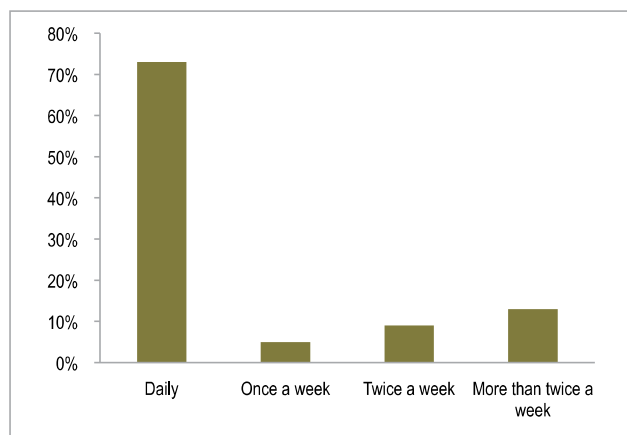
Food purchases

In Durban, respondents spent on average R1 274.04 on food every month. In Johannesburg that figure was an average of R800 per month and in Pretoria, an average of R1 110.71 per month. When asked about the frequency with which respondents purchased food at fast-food restaurants, 27.6% of all respondents indicated that they never purchased food at fast-food outlets, for the main reason that it was too expensive to buy food for their whole family. Only 9% of all respondents indicated that they purchased food at fast-food restaurants on a daily basis.

To the question of the frequency of households cooking food (Figure 2), 72% of all respondents indicated that they cooked for themselves or for their households on a daily basis. The only real hindrance to not cooking for themselves on a daily basis was the high cost of electricity.

All residents indicated that the decision where to buy their food was mostly based on price.

Figure 2: Frequency of respondents cooking for themselves or their households.

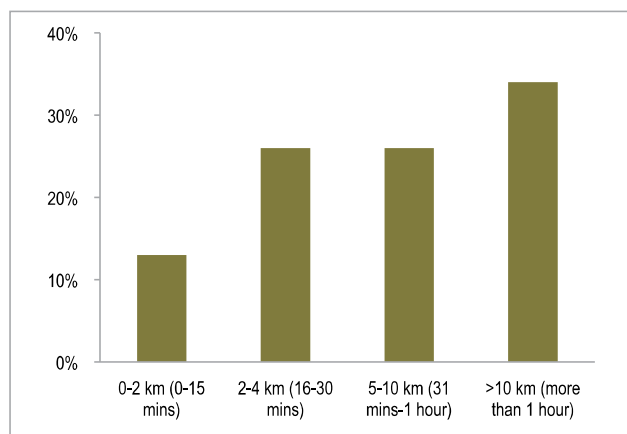


Source: Van der Merwe, 2012

Frequency of food purchasing and distance travelled to food outlets

When asked about the frequency of grocery shopping, 58% of respondents indicated that they purchased groceries (food) only once per month, which they supplemented towards the end of the month with small trips to a food outlet for those items that had been exhausted.

Figure 3: Respondents' travel time to first-choice food outlets



Source: Van der Merwe, 2012

A total of 60% of all respondents indicated that they had to travel to get to the food outlet where they purchased most of their food (Figure 3). The alarming statistic was that 33.7% of these respondents indicated that they had to travel more than 10 kilometres or one hour to get to a food outlet, and 53.1% of the respondents had to travel between two and 10 kilometres to get to a food outlet. This figure could have a slight limitation, as a possible explanation could be that many respondents chose to purchase their food close to where they worked, which could mean these were the distances

from their workplace. It was nonetheless alarming that many respondents reported long daily distances of travel for work purposes.

Discussion

The study showed that the majority of people who resided or worked in and around South Africa's urban centres made use of large retail supermarkets for food purchases. Smaller supermarkets and informal markets were mostly used to supplement purchases made at larger supermarkets.

An emerging pattern in terms of urban diets and lifestyles was an increase in the consumption of prepared foods and fast food, and the adoption of more Western diets and lifestyles, in other words diets that had high intakes of fats and low intakes of carbohydrates and fibre. This finding confirmed the outcomes of other studies that indicated while many white and coloured urban populations already followed the typical Western diet, black urban dwellers were increasingly starting to adopt these types of diets and lifestyles too.

This study also highlighted the importance of social grants as a tool to enable the urban poor or unemployed urban residents to access food. In addition to these grants, food provided by parents or other family members also proved to be an important food source for unemployed urban residents.

Lastly, it was important to understand the three levels of food retail outlets (large supermarkets, smaller supermarkets and informal markets) and the relationship between them. Even though most respondents indicated that they bought the bulk of their groceries at large supermarkets, all residents indicated that the decision where to buy their food was mostly based on price.

Conclusion

The data presented in this article suggest that certain aspects of the broader food systems of South African cities could possibly be considered to be unsustainable. The following is therefore suggested:

- Geographical access to food seemed to be unsustainable in some cases because of the distances respondents had to travel. The cost of travelling such distances coupled with the already high prices of food means that this is not sustainable, and that it is a challenge that needs serious attention.
- Income and the availability of cash needs to be continuously highlighted and addressed, especially in urban settings where food is mostly acquired through food purchases.
- Diversification of food sources for the urban poor remains a challenge that needs further investigation, as this sector mostly relies on social security assistance from the government. The study showed that a very small percentage of people participated in urban agriculture.
- The relationship between the three categories of food outlets and exactly what influences people's choices regarding the type of food outlet at which they choose to buy their groceries, as well as where they choose to go if they cannot find what they are looking for at their first choice of food outlet, could provide interesting grounds for further research. ■

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