

Good food security ranking does not mean an end to hunger

By Wandile Sihlobo, [Business Day](#), 25 October 2018

The medium-term budget policy statement has addressed some of our bread-and-butter issues, but now that it is behind us it is time to reflect on another: food security.

We have seen some rather pessimistic media coverage of the SA agricultural sector over the past couple of months due to policy uncertainty. On October 16, the Economist Intelligence Unit highlighted the contribution of the SA agricultural sector to ensuring food security, ranking SA 45th out of 113 countries in the 2018 global food security index, making it the only African country within the top 50.

The index evaluates the most critical aspects of food security, namely affordability and availability, as well as quality and safety. A close look into these subindices shows that SA ranks highly in availability, measured at 35 out of 113. However, boasting about this ranking when millions of South Africans go to bed hungry every day is contradictory, as has been pointed out to me after a few presentations where I cited these statistics.

We must remember, however, that the food security index balances the four elements to arrive at a rating and covers matters at a broad national level. In this regard SA produces enough food to fill the shelves of supermarkets with high-quality products but still has a long way to go in addressing household food insecurity as many households cannot afford the food that is available in a way that meets their nutritional demands.

SA's good standing in the global food security rating has been made possible by robust agricultural production, which in turn has been supported by increasing investment, both capital and human. While production of major grains such as maize was down 23% year on year in the 2017/2018 production season after a bumper crop the previous season, it was still higher than long-term average production, at 12.9-million tonnes. Moreover, soya bean production reached a record level of 1.6-million tons, and other crops such as sugar also performed well, all adding up to improving the country's food availability.

As we look to the future to learn whether SA will maintain and/or improve this ranking, production data that will be released on Thursday afternoon by the crop estimate committee will give us some clues of what the next year might look like. The committee will release the "intentions of farmers to plant in 2018/19" statistics. The activity on the ground has thus far been encouraging, with planting activity under way in Mpumalanga, the Free State, Gauteng and parts of KwaZulu-Natal.

The near-term weather outlook also paints a positive picture of possibly higher rainfall between November 2018 and January 2019 in most summer crop growing areas. The preliminary production estimates from reputable global agricultural observers such as the International Grains Council and the US department of agriculture are fairly optimistic, forecasting SA's maize production at 12.3-million to 13-million tons in the 2018/19 production season. As I indicated in my column on October 11, a maize harvest above 11-million tons could keep SA as a net exporter until the first half of 2020, given the carryover stock from the 2017/18 production season.

This is not only a maize story though. Oilseed production is also expected to be above long-term average levels, although the medium-term possibility remains of an El Niño event setting in later in the summer. Aside from land reform policy developments, this will be a key determinant of whether SA slips from being among the top 50 most food-secure countries in the world or maintains and improves its ranking. I lean towards the latter, hoping that with time SA will address household food insecurity issues.