Invisible Urban Farmers and a Next Season of Hunger – Participatory Co-research during Lockdown in Cape Town, South Africa

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced countries across the world into imposing full or limited lockdowns to slow down the spread of the virus. In many countries this has caused a sudden halt on economic activities, forcing tens of millions of people into unemployment and underemployment. The rapid loss of jobs and incomes has resulted in millions of people across the world struggling to meet their food needs (FAO, 2020a). South Africa is no exception. The South African government imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the world. This resulted in massive job losses, especially in the informal sector, with one in every six South Africans – particularly people of colour[2] – depending on these informal jobs to meet their daily food needs (Fourie, 2018, Swanby, 2018).

Much of the debate in South Africa rightly highlights how the Covid-19 pandemic has adversely impacted access to food and exacerbated hunger for those who are already marginalised. In South Africa, and worldwide, the pandemic reveals the fragility and injustice of existing food systems, which have clearly failed to feed those who are most marginalised, even before the current crisis. This counters the "Feed the world" narrative that supports increasing agricultural production and sufficient calories at the global level while neglecting the root causes of hunger and food insecurity: questions of access and distribution, social inequality and unequal power relations within food systems (IPES-Food, 2016; Bellows, Valente, Lemke, Núñez BdL, 2016).

On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic offers the unique opportunity to re-assess and fundamentally reshape local food systems to become more socially just and inclusive, and in doing so, address the root causes of poverty and hunger by achieving the right to food for all. Those who are most affected should be involved in co-creating these solutions (Bello, 2020, FAO, 2020a).

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[1] Corresponding author: Nicole Paganini, paganini@hu-berlin.de – all authors contributed equally and collectively to this paper. The order of the authors corresponds to the alphabetic order of the surnames. This opinion piece presents early findings from an international, digital covid-coping research project in four countries in the South. The Cape Town case study will be further investigated in an upcoming food security household survey in 2020.

[2] The ethnic terms "Black", "Coloured", "White" and "Indian", intended by the apartheid laws for "racial classification", are still widely being used in post-apartheid South Africa, although these terms are highly contested (Durrheim et al., 2011; Erasmus, 2008; Posel, 2010; Seekings and Nattrass 2005). Moreover, we use the term "people of colour" as an umbrella term for Black, Coloured, and Indian South Africans, as is used in the broader South African context.

This opinion piece presents findings from participatory co-research that was initiated by a group of small-scale urban farmers – in the following referred to either as urban farmers or co-researchers – from Cape Town's townships. These urban farms are from Mfuleni, Gugulethu, Khayelitsha, and Philippi, and worked in collaboration with local and international researchers and scholar-activists from the University of the Western Cape, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in Germany and Coventry University in the UK[3]. During four consecutive weeks in April 2020 and the first week of June, 67 urban farmers (44 female, 23 male) documented their experiences via digital data collection on their smartphones (KoboToolbox) in five surveys. They engaged in regular exchanges among themselves and in reflections with some members of the larger collaborative group. However, not all 67 farmers participated in surveys and exchanges each week, which explains the difference in the sample size in the analysis.

This opinion piece contributes to the current debate by shedding light on an aspect that has been neglected so far, namely, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown on marginalised urban communities from the perspectives of small-scale urban food producers. First, we assess the challenges experienced by urban farmers to pursue their farming activities, due to lack of permits to reach their food gardens in April and May 2020. Ironically, while local food needs and especially the demand for vegetables increased, locally produced vegetables were left rotting because they could not be harvested and sold. Second, we document the impact of the lockdown measures on the livelihoods of urban farmers and on their access to, and availability of, food in township communities. Urban farmers were forced to change their food choices and eating habits as some food was unaffordable. They also provided insights into the coping strategies they resorted to in their daily struggle to feed themselves. Third, we call for using the current crisis to promote the potential of locally developed community-driven solutions developed by urban farmers, which should receive adequate support.

2. The impact of lockdown in South Africa: exacerbating ongoing socio-economic injustice

After introducing selected measures from mid-March 2020, South Africa went into a complete lockdown on the 26th March. The timeline of these measures and implemented restrictions and the reported Covid-19 cases are illustrated in Figure 1 to show the development of the COVID-19 spread and its political implications in South Africa.

[3] This research collaboration was extended to Masvingo in Zimbabwe, Maputo in Mozambique, and West Java and Toraja regions in Indonesia, including a total of 400 farmers across the five regions. The focus here is on South Africa, while the findings from the other regions will be presented elsewhere.

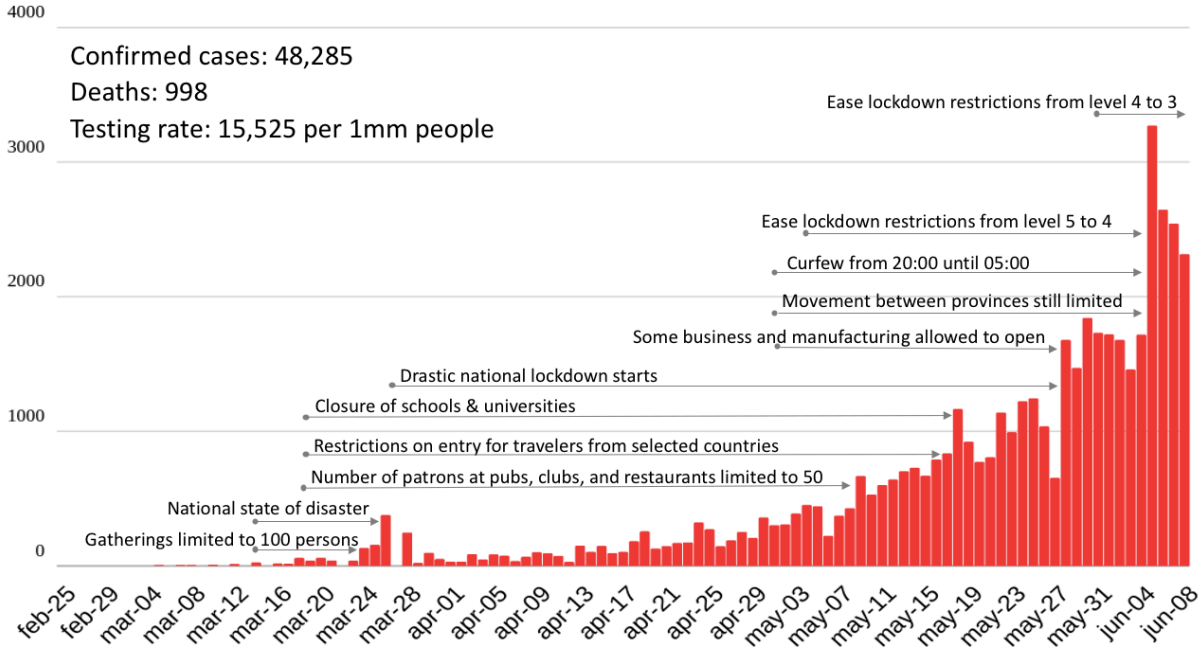

Figure 1 Development of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Source: WHO Data (accessed June 2020)

In addition to high rates of unemployment and underemployment, South Africa also faces high levels of hunger. The South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (SANHANES) found that 26% of South Africans face hunger, with a further 28% being in danger of being subject to hunger (SANHANES et al., 2013). Alarmingly high levels of food insecurity persist in low-income households, especially for people of colour. Almost three quarters experience hunger, with the greatest burden falling on informal dwellers, female-headed households, and households with irregular sources of income (Battersby et al. 2014). For these households, the Covid-19 lockdown has been disproportionately severe. Furthermore, high levels of diabetes, hypertension, and obesity occur in the Western Cape, all higher than the national average. These non-communicable diseases have been linked with poverty and nutrition transition leading to the consumption of cheap, high-fat, and sugary foods (Western Cape Government, 2016). Diabetes and hypertension were the most prevalent co-morbidities present in Western Cape Covid19 deaths by mid-June 2020 (Western Cape Government 2020). Ensuring access to sufficient fresh nutritious food should, therefore, have been a number one priority in the government response to the pandemic lockdown, with a keen eye to support those who produce and distribute to vulnerable and far-flung communities. These statistics reveal deep-rooted inequalities relating to race and class, with people of colour already experiencing the brunt of unemployment and hunger, compared to most white South Africans who belong to the middle and upper classes. The legacy of the apartheid-era spatial planning in Cape Town is still felt today. As a result of the Group Areas Act of 1950, people of colour were consigned to the periphery of the city and many continue to lack access to the formal economy (Strauss, 2019).

3. The Impact of Restrictions of Movement during Lockdown on Urban Farmers

It is important to explain first what we understand by ‘urban farmers’, specifically, those who are involved in the research reported on here. In Cape Town, thousands of urban dwellers grow food in

backyards which contributes to their household diets. Depending on the season, between 100 and 200 larger food gardens (100sqm – 1ha) which are mostly located on public ground, such as schools or clinics, are cultivated by urban farmers. These are mostly elderly unemployed women (Engel et al. 2019). They produce a large variety of crops, from artichokes to cabbage and spinach to zucchini. Most urban farmers are integrated into formal food value chains within the alternative food system, i.e. those affiliated with intermediary programs that sell produce from these food gardens to restaurants, hotels, and markets in better-off city quarters (Engel et al., 2019). During the lockdown, these urban farmers received permits to access their farms, as did local street vendors, as they are regarded as part of essential services.

In contrast, the group of 67 urban farmers reported on here are not linked to marketing channels of the alternative food system and used to regularly supply their own neighbourhoods within the townships with fresh produce before the outbreak of Covid-19. Most farmers of this group did not receive a permit to travel to their farms and their markets (Figure 2). They either did not know about the procedure and where to apply, or they gave up after days of unsuccessful attempts at the respective issuing offices. As a result, crops which could not be harvested, rotted in dozens of gardens, and these urban farmers were not able to provide fresh and healthy food that was urgently needed in their neighbourhood. Despite their important role as local food providers, they were not regarded as providing essential services. In addition to the current crop losses, the lockdown will also lead to losses in the next winter growing season, due to urban farmers not having access to seedlings and substrate to prepare their fields.

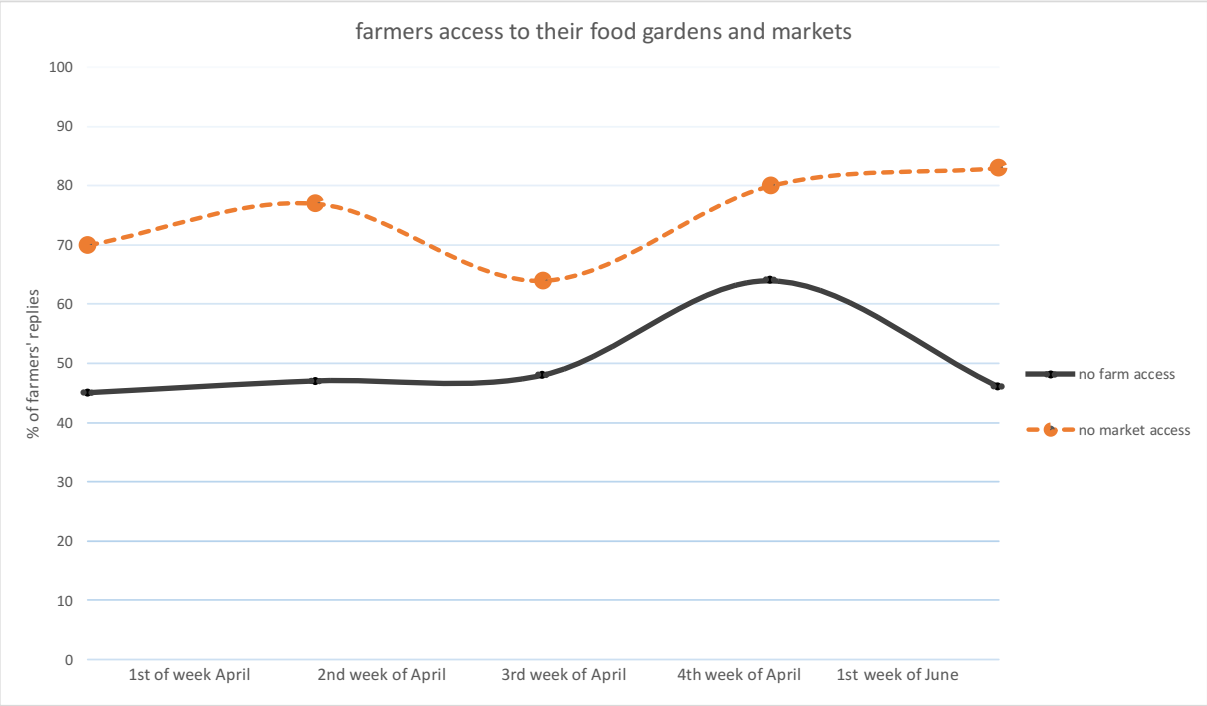

Figure 2: Access to farms and markets, n=32 (April weeks), n=52 (June)

One of the most controversial aspects of the lockdown has been confusion around restrictions and specific requirements in the food sector[4] for food producers and their distribution networks, for emergency food relief and for those tasked with enforcing the law. Rather than guiding and assisting people in understanding the new rules, spaza shops, and food markets were closed, farmers were chased from their fields when tending their livestock and fisherfolk were chased from the beaches. The lack of clarity on this issue trickled down to the South African Police Force and military, where law enforcers created their own interpretations, leading to harassment and brutality and undermining the ability of people working in the sector to do their work or to continue subsistence activities. This lack of clarity pointed to the government's perspective towards protecting large, centralised retailers on the one hand while being ignorant or having a poor understanding of the requirements of the informal economy (Battersby 2020). They are an essential source of the urban poor's food systems, as they sell in small units and also offer the option to buy on credit (Battersby et al. 2016).

4. Empty Plates despite Blooming Food Gardens

The following sections illustrate the four lockdown weeks in April from the perspective of urban farmers.

4.1 First week of lockdown - Coping as an Urban Dweller

> *"The poor are left behind as they could not access the food they usually buy. Those with money bought most of the stuff in the stores. When the poor received their little money, when they got paid, most of the shop was half empty" (female urban farmer)*

Accessing food during the first week of lockdown has been a major challenge: 42% of the urban farmers report that food is not available to them and 58% state that they cannot afford food. They reported long queues, entrance controls at food stores, and days when they had to turn back to queue the next day.

The digital lockdown logbooks reveal that prices rose rapidly during the first week of lockdown (Figure 4). At the same time, the majority of urban farmers lost their income and also access to their own food from their gardens.

[4] According to the first set of regulations to the Disaster Management Act of 2002, gazetted on 25 March 2020, everyone involved in the production, processing, transport, and supply of food were deemed as essential; and therefore allowed to continue their economic activities. Retailers and spaza shops were explicitly named as being allowed to stay open (Regulation 11, read with Annex B.) The regulations did not explicitly require these actors to apply to any authority for a permit. A form was laid out in an Annex for the head of institutions involved in essential goods or services to provide essential workers permission to continue their duties, for example food producers, input suppliers, distribution staff, etc. There was no requirement to apply to any government body. On the 25th of March the Minister of Trade and Industry, Ibrahim Patel, made a media statement announcing a business portal, where businesses could apply for operating permits. However, this was not reflected in the regulations and as it turned out, applied only to registered businesses, leaving the vital informal trade out in the cold (SA Government, 2020).

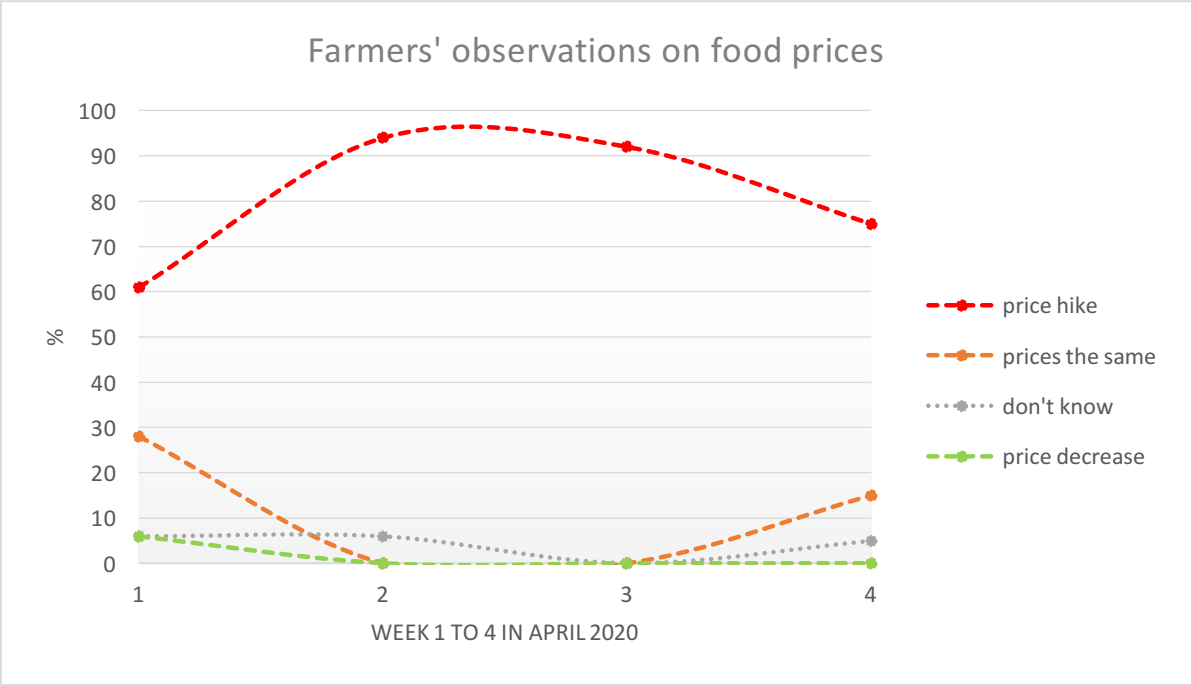

Figure 3 Farmers' perception in % (x-axis) on price developments in their communities for basic groceries (staples but also meat, fish, vegetables, fruit, oil, sugar) (n=32).

Sourcing food became a daily challenge. Long distances had to be covered to reach supermarkets, only to queue for hours and still not be let in. In addition, there was simply not enough money to buy food at all, or even to buy bulk food in stock. State aid, especially in the form of (sometimes temporary) cash from social grants, has been very slow to materialise (PLAAS 2020). Social programmes, such as the school feeding programme, on which 63% of the urban farmers involved in this project depend, were not compensated during the lockdown. Therefore, families (mostly the women) were desperate in their effort to replace these meals. The closure of schools during the lockdown meant that children who received one or two meals per day during the school week were now going without. This deepened food insecurity among children and placed an additional financial burden on very poor households who are short of cash. The distribution of food parcels, which could help ease this shortage, is organised by different governmental and non-governmental organisations, political parties, or church- initiated food donations. However, for many poor households, the application procedure is not clear, or, as is the case for most of the urban farmers, they do not qualify for it. As a socio-economic study in 2017 showed, urban farmers are not the poorest of the poor and household incomes are usually above the average income of the neighbourhood (Engel et al. 2019). However, in losing their regular farming income, they, therefore, had no income in April. Of the 67 urban farmers who participated in this project, only one received a food parcel (from a local Muslim NGO).

4.2 Second week of lockdown: Farming for Food Waste or Farming for Food Security?

> *"Yes, we can change to work towards addressing the importance of food sovereignty and sustainability" (male urban farmer)*

In the second week, a key issue debated among farmers was how to tackle the crisis and start activities with regard to re-instating urban agriculture as a local supplier in communities. At the beginning of the lockdown, they saw an opportunity in the crisis. Despite being a small contributor, compared to other larger food producers, the gardens could have played a role in supplying vegetables to soup kitchens if urban farmers had received support from the government, such as travel permits or state subsidies for food donations from food gardens. A group of urban farmers in Gugulethu, who were lucky to obtain a permit individually, organised themselves and harvested transported food and donated it to local institutions, churches, and families in need. This has helped, at least in some cases, to support those in need and to avoid wasting food. On the downside, farmers did not benefit economically, as nobody paid or subsidised these food donations, neither the hungry people nor the soup kitchens nor the township administration.

Figure 4 Local farmers distribute food to communities in Gugulethu. Source: own photography by Qamata, 2020

4.3 Third week of lockdown: No income, no food

> *"People have to stay at home, no work, no food, people are hungry" (male urban farmer)*

In week 3, farmers increasingly reported that the lockdown affected the security of communities, their rights of freedom, the income situation, and their constitutional right to food and their safety as

residents of Cape Town. The farmer group gradually reported more about unrest and growing violence. For example, food trucks were being looted before unloading, shootings took place during the distribution of food parcels, and the military used tear gas to enforce social distancing. Memories of the escalating violence, especially in cities of the Global South during the 2008 hunger crisis, were reawakening. This is a situation that cannot be accepted as the "new normal" as the on-going crisis situation is being called.

As a consequence of the lockdown's price increase and the earlier closed spaza stores, four out of five farmers had to change their diets (n=52). For example, 83% consumed more staples and 40% consumed more vegetables but had reduced consumption of meat, fish, oil, and sugar. The main reason was that there is less cash available to buy these foodstuffs. Some of the farmers stated that they would like to eat more healthy food to avoid infection risks and so they are increasingly choosing vegetables. It was only in the third week of April that small vendors and spaza stores were allowed to re-open.

4.4 Fourth Week of Lockdown - Urban Hunger

> *"I went to visit my mom, she had a pains on her foot and couldn't step on it, spent the whole of Sunday in bed. We didn't have anything to eat for lunch and we were talking about the food parcels from the Ethiopian and Somali community. She was voicing her disappointment at how she is always "forgotten" by her own government, even though she had dedicated her time for our community" (female urban farmer)*

The impact of lockdown on urban farmers' food situation is severe. Every third farmer often (several times a week) goes without food, while two-thirds have often (several times a week) reduced the number of meals per day and reduced the portion size (n=52). They cook what will last for many days and can be stretched again and again, such as lentil curry or beans.

The coping strategies against hunger are multiple. Urban farmers report rising debt and every second farmer regularly purchases food on credit or borrows from family or neighbours. Two-thirds say they have to decide daily, or several times a week, between food or other needs, such as electricity or mobile data to do home-schooling (n=52). Farmers further report the sale of assets, such as mobile phones or TVs, to generate cash to meet daily needs, including food. Overall, the social family network is the central coping strategy; those who continue to work and earn a salary are now providing support for even more people, as families rely on those who are still in paid employment.

The impact of lockdown on communities (Figure 5) and families (Figure 6) became more severe in week 4 of the lockdown, particularly related to food security, which was not mentioned in the third week. As it was the last week of the month, many faced severe challenges to purchase food. For example, a female farmer stated: "*Everyone is at home not able to go to work, I am worried about even more poverty, loss of income and that may increase criminal activities directed by survival."* An increase in violence in the streets has been observed, and fear of robbery.

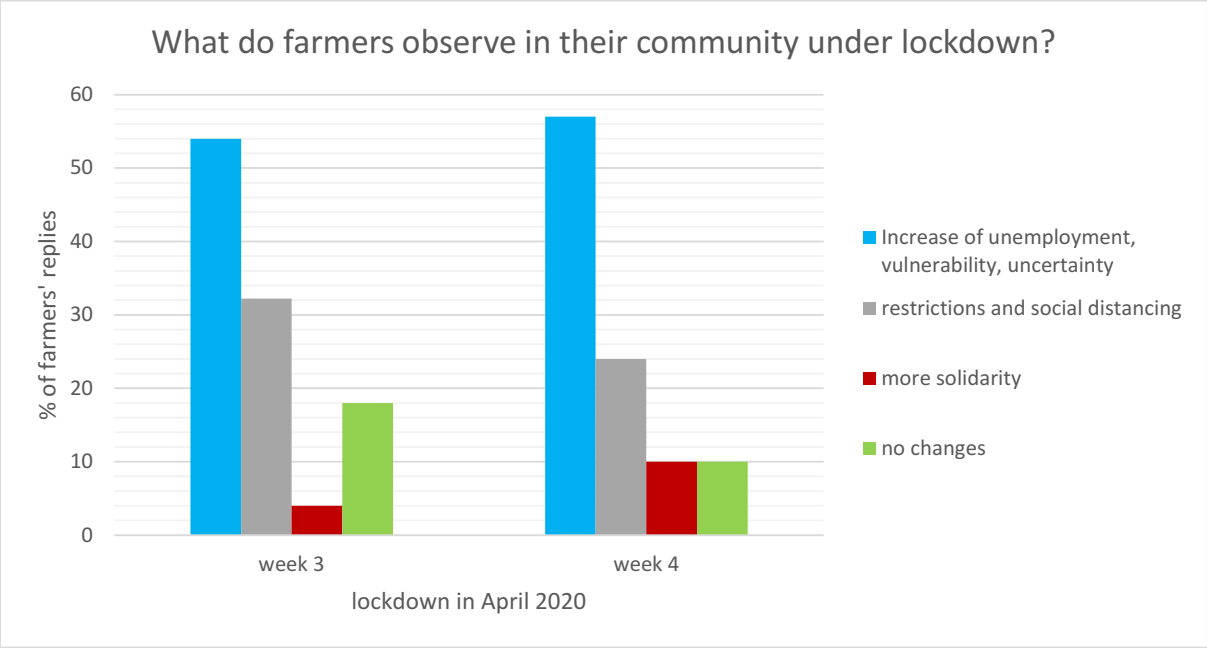

Figure 5: Co-researchers document their observation within their communities. Qualitative content analysis. (n=32)

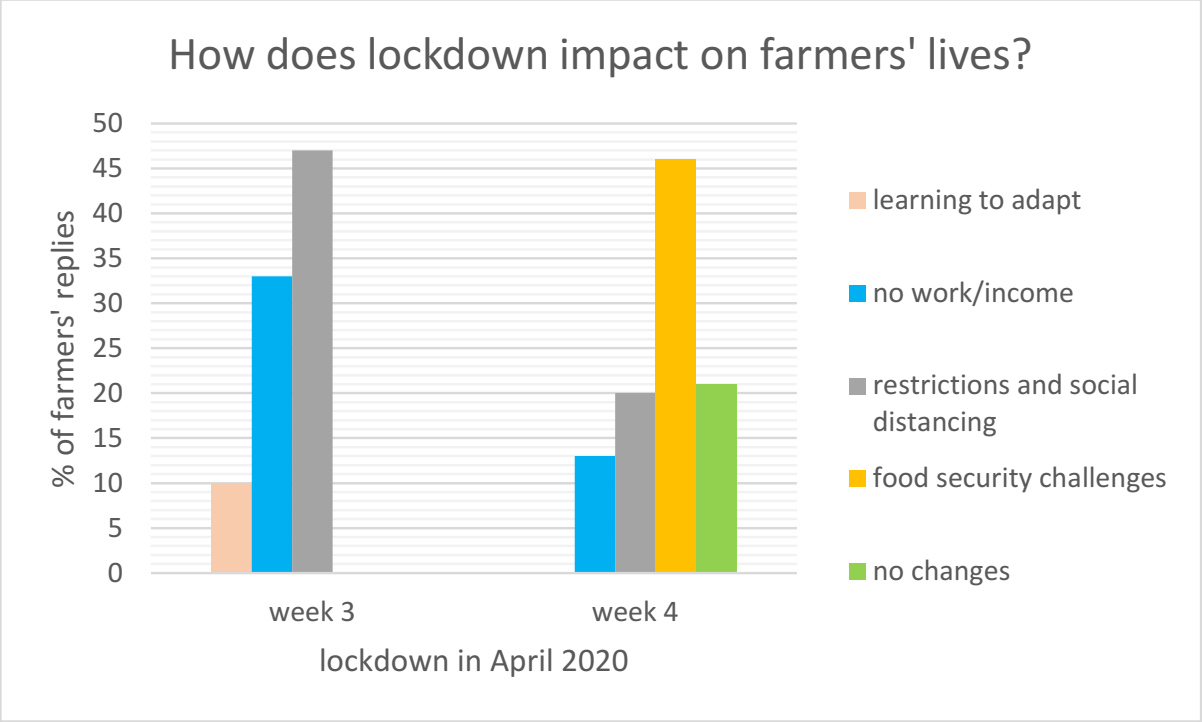

Figure 6: Co-researchers document their family life. Qualitative content analysis. (n=32)

4.5 The Covid-19 Pandemic Reveals Shortcomings of Global and Local Food Systems

Is it too early to discuss a better post-COVID food system? Does the crisis offer the chance for change that has been demanded for decades? It is expected that the lockdown restrictions in the Global South will lead to a considerable increase in hunger and food insecurity in the near future. It remains to be seen whether the world is heading for a major hunger crisis, and whether the damage of Covid-19 restrictions is much greater than the consequences of the virus itself.

This devastating Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the many flaws in the industrialised global food regime. The disruption of global, regional, and local food chains in a time of severely restricted movement has made food security a top concern around the globe (Bello, 2020). Among others, the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food (IPES Food) critically analysed the fault-lines exposed by the pandemic and propose a transformation. This would reconnect people with food production and thereby reduce peoples' vulnerability to economic shocks (IPES-Food 2020). The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa has also pinned the pandemic on industrial agricultural practices and called for, amongst other things, political will, and support to nurture "territorial" and small-scale agricultural systems. Meanwhile, in South Africa, the pandemic has mobilized a whole new solidarity amongst a wide array of civil society and grassroots actors, as food producers have mobilized to support those in need in their communities (Seidel 2020). One of the most active new platforms, the C19 People's Coalition, points out that, "COVID-19 thus comes into a highly skewed and constrained environment, with disaster measures to contain its spread locking people down into old apartheid spaces without adequate access to food supplies or health care. The results are already catastrophic with hunger and food shortages being reported on a scale we have not seen in this country for half a century" (C19 People's Coalition, 2020).

5. Conclusion and Outlook

This participatory research reveals underlying and ongoing structural inequalities and injustices inherent in the context of urban farmers which has been exacerbated by the current Covid-19 pandemic and shows only the beginning of a probably more serious crisis. As is the case in other regions of the world, small-scale farmers in urban and rural areas have struggled to make a living within the broader global food system that still favours highly industrialised agriculture. Urban agriculture has only contributed on a limited scale to providing locally produced food for those who live in the marginalised area of the city. Nevertheless, in Cape Town, hundreds of farmers produce vegetables on small plots of land – most of them with extraordinary passion – and play an important role as urban soil improvers, as educators and often as community-builders. However, urban farmers who are not affiliated to intermediary programs, are excluded from government support strategies, and worse, the government hampered community-driven efforts by supporting only a selected number of urban farmers with permits during the lockdown. In implementing a strict lockdown, the South African government paid little attention to combatting urban hunger. In the absence of government support, civil society organisations, including the urban farmers, provide food to food insecure communities. The Cape Town Community Action Network (CAN) linked affluent neighbourhoods with poorer ones

and distributed food. Moreover, within township communities, people formed neighbourhood support groups and the establishment of local community soup kitchens.

Another important topic is information and education regarding Covid-19. On the one hand, farmers are demanding that there should be more active dissemination of information about the virus, restrictions, safety measures, and ways of obtaining food. On the other hand, they also demanded that decision makers are better informed about what is important in marginalised communities. The feeling of being "unheard", which was repeatedly reported in various focus-group discussions within a previous project that was conducted with urban farmers between 2016-2019[5], was further exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. As a male farmer noted: *"I would make sure that there are street committees that will monitor the situation of each of household instead of having structures that don't really know what is really happening with the people at the bottom*".

This crisis reveals that the group of urban farmers who participated in this report, farm for their neighbourhood communities and are part of local solutions. Looking ahead, a farmers' group plans to plant hundreds of backyard gardens in Gugulethu after lockdown. Farmers in Mfuleni are currently producing dozens of bags of compost for new home-garden projects. In Mfuleni, Khayelitsha, Mitchells Plain and Gugulethu, eight urban farmers are developing a concept for independent nurseries that sell seedlings to other farmers. They plan to produce seedlings that correspond to local food demands, such as locally consumed leafy vegetables or lentils to meet the protein demand, which is key to improve food security in the townships.

However, to be part of the solution, small-scale farmers need purposeful support. The Department of Agriculture of the Western Cape offered financial support for urban farmers during the lockdown, but only for those with an annual turnover between R50,000 and R100,000 (DoA2020). This does not apply to the small-scale farmers involved in this project, whose income is on average R6,000 annually in 2017 and 2018 (Paganini et al. 2018). It also reveals a major concern of many small-scale farmers, which is reflected in the following question by an urban farmer: "Do I fit into their scheme of a small farmer?"

This study was initiated by urban farmers who decided to unite and take action. They aimed to shed light on their current desperate situation, but also to focus attention on how the current crisis links to broader issues of ongoing racial, gender, and socio-economic inequality and injustice. The farmers' group already proposed extensive concrete solutions to the city council that could support and scale-out their ongoing efforts. For example through closing important knowledge gaps regarding access to support structures, acquiring funding for micro-enterprises, improving agricultural information technology, and addressing gaps in infrastructure, such as storage and processing facilities to avoid food waste, as well as the transport to reach local markets (Karriem 2019).

[5] The UFISAMO project (Urban Agriculture for Food Security and Income Generation in South Africa and Mozambique) was coordinated by the Centre for Rural Development (SLE) at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin between March 2016 and November 2019.
https://www.sle-berlin.de/index.php/en/research/ufisamo

The interim committee of the Farmer Forum in Cape Town, which is an independent network of urban farmers, formulates the following specific requests to policy makers:

1. *Acknowledge all small-scale farmers as essential services.*
2. *Simplify access to vacant public land to support the locally organised urban farmers network, and expand the net of home-gardeners and food gardens that provide food in the Cape Flats, and support the creation of a circular local township economy.*
3. *Tear down the injustice in the food system – the thousands of previous dialogues among the many food actors, such as NGO and policy, civil society and intermediaries in Cape Town, hardly tackled the root cause of why urban agriculture has not been as relevant in contributing towards food security as in other cities in the South.*
4. *First and foremost, speak with and not about urban farmers who constantly develop local solutions such as soup kitchens, food processing, local transport concepts.*
5. *Simplify institutional processes: most innovations are initiated by urban farmers, but these efforts are hampered by administrative barriers or a lack of funding. Funding should be made available and directed to actors in urban agriculture projects.*

This opinion piece does not argue for urban agriculture as the sole solution to a food crisis or to combat urban hunger. We also argue that it is an obsolete poverty alleviation concept to fight (urban) hunger by letting "the poor" grows their own food. Cities are too complex systems that rather require holistic approaches. This is even more pronounced in a city where class and race determine privilege and divide, and ultimately who eats during the lockdown and who does not. However, building on the documentation of the participating farmers as co-researchers, we argue that valuable solutions provided by and from urban agriculture within their communities should be seen, acknowledged, and meaningfully supported.

Acknowledgement

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