

The conundrum of rising agricultural output and worsening food security in South Africa

- South Africa has the contradiction of being the leading agricultural exporter in Africa, and a swelling number of households that is food insecure. Without proper policy engagement of this challenge, the sector face the risk of more waves of misconceptions about its export-driven growth drive while many South Africans are impoverished. We believe that an accurate diagnosis of the problem and its underlying causes is critical to formulating a suitable policy response.
- In February 2025, Statistics South Africa released the Food Security Report for 2019, 2022 and 2023 (COVID-19 affected the ability to collect data in 2020 and 2021). The report utilized data from the General Household Survey (GHS) for those years. The report's most striking observation was that 'the proportion of households in South Africa that experienced moderate to severe food insecurity was estimated at 15,8% in 2019, 16,2% in 2022, and 19,7% in 2023. Over this period, the proportion of households that experienced severe food insecurity was estimated to be 6,4%, 7,5%, and 8,0%, respectively'.
- It is not the lack of supply of nutritious, high-quality food and safe food products, or prices that has caused the deteriorating food security. Access seems to be the fundamental challenge, especially for households with no regular income sources. Therefore, addressing income poverty at the household level must be at the center of any strategy to deal with food insecurity. Clearly, this is not a challenge that can be resolved by the agricultural sector alone but through coordinated efforts to grow the South African economy, lift employment across various sectors and providing appropriate support to vulnerable households.
- Despite the concerning trend in Stats SA's survey, at the national level, South Africa remains food secure and is a net exporter of agricultural products. The exports are necessary for sustaining farming incomes, generating the resources necessary for investment and ultimately the sector's ability to create and sustain jobs. Notably, South Africa does not export its food supplies without appropriately considering the domestic food needs at the national level. Moreover, the country's food prices remain relatively moderate. Despite this, food insecurity will remain a challenge if households have little to no incomes.
- One of the measures some researchers use to evaluate the food security condition of each country relative to the world is The Economist's Global Food Security Index. While slightly dated, if we consider then 2022 results, South Africa ranked 59th out of 113 countries in the index and the most food secure in Sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa ranked the second most food-secure country in the African continent after Morocco. When looking at the index scoring, it becomes clear why South Africa's food security ranking has improved somewhat. South Africa's scoring came in at 61,7, up from 61,4 in the previous

year. The Global Food Security Index comprises four subindices, namely: (1) food affordability, (2) food availability, (3) food quality and safety, and (4) sustainability and adaptation.

- Still, the national level picture may be hard to celebrate in an environment with many households are food insecure. And this means that ensuring the economy grows and creates employment is critical. In agriculture, better support for boosting output, especially labour-intensive value chains, to ensure that more job opportunities in South Africa's small towns will be important. There should also be a stronger focus to revitalizing other sectors of the economy, as South Africa's household food insecurity problems will not be resolved only through agriculture.
- Agriculture will play its role where possible, and the path for agricultural growth has been studied and included in the policy thinking. For example, at a technical level, the ideas of expanding agriculture and agro-processing capacity to boost growth and job creation were well established as far back as in the National Development Plan 2012. They were again highlighted in the 2019 National Treasury paper, in the 2022 Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan, and, most recently, in a book titled *A Country of Two Agricultures: The Disparities, The Challenges, The Solutions*.
- Ultimately, South Africa's agriculture has a role in resolving the household poverty challenges. However, the responsibility does not lie solely in the sector. Other sectors of the economy can play an essential role in creating work and general fiscal space that would be used for different social causes to improve the quality of life in South Africa.
- The growing exports of agriculture are not at the expense of the local supply and are essential to growing the South African agricultural sector and ensuring that the over 926k people working in farms across the country retain their jobs and that more jobs are created in the future. Through their income, those employed help improve food security conditions in their communities.