

18. Food through the lens of Covid 19

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The 30th of April 2020 signified the official end of the first phase of the South African Lockdown. The second phase of lockdown began based on reports of escalating infections of Covid 19 in South Africa. This still means limited movement in home cities, closed businesses and industries, temporary unemployment for the majority and minimal social interactional experiences. This was strongly complemented with practicing social distancing and good hygiene practices amongst other personal sacrifices to flatten the curve of the Coronavirus 2020 pandemic.

Despite the fact that all South African leaders have been preaching that we are all at similar risk to contracting the virus, the socioeconomic impact of the lockdown on different classes has varied in a country which is already plagued by wide economic gaps. Class hierarchies in our society determine whether people have access to basic resources such as water and food.

Politicians, religious leaders, social influencers and those alike continually inform us through numerous mass media measures that class, ethnicity, historically disadvantaged societies, the uneducated and unskilled, and the unemployed are all fighting this battle together. This perception is supported by an analysis and documentation which focuses on the manner in which the virus can be contracted and the similarity of all the symptoms that we each can experience after contracting it. Similarly, present infected patients too have indicated similarities in the conditions such as difficulty in breathing and influenza like symptoms brought on by the disease.

However, in the the 8th week of the lockdown phase-out (moving from level 5 to level 4) measures, the majority of South Africans who endure hardships was inadvertently exposed. I make special reference to the employees within the informal economy and small enterprises that are dependent on daily sales to survive. Many South Africans are solely dependent on an income from the informal economy and the functionality of this economy is based on "no work, no pay" and "no work –no income" norms.

Street food traders only see an income if they are out there on the streets retailing their food items to citizens in the city centre of Durban. Likewise, 'contract' employees in this sector are not entitled to any unemployment funds and have received no financial aid from their employers or organisations, despite not being able to earn an income during the lockdown. Government has undertaken initiatives in this regard by availing a number of national grants including a covid grant, but the criteria and conditions hinder accessibility for many of those who are eligible. The accessibility of these grants marginalises the illiterate person starving in rural areas and segments of our populous that have limited or no access to the necessary technology. Some needy South Africans may not even access the grant as their priority will be attaining a daily meal to survive under these conditions. These grants are not enough to buy food for a

month for a person, but are there to fill a gap in struggling households. The weakened exchange rate of our currency had added pressure to the costs of basic commodities such as wheat and rice, which form part of the staple diet of many underprivileged households in South Africa. These homes have been challenged with daily and weekly food budgets and the daunting task of continuously preparing cost effective meals for their families which can be influenced by the availability or inaccessibility of basic foods such as rice, maize and wheat based products such as bread at reasonable prices. Homes have to compromise on the luxury of balanced nutrition and other personal necessities so that food can be sufficient for all.

Food safety has become an escalating concern as continual research indicates that the virus can be found on the packaging of store bought food items. Food related health concerns for the poor and rich during this time can take many forms which include the consumption of an inappropriate diet for those with pre-existing illnesses due to lack of funds and to concerns which indicate that food packaging can be a source of transmission.

For middle class homes, cooking, baking and meal preparation has become a sort of occupational therapy and a pleasurable task whilst one is at home. These families have been thriving on the experiences of attaching social meaning to their creative culinary preparations which is coupled with the development of new eating habits combined with traditional meals and eating patterns.

With the availability of time and access to an abundance of ingredients, some families have engaged in cuisine preparation outside of their daily diets inherent to their cultures. Ingredients of meals that were usually bought prepared and ready to use are instead made from scratch during this time. The distinctive culinary tastes of people have become an exploratory journey and a unique dining experience for some. Grocery stores in Middle class areas have a lack of baking ingredients such as flours, dry yeast and products alike amidst the lockdown. Many South African families have now engaged in cooking dishes from Italian, French, Mauritian, Thai cuisines amongst others...an opportunity to travel to another country through the means of exploring the cuisine of another nation state. The interrogation of which dishes are ethnically authentic and which are locally infused dominate the minds of some. The sharing of recipes and detailed visual guides via social media websites and telephonic messaging, the exploration of other types of foods and the constant togetherness has encouraged meal preparation and cooking a gender inclusive, fun and recreational activity for the entire family...the emergence of a bilateral household activity for some pre-existing patriarchal homes.

The economic and symbolic value creation of food is now scrutinised through a lens blurred by the pandemic. The lack and availability of food for some has been brought to the fore, whilst others explore cuisines and traditional meals which allows for reflection on other cultures. The relationship we share with food, the way food will be perceived by some will differ to previous perceptions which can result in permanent and temporary food way changes. Some will be more appreciative of their daily bread, whilst others have invested this time in adopting culinary skills which contribute to their cultural and social capital. Food too has been responsible for broad societal changes globally and such a pandemic has encouraged existing trends of feeding the impoverished. At the fore we see within our society non-Profit Organisations, Large corporations and businesses, religious organisations such as Temple, Mosque and Church philanthropy organisations all unite and contribute effectively and continually attempt to address food insecurity.

What is clear is that relationships to food is largely determined by class positions and this has been exacerbated and brought to the fore by the Pandemic.