

Food is a fundamental human right, yet South Africans go hungry

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As South Africa celebrates Human Rights month, the Tiger Brands Foundation (TBF) would like to place some emphasis on the one human right that continues to be obviated despite being recognised by law – the right to food.



As asserted by the South Africa Human Rights Commission: “The right to food is a human right recognised under national and international law, which protects the right of human beings to access food and feed themselves, either by producing their own food or by buying it. The right to food is linked to one’s right to life and dignity.”

Despite this declaration, the TBF is saddened by the fact that an astonishing amount of South African households – some 2,1 million (11,6%) – reported experiencing hunger in 2021, which are the latest official figures reported by Stats SA. Even more tragic is that Stats SA puts the number of households with children aged five years or younger who experienced hunger that year at 683,221.

“The figures are already very concerning, yet they are bound to get worse as South Africans continue to battle against rising food prices, steep inflation and an increasingly tough economic environment,” says Karl Muller, operations manager at TBF.

“It is common knowledge that children who do not receive adequate nutritious food are at high risk of acute malnutrition and cannot develop properly. The Department of Health reported in Parliament last year that over 15,000 children are diagnosed with severe acute malnutrition annually, resulting in 1,000 deaths a year.”

According to a research study conducted in 2022, around 10,000 child deaths occur every year in South Africa due to malnutrition, which accounts for one-third of all child deaths. Additionally, 27% of children under the age of five suffer from stunted growth caused by chronic malnutrition.

“As part of our ongoing efforts to fight child hunger, the TBF remains resolutely committed to ensuring that every child’s right to adequate nutrition and education is met, which we would like to highlight especially on Human Rights Day,” says Muller.

For more than a decade, TBF has been operating its in-school breakfast programme to complement the lunch provided by the Department of Basic Education’s National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). Since its inception in 2011, the TBF’s in-school breakfast programme has become one of the most efficient nutrition schemes in South Africa, serving nutritious meals to tens of thousands of learners from underprivileged communities daily.

“TBF’s breakfast programme supports the fundamental human right to food. We provide nutritious breakfasts to 74,080 learners every day, at 96 schools around the country in all nine provinces. Since it was established, the TBF has served more than 120 million meals by June last year,” says Muller.

“As one of the most efficiently run non-governmental organisations, the Foundation provides food at R2.82 per meal per day, currently spending about R28m a year to serve about 67,700 learners a nutritious breakfast.”

Launched in 1994, government’s NSNP today feeds more than 9.6 million children in South Africa per day, at more than 21 000 schools across the country’s nine provinces. The programme was designed to improve the ability of children to learn by combating malnutrition, reducing hunger and improving school attendance.

“The TBF, through a partnership with The Department of Education, is working to combat malnutrition in South Africa’s school-going youth by providing a robust and quality in-school nutrition programme that will include breakfast and lunch by 2035,” says Muller.

He points out that a typical TBF hot breakfast consists of either a fortified sorghum, maize or oats-based porridge, prepared by food handlers who are trained to cook in bulk, as well as how to use the Foundation’s sponsored mobile kitchens optimally. Each learner is provided with one plate and a set of eating utensils.

“The costs, distribution, training, and monitoring of our in-school breakfast nutrition programme are the sole responsibility of TBF. However, we make use of the systems developed by the NSNP. The breakfast programme has been expanded significantly to include primary and combined schools across all nine provinces since its pilot phase,” says Muller.

He notes that school nutrition remains one of the most effective measures to combat the problem of learner dropouts and the additional pressure on food security that has been brought about by the tough economic conditions and rapidly rising food prices. Investment in school nutrition programmes should thus remain an urgent priority for all stakeholders of TBF.

“Nourishing young growing minds should remain a priority and the work done by government and organisations such as the TBF is key to addressing many of the major health challenges affecting vulnerable communities in South Africa,” concludes Muller.

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