COMMUNITY VOICES ON FOOD PRICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Community Monitors Activist Training

This booklet is part of the work produced in the Community Monitors/Activists Training Programme. The Programme is one of the Bench Marks Foundation's areas of activity to support activists in building core organising and problem-solving skills.

This in turn is aimed at contributing to activists' effectiveness in their local organisations and communities.

The programme currently involves activists in communities living near mines in Mpumalanga, Limpopo, North West Province and Gauteng.

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CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
BEE	Black Economic Empowerment
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PEJDR	Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Report
SASSA	The South African Social Security Agency
StatsSA	Statistics South Africa
GST	General Sales Tax
VAT	Value-added Tax
SAFEX	South African Futures Exchange
CFE	Chicago Futures Exchange
PAYE	Pay As You Earn
UIF	Unemployed Insurance Fund
TERS	Temporary Employment Relief

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Community Monitoring process

This report covers the actions and efforts of community activists in their respective areas during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns. We saw how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the lives of ordinary South Africans. When president Cyril Ramaphosa announced that the country would be going on lockdown, he indicated that it would impact on the country's economy. Many people would lose their jobs, life would be different and everyone would have to adjust to the new normal. He later went on to announce a R500 billion stimulus package as well as increases to the Social Grants in order to alleviate the pressures on livelihoods that came with the lockdowns.

This was, of course, additional to the fact that the inequality gap has been increasing for many years. Things were extremely bad for most people long before Covid-19. Millions are unemployed and many who do work are forced to earn their livelihoods through casual, part-time or piece-work. And millions suffer informal housing or homelessness while basic services such as water, sewerage and energy are either lacking or only available at a price that is not affordable.

Lockdowns saw many people losing their jobs because businesses shut down as the economy slowly declined. Livelihoods were impacted upon and more people were left increasingly vulnerable. While some people were excited about the cash injection they were to receive in the form of the new social grants, things were worsening every day. Everyone was worried about providing food for their families and chose food over luxuries. More and more people were losing jobs and applying for the SRD grant even if it was not enough to cover basic foodstuffs.

With the lockdowns causing business closures and loss of income, people wondered whether food prices would stabilise or decrease. According to orthodox or conventional economic principles, it was expected there would be a fall in demand. The other possibility is that retailers and others in the food industry would use the pandemic to profiteer by increasing prices.

This question is normally answered in official circles and the media by looking at the inflation rate. And the annual year-on-year inflation rate in December 2020 remained low at about 3.3%. Yet independent NGOs, such as the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Report (PEJDR), which monitor price increases of a basket of goods that working-class people consume made the sensational claim that food prices had actually gone up by more than 17% over 2020!

So the BMF, through community activists embarked on a study to measure the impact of the pandemic lockdowns so as to know exactly how the interventions can be tailored. We also wanted to have a report which can be used as an advocacy tool.

We began the process from May 2020 by observing what was happening in our communities, and wrote short articles and alerts about what was happening so that everyone could know about the situation so as to bring about change. As we went along we had focus groups which examined different aspects of such as food prices, food gardens, GBV etc. This report gives a view of how people experienced food prices during the pandemic.

1.1.1 A Fact-finding mission

Community Activists were tasked with visiting *spaza* shops, shopping malls and retail outlets to compare essential food items' prices before as opposed to during the lockdowns. The results of the exercise demonstrated exorbitant food prices and high increases such as the country has not seen before. This happened after the President had begged the food corporations not to increase food prices during the pandemic. Monitors then wrote reports comparing those essential food items' prices against their initial prices. Most reports indicated price increases of between 30% to 40%.

The second exercise monitors engaged in was to interview members of the community on how food prices was affecting their lives and livelihoods.

The intention of the exercise was to establish the households' incomes against what they consume on a regular basis. We also wanted to establish whether the government had delivered on its promise that the most needy families would be further assisted by being given food hampers. Lastly, we wished to establish if members of the community see household gardening as a means of survival during this difficult period.

Community Activists interviewed the community members in the North West and wrote up their experiences. All were asked to describe their personal circumstances, how they earned their livelihoods and, given the controversies as to what is included in the basket of goods of official statistics, to say what is in their regular food shopping list and how prices changed over 2020. The BMF would like to thank them for their commitment to changing the lives of their communities, and their courage especially during the lockdown period.

"The panic of lockdown business closures and loss of income, left people wondering whether food prices would stabilise, decrease or increase"

1.2 The Community Voices

The following 21 people from mining-affected communities in the North West were interviewed:

Letty Mosime (34), who relies only on the child support grants which she receives on a monthly basis for four of her children. During the Covid-19 pandemic she also received the Covid-19 relief grant. From the total household income, she buys the following 10 essential items on a monthly basis: rice; maize meal; sugar; cooking oil; flour; 5kgs of chicken portions; canned pilchards; toiletries; cleaning items and electricity.

Lorato Setlholoeng (35) is unemployed and has been relying on the child grants she receives on a monthly basis on behalf of her child. During the Covid-19 pandemic she also received the Covid-19 relief grant, which helped to boost her monthly household income. With the little monthly income from the child grants Lorato buys the following ten essential items: medication; meat; maize meal; toiletries; sugar; tea; milk; cooking oil; flour and electricity.

Betty Mathunda (62) is an elderly person surviving on an old age grant together with child grants that are received for three of her grandchildren. During the pandemic her total monthly household income was boosted by the Covid-19 relief grant that two of her children received. With the monthly household income Betty normally buys food hampers, which consist of the following essential items: sugar; flour; rice; cooking oil; washing powder; canned pilchards.

Lesego Mabale (30) is a member of a family of ten. Their household income consists of one person's salary and child support grants for four children. The older brother who doesn't live with them also chips in with financial assistance from time to time. During lockdown three of the unemployed family members received the monthly Covid-19 relief grant. Ten essential items bought on a monthly basis with the household income include the following: maize meal; rice; cooking oil; sugar; mabele; baby milk; baby food; 5kgs of mixed chicken portions; flour and samp. In the past 3-5 months it has been difficult to make ends meet because of the price increases. This has led to the family having to leave out some essential items from their normal monthly grocery list.

Maletsatsi Ramapulana (60) is an elderly woman in a family of five. Their income is from a child grant received for one child together with old age grants received by three elderly persons in the house and money made from driving a taxi. With the monthly household income, Maletsatsi buys the following ten essential items: maize meal; flour; rice; cooking oil; sugar; coffee; meat (chicken); mabele; toiletries and electricity.

Onkgopotse Dube (31) is an unemployed mother who is dependent on her own mother. She does however also sell eggs and atchar to survive. She is from a family of ten. Their monthly household income is earned from: salaries of one formally employed person and two informally employed persons; one child grant and one old age grant together with financial assistance from one relative. Even though she's unemployed she did not receive any Covid-19 relief grant during the lockdown. With the total monthly household income, they buy the following ten essential food items: maize meal; potatoes; cooking oil; rice; bread; milk; eggs; canned pilchards; vegetables and tea bags.

A 34-year-old female who did not wish to be named is currently employed at one of the local mines. She lives with her mother who is also employed, a sibling and her two children. She does not receive any social grants, nor has she received any food parcels but managed to survive nonetheless as she also sells personal care products which earns her extra money.

Tshepiso (41) an unemployed male. He lives alone and survives by doing odd jobs and selling recyclable plastic, glass bottles and any other valuable scraps he can find. He has been receiving the R350 relief grant which came in handy. Tshepiso lives in a shack with no electricity. He uses a paraffin stove or wood which he sometimes also sells when locals need wood for ceremonies. He normally buys what he can afford. With prices going up it has been difficult to buy essentials that are not included in most food parcels such as personal care products.

Lerato Motene (37) is a mother of three. She lives with her mother and 2 siblings. She and her sister are employed. She works in hospitality, receives grants for her 3 children and also sells Avon personal care products. Her mother receives a social grants and a brother receives the Covid-19 relief grant. She fortunately also gets assistance from the father of her children monthly.

Tshegofatso (31) lives at her grandmother's house with her mom and they are 13 people. There are 8 children and 5 unemployed adults. They receive grants for all 8 children and the old age grant for her grandmother. They have 15 backrooms, which they rent out to mine workers and this the family's main source of income. Sadly, they are always in conflict as the rooms were built by her now unemployed aunt and not by the whole family. She does sell Tupperware

Palesa (30) is a female in a family of 5. There is only one employed in the family. They also receive child and old age grants. The family is also assisted financially by relatives. They buy food for R2000 which does not last them for the month and they also struggle with paying school fees and the children's school transport. Covid-19 affected most people negatively and Palesa says that it's been financially stressful.

Maria Tladi (39) is a mother and a breadwinner from a family of four. The family has been surviving through the child grants they receive monthly on behalf of two children. During the Covid-19 lockdown, the two unemployed persons received the R350 SRD grant which helped boost the monthly household income. From the total monthly income, Maria buys the following ten essential food items: maize meal; sugar; tea bags; cooking oil; salt; soup; dried beans; canned pilchards; tomatoes and onions.

A 31-year old woman who did not want to be named comes from a family of four. They survive mainly on child grants received monthly on behalf of two children. During the Covid-19 lockdown two of the unemployed adults received the SRD grant which helped boost the monthly household income. They buy the following ten essential items monthly from the total household income: canned pilchards; canned beef; cooking oil; maize meal; milk; sugar; onions; tomatoes; potatoes and washing powder.

Margaret Nape is a mother in a family of four. They are surviving on a salary of one person, child grants received for one child and, during the Covid-19 lockdowns, one unemployed person was receiving the R350 relief grant. With the total monthly household income, she buys the following eight essential items: sugar; tea bags; flour; vegetables; powdered milk; cooking oil; dried beans and maize meal.

Martha Molotsane (58) is a single mother in a family of six. They survive on disability and foster care grants to make up their total monthly household income. With that she buys the following nine essential items: bread; maize meal; beans; sugar; tea bags; cooking oil; washing powder; toiletries and flour.

Steven (31) is a breadwinner doing piece-jobs. In a family of three they survive on child grants received for one child and the little he earns from doing piece-jobs. During the lockdown his partner received the TERS grant. With their total monthly household income, they buy the following ten essential items: maize meal; cooking oil; salt; sugar; coffee; washing powder; bath-soap; toilet paper; eggs and canned pilchards.

Tebogo (29) is employed full-time and lives alone. His salary is his only source of income. He buys on a monthly basis the following essential items: dairy products; maize meal; rice; macaroni; toiletries; eggs and French polony.

Nothemba (27) lives in a family of three. They survive on child grants and income from part-time jobs supplemented with financial assistance from a relative. With the total monthly household income, she buys the following ten essential items: maize meal; mixed chicken portions; rice; soya beans; toiletries; baby formula; nappies (Huggies); hair products; meat and vegetables.

Sebojang (33) is a wife in a family of three. They survive on child grants and income from informal employment. With what they get in a month she buys the following essential items: maize meal; mixed chicken portions; nappies; vegetables; soya mince; toiletries; baby food and meat.

A 49-year-old mother in a family of seven that survive on income earned by her daughter from casual employment and also child grants for four children. With what they earn per month the family buys the following nine essential items: bath-soap; washing powder; rice; soup; cooking oil; samp; maize meal; sanitary pads and toiletries.

A 58-year-old father who lives alone did not want to be named. He survives on income from casual employment and financial assistance from relatives. He was also receiving the Covid-19 relief grant. He purchases the following essential items monthly: cooking oil; maize meal; salt; eggs; washing powder and toiletries.

Looking over the profiles of the community voices in our small sample we can see a number of patterns which were there long before Covid-19.

- **Of the 21 community members interviewed 17 were women** and only 4 were men. This is a reflection of how much women bear the responsibilities of domestic labour and the rearing of children. This also means that it is women who have the knowledge of the incomes received from Child Support and other SASSA grants and plan the household expenditure on food. Women were the ones who tended to come forward for this research project and the impact of higher food prices has a particular significance for them. With the mass immiseration of the working class in South Africa over the last few decades, women have in effect become the heads of households.

- **As regards livelihoods only two people have a full-time job.** Everyone else is either unemployed or in some form of piece-work, part-time or casual labour or sells things to get some income.

- **With the exception of one man, everyone lives as a collective** sharing incomes received as families, where those who get something share it with everyone else.

- **Almost everyone relies on the various SASSA grants** (Child support, old age or disability).

As regards what people buy as part of their regular shopping — what they themselves identify as "essential goods" — there is also a pattern: maize meal, cooking oil, flour, chicken, washing powder etc. Already we see people's survival choices well before Covid-19: more chicken and pilchards than red meat, flour for the making of bread and the importance of maize meal as a staple.

No-one listed gym membership, alcohol, car instalments, bond instalments or take-away foods — items that would have been there in the essential items for middle class and rich households.

Which brings us to the issue of the way government, academics and the media talk about food prices and the contrast with the community's experience – through the device of inflation.

1.3 Inflation

Inflation — or by its official name, the Consumer Price Index — is a measure of how much consumer prices have increased over a year comparing a month in one year with the month in the previous year.

StatsSA takes a *basket of goods* to make this comparison. They compare the price of their *basket of goods* with the same *basket of goods* the year before. Every now and again the statisticians change the kind of *goods* they would include in the *basket*, to reflect changing life-styles in the country. But people from the rich, the middle classes and the working class have very different lifestyles. In the past StatsSA did try and accommodate these differences by taking three different *baskets* — for upper, middle and lower income categories — and then averaging the final figure for the official inflation rate. But over the last few decades of neo-liberal capitalism the growth of the poor and precarious amongst the working class has become so huge that StatsSA — along with such official institutions throughout the world — simply ignores the experience of the majority in making their calculations for inflation.

More recently the choice of the *goods for the basket* for the calculation of inflation has also become a politically sensitive one in South Africa. The Finance Ministry, Treasury and the SA Reserve Bank are committed to macro-economic policies which they call *inflation targeting* and which, they claim, delivers low inflation and low budget deficits. These macro-economic policies are part of the neo-liberal ideology which dominates the world today and require that governments do everything to make the markets rather than ordinary people happy.

Much depends on whether they have fulfilled this promise, from rich investors betting on stock markets, to rating agencies deciding how risky it is to invest in or loan money to South Africa. The pressure is therefore kept on StatsSA to select a *basket of goods* in such a way as to ensure that the required low inflation is achieved. Five years ago, for instance, they had 2 inflation rates – inflation and a *core inflation* (i.e. *excluding* the cost of home loan repayments).

What all this means is that official inflation has little to do with the things that ordinary working class people actually consume and include in their trollies.

This is why some progressive institutions and NGOs have tried to come closer to the truth by making comparisons for a *basket of goods* that is more what poor people actually consume.

1.4 The PEJD report versus inflation

The Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Report (PEJDR) is an NGO that publishes monthly food price reports taking as its basket of goods things that are very much like our community voices have found.

The PEJDR showed in its most recent report on food prices in December 2020 that food prices rose by over 17% as compared with December 2019. Items such as sugar beans, rice, bread and flour have seen price hikes between 31% and 68%.

A family was spending almost R520 more per month at the end of 2020 than it did at the end of 2019. In other words, during the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns enforced by the government, most people becoming poorer and had less disposable income. The food businesses were profiteering by charging higher prices.

This can be contrasted with the official inflation statistic used by government and economists which stood at 3.2% year-on-year at the end of December 2020.

The difference between what the PEJDR finds for food prices (+17%) and what StatsSA says Is the basket of goods used to measure the inflation rate (3.3%) shows how misleading official statistics are. It is the same with the unemployment rate.

This is why we have asked people what *their* experience of prices has been.

2. THE CONTEXT

2.1 Why we shop at supermarkets

These days most of us buy our food from supermarkets. A smaller number buy from local *spaza* shops or other small traders.

Underneath this fact lies a major historical process – the forced expropriation of land access and land use by 19th century colonialism and 20th century apartheid capitalism. This expropriation destroyed the ability of most black people to have food security through agricultural livelihoods.
South Africa is in this sense different to many much poorer African countries (where rural land often was outside colonial intrusion or remained an unprivatised commons) and other ex-colonies in the global South, where even the poorest people can draw on some livelihoods on communal lands.

Even those people who had forms of land access through labour tenancy or sharecropping or in traditional areas (the parts of South Africa that used to be the bantustans or homelands) cannot survive entirely through farming and must supplement this with buying from retail outlets.

This latter point in regard to the ex-bantustans is one of the cruellest Ironies of recent South African history.

> *"Even those people who have access to land through labour tenancy, sharecropping and in the traditional areas cannot survive entirely through they supplement this with buying from retail outlets"*

The apartheid regime deliberately designed the homelands as areas which would mainly be labour reserves for the gold mines of the Witwatersrand and Northern Free State. As feeder areas for cheap migrant labour to the mines and cities almost no effort was made to develop infrastructure there except for the purposes of getting labour to the mines and controlling black people's lives. To achieve this the state allowed forms of traditional rule and livelihoods here while imposing the pass laws and influx control to regulate the flow of labour to the urban areas.

And then, in the second half of the 20th century new metals were discovered in these areas. Mining resources which had been a by-product of gold-mining became profitable. These were the PGM minerals — platinum, palladium, chrome — and uranium, Parts of the northern provinces of North West, Limpopo and Mpumalanga located inside the old traditional areas became some of the richest mining areas.

Today people in many communities also rear livestock in spaces near their villages, homesteads, townships and mining areas to supplement their food security. Their livelihoods include part-time or piece work on the mines and small trading and craft. But they cannot survive either on what they earn from these activities or from growing their own food or rearing livestock.

So they shop at supermarkets and are very sensitive to changing food prices. Unlike rich people the poor spend a greater percentage of their income on food.

2.2 Background on food prices

The price of the food that we source in this way is shaped by developments within the three food sectors:

- The agricultural sector
- The food processing sector, and
- The retail sector

All three sectors are dominated by a few monopolies.

And all three sectors have been through major policy changes by successive governments – from changes made by the apartheid regime in the late 1980s to the changes made by the ANC government after 1994.

Thematically, the most significant of these changes were:

- the liberalisation and de-regulation to allow agri-business to profiteer and go global
- the shifting of the tax burden from direct taxes to indirect taxes (like GST and VAT) – which target consumers and affect food prices.

2.3 Agriculture

As regards agriculture South Africa is one of the few countries in the world which can actually be food self-sufficient. It produces enough food to feed its entire population, and in most years it is even a net exporter of food. There is, therefore, not a shortage of food in South Africa.

Yet if you walk through the streets of any township or rural village in the country you will find people suffering from hunger because they can't afford food. Sadly, 1.5 million South African children suffer from chronic malnutrition, while 14 million people in the country are vulnerable to food insecurity. In fact, in the last decade the food security of poor South Africans has been totally undermined. This dire situation has come about because successive South African governments have completely deregulated the agricultural sector along with food prices through adopting neo-liberal policies.

Prior to the late 1970s and early '80s the apartheid state acted as an organised force for the growth of a white bourgeoisie, based on mining and agriculture, through a series of economic interventions and through programmes of welfare directed at the white working class. Apartheid could be said to be a racial version of the Keynesian economic policies practised in some other countries. As part of this setup, food prices within South Africa were controlled by the state. Certain essential foods like bread and milk were fixed by the state. Other agricultural prices were regulated.

This was done through Control Boards that acted as the single buyer of agricultural products at set prices. This allowed for both the interests of white farmers and consumers to be protected to some extent. The state also had high import tariffs and quotas in place to protect the white domestic agricultural sector from cheap imports and dumping.

In conjunction with this, the state also established a Land Bank, providing subsidies to white farmers and promoting the establishment of various co-operatives. Consumers were also directly assisted in a number of ways including the provision of state subsidies for basic food stuffs such as bread and milk.

> *"South African children suffer from chronic malnutrition, while 14 million people in the country are vulnerable to food insecurity"*

As the black working class and poor urbanised after World War 2, these measures saw these large sections of the poor majority also enjoy the spin-offs of the welfare state albeit on a discriminatory basis.

This meant that even under the appalling system of apartheid, the state ended up assisting the poor in some way to ensure that they could at least afford basic food items.

But, increasingly throughout the 1960s, the composition of the white ruling bloc became reconfigured as large sections of the white working class became middle class and as the Afrikaner coop movement began to mature into agri-business. Together with Afrikaner mining capital, agri-business grew to become equal partners with the English-speaking capitalists.

With creeping neo-liberalism, the co-operatives that had been established in the storage and processing sectors changed their status and formally became companies. With this, many of these companies listed on the stock exchange, and began to focus solely on maximising profits. They found regulated prices and Control Boards to be obstacles in their way, and no longer the protective shield it had previously been.

All sections of South African capital therefore began to clamour for reforms in the food sector throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. The reforms they called for — which the first the apartheid state, and then the new democratic ANC government began implementing — have impacted negatively on food prices.

The most important factor affecting food prices occurred post-1994 when the newly elected ANC government scrapped the various agricultural Control Boards in 1996. As part of this, the South African Futures Exchange (SAFEX) was established. At SAFEX and the world's largest Future Exchange — the Chicago Futures Exchange (CFE) — investors speculate on the future price of goods and make a fortune if their speculation pays off.

The prices of many agricultural goods — particularly the staple food of most South Africans, maize — are now set in dollars through betting activities on the CFE.
Global food companies through their trading power, along with the influence of international commodity markets, determine the prices of agricultural products in South Africa. This deregulation of prices has also led to the rise of speculation on agricultural products. The result has been massive volatility in food prices – in recent years the price of maize on SAFEX has risen by over 200%. Of course, this has seen corporations involved in trading on SAFEX making massive profits; while the poor have suffered the consequences of these rising prices.

Access to food through food production by subsistence farmers has declined significantly. Today subsistence agriculture makes up only 5% of subsistence needs. Big large-scale farms and plantations owned by agri-businesses, such as Illovo, Tongaat-Hulett and AngloVaal Industries have become dominant.

2.4 Food Processing

As regards food processing a handful of South African food producers dominate the food chain. Amongst the big food processing companies are Tiger Brands, Premier Foods, Foodcorp and Pioneer Foods. In 2008 the Competition Commission found Premier Foods guilty of fixing the price of bread. Tiger Brands and Foodcorp were also investigated because they jointly took over Enterprise – the meat company. The dairy industry is dominated by Clover-Danone and Parmalat and in 2007 the Commission also investigated price-fixing of milk between these monopolies.

With Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) legislation some of the food monopolies have become either taken over or partners with black capital and via the Public Investment Corporation (PIC). Oceana, for instance has taken over much of Foodcorp's fish-processing businesses.

2.5 Retail

At the other end of the food chain is the retail, which is dominated by four companies – Steinhoff, Pick 'n Pay, Woolworths and Spar (whose core unit is owned by Tiger Brands). A recent entry into this domination is the Botswana-owned Choppies. But Shoprite and Checkers are both owned by Pepkor, founded by Christo Wiese. Today Pepkor's parent is Steinhoff wherein Wiese is the major single shareholder. Many of our community voices say they now buy at Boxer – but Boxer is owned by Pick 'n Pay.

Research has also shown that 50% of the price of food in supermarkets is made up of packaging and the company which dominates this industry is Nampak.


104 99
MAIZE MEAL
HYPER SAVING
SAVE R30
WEET-BIX
Sunfoil
PROCHEF
Canola Oil
HIGH IN OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS
VERY HIGH IN OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS
WHITE STAR SUPER 10 kg

Beginning in the late 1980s the system was completely dismantled. To begin with the state started to gradually phase out fixed prices for bread and milk, as well as the subsidies that it provided on basic foodstuffs.
This had a major impact on the poor as food prices increased steadily from the early 1990s onwards.

With the degree of monopolisation in retail there is little incentive to compete with one another over price. If anything the food retailers have control over what is called the *food value chain* – they can determine prices of both suppliers and consumers because they are the final outlets. Through this control they can even put their brand on producers and call these *own* or *no-name brands*. The big retailers even get the shopping mall real estate companies to bid for them to be the *anchor* tenant.

Out of such power also emerges the opportunity for corruption.

Steinhoff — which is houses Christo Wiese's Pepkor (the largest retail group in SA) — has been involved in one of the biggest instances of corporate corruption in South Africa's history.

In 2020 the Financial Sector Conduct Authority fined the Tongaat Hulett agri-business and agri-processing giant R118mn after it was forced to restate its financial results. This was because of the uncovering of large-scale irregularities in the company's previous years' accounts.

All of these are structural reasons why profiteering is such a feature of the food industry and why food prices are high.

2.6 Changes to the tax regime and their effect on food prices.

In 1987 the apartheid regime first introduced a General Sales Tax (GST). GST was part of a neo-liberal shifting of taxation from Direct Tax (PAYE and Corporate Tax, is based on the principle that those who earn more wealth must pay more) to Indirect Taxes (on fuel, alcohol, cigarettes and general consumption), where everyone pays the same tax. In practice means the poor pay more than the rich.

Governments everywhere began to reduce corporate tax and shift the tax burden onto the working class and the poor. As a result of campaigns led by COSATU, some foodstuffs were exempted.

Then in 1990 the apartheid regime changed GST to VAT which was 12.5%. VAT was to be included in the prices that retailers and other businesses displayed. This meant businesses were in effect collecting the tax on behalf of SARS. Businesses would calculate what they owed SARS in VAT and pay over. SARS in turn granted certain VAT exemptions to businesses and would compensate them afterwards.

> *"A consumer strike can help us to have access to cheaper and affordable food or to have a backyard garden for my household"*

But this also created a situation where government too was responsible for driving up food prices, together with the profiteering of retailers and other businesses in the food chain.

The proportional contributions to tax revenue in the 1990s had become, roughly, ⅓ Corporate Tax, ⅓ PAYE and ⅓ VAT.

Then the incoming ANC government started slowly increasing VAT, albeit with a list of exemptions, while reducing corporate tax. In the 2019 Budget the Ramaphosa government increased VAT to 15%. By then, and through VAT and PAYE, ordinary people — the working class and the middle classes — were paying proportionally more tax than corporations.

In the 2021 February budget corporate tax was reduced to 26% – the lowest it has ever been in South Africa's history.

So when we asked our community members what their experiences were over the course of 2020 this is what they said…

3. COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE OF PRICE INCREASES AND THEIR RESPONSES

When we asked, everyone spoke about how much prices had increased and how they were forced to change their shopping patterns – from dropping certain essentials to buying cheaper brands to trying different retail outlets.

Letty Mosime said: "Almost everything from my list of 10 essential items had increased in price except electricity and cleaning items. With these price increases I had to prioritise buying baby stuff and food items for the rest of the family.

"I was also forced to change brands to try and maximise the use of the little income that is. I have managed to redirect R140 in total by switching brands. I used to spend R170 for Tastic rice. Now I only spend R100 for a no-name brand rice. Now I spend R50 for a no-name brand maize meal instead of R70 for White Star maize meal. We have also switched from buying 5kgs of mixed chicken portions, which used to cost R150, to buying 5kgs of soup cuts for R100 from OBC butchery."

Lorato Setlholoeng "Unfortunately, in the past 3-5 months, everything on our list of essential items, except milk and tea, increased in price. With the price increments I had to stand in long queues at the local shops because I could not afford transport to go buy groceries elsewhere. I have also had to switch from our regular White Star maize meal to buying Chester maize meal."

Betty Mathunda: "The food hamper has increased in price in the last 3-5 months and now costs me 50% more than it originally did. The price increments have put a lot more strain on the monthly household budget. So much so, there is no surplus money left for day-to-day expenses after buying groceries. With the price increments, I was also forced, just like many other people, to switch from buying brands that we normally trust and rely on."

Lesego Mabale: "In the past 3-5 months it has been difficult to make ends meet because of the price increases that have led to our family having to leave out some essential items from our normal monthly grocery list.

"Everything on my list of essential grocery items increased in price. I have switched brands and sometimes buy from different supermarkets than normal. I used to buy from Shoprite, which is a more reliable supermarket. Now I have to first compare prices before buying and then go buy at a cheaper supermarket even if it's less reliable."

Maletsatsi Ramapulana: "Everything on my list of essential items has increased in price in the past months, which has put a huge strain on my budget. I have resorted to switching brands and buying from a different supermarket. I used to spend in total R1500 a month on groceries from Shoprite. But now R1500 is not enough to cover all that I need to buy from Shoprite. However, by switching to Overland I am now able to buy enough of what we need."

Onkgopotse Dube: "Almost everything on my list increased in price in the last 3-5 months, with potatoes being the worst of them all. It has put a strain on my budget. We had to resort to cutting food portions and switching brands and where we normally go for grocery shopping. We now buy no-name brand food items instead of the usual Lucky Star and Excella brands and have now switched to buying from Shoprite to Boxer supermarket."

The Anonymous Woman has, like everyone, noticed a drastic price increase in food items since the lockdown was announced in March.

"With prices increasing daily, my mother and I had to change stores and brands to ensure we can get the same number of items to sustain us monthly. But unfortunately we had to cut out certain items. We substituted food like brown rice for white rice, less beef and more frozen chicken and vegetables. We also opted to buy unknown tissue paper in bulk and washing powder from local people who sell them at low prices."

Tshepiso said: "I normally buy what I can afford. With prices going up it has been difficult to buy essentials that are not included in most food parcels, such as personal care products."

Lerato Motene: ”My family had to go for cheaper brands and cut out some of our essential items due to high prices. We need to have extra cash should one of us get sick. We stopped buying rice and red meat, and changed from Iwisa to White Star, Ultra Mel milk to no-name, Excella cooking oil to no-name and more no-name brands even on personal care products. There are products the family chose not to compromise on such as baby disposable nappies, formula, and sanitary products due to fear of irritation or worse.”

Tshegofatso said: “The family had to change from Pick ‘n Pay, Shoprite or Spar to Boxer and Trans Cash and Carry to ensure that we get enough essentials to sustain the family. We changed maize meal, rice, cooking oil, frozen chicken, milk names to cheaper options.”

Palesa said: “We buy food for R2 000 which does not last us for the month. We also struggle with paying school fees and the children’s school transport. Covid-19 affected most people negatively and for us it’s been financially stressful.

“The family received food parcels which had few essentials and vegetables. The family had to stop buying well known Tiger brands and change to cheaper options. We have no knowledge of their origin or if the nutritional information is true. Maize meal, canned food, vegetables and oil are what takes priority in the family food basket each month.”

Maria Tladi: “In the past 5 months most of the essential items on our grocery list increased in price. The food price increases have resulted in me resorting to buying smaller quantities. Even cutting down on the number of daily meals from three meals a day to having only one meal a day. I was also forced to switch brands from buying White Star maize meal to Super White. I even switched from buying from Shoprite to buy from local shops.”

The Anonymous woman: “Everything on my list of essential items increased in price during the last months.

“With an extra strain on the budget due to the food price increases, as a family we resorted to eating smaller portions than normally to try and have our less grocery last longer. Also we had to repeat outfits to try sustain the washing powder. We also switched food brands from buying known reliable brands like Selati sugar to buying no-name brands.”

Margaret Nape: “With the food price increments I was forced to switch brands and also buy smaller quantities than normal. I now buy 10kgs of flour and maize meal instead of the usual 12.5kgs. I buy no-name brands instead of the usual Tiger brands. I buy from Portuguese shops having switched from Shoprite.”

Martha Molotsane: “Everything on my list of essential grocery items increased in price, putting an extra strain on our budget.”

“Like many struggling families we resorted to switching brands. From buying reliable brands like Nestlé and Tiger-brands to now buying no-name brands. We even switched buying from supermarkets like Shoprite to buying from smaller local shops.”

Steven said that: “The food price increases have put a strain on my monthly budget and I have resorted to cutting down from our list of essential items. I have even switched brands for some of our essential items to buy cheaper no-name products.”

Tebogo: “With the increasing food prices I have had to re-arrange my budget. Although I live alone, I had to decrease my entertainment budget to be able to afford my usual essential items.”

Nothemba: “I was forced to switch brands to buy cheaper brands, from buying Huggies to Kisskids nappies, and White Star maize meal to Super White.”

Sebojang: “I was forced to switch brands and even to go buy from cheaper supermarkets like Choppies and Boxer in Rustenburg. I now buy Super White maize meal instead of the usual White Star.”

Anonymous: “The increase in food prices put a lot of strain on the family’s monthly budget.

“We have opted to switch from buying their usual brands to buying no-name brands. We now buy from Trans Cash & Carry and Three Star Cash & Carry because they are cheaper.”

Anonymous: “Increasing food prices in the past 3-5 months have put a huge strain on my monthly budget especially because I don’t have a stable permanent source of income. I was forced to buy less of my essential items, even buying from local tuck-shops.”

4. GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO THE EFFECTS OF THE LOCKDOWNS: RELIEF MEASURES, AND COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES

Covid-19 hit South Africa in February 2020.

In response, in March 2020, the South African government called on everyone to practise hygiene, wear face masks and observe social distancing. It also declared a National Disaster and in terms of the Act announced a lockdown in which all businesses and workplaces except those considered as essential would close. People had to stay indoors, again with the exception of essential activities.

The reasoning was to slow down the rate of infection and to prevent the healthcare service from being swamped by people becoming sick and needing urgent medical attention.

The government's intervention to use the lockdown to slow the rate of Covid infection was widely supported by the South African people.

Some did however point out that government's cutting of the healthcare budget in the 2020 National Budget did not make sense in this regard.

Over the course of 2020 we learnt that the lockdown was part of what government called a "risk-adjustment strategy". This meant that, as infection rates changed, so the lockdowns could change from Level 5 (the most stringent) to Level 1 (the least) and even back again. Lockdowns could even be nationally applied uniformly or could be focussed on different regions and provinces depending on the spread of the disease.

But, of course, shutting down all but "essential business" was always going make it controversial as to which businesses could be said to be "essential". Whereas there was no dispute that healthcare services, for instance, were essential different business groups started lobbying and arguing that their particular industry is "essential". So the need for energy (mainly electricity) was also seen as essential and this meant that some mining activity (like coal mining) was therefore essential because South Africa's electrical generation is largely via coal.

But over the course of 2020 almost all mining sectors argued that their mines were "essential".

And when it came to schools there were also contestations – between parents wanting their children in school and teachers concerned about safety; between private schools who make their money out of education as a business and public schools where parents struggled to supply air-time and data or internet bandwidth for remote learning. These battles often pitted middle class and rich parents against the poor majority.

Although there was always an element of exaggeration to the perception that Covid-19 has "shut down the economy" many smaller businesses, manufacturing companies, offices and commercial services, hospitality and tourism businesses did suffer. The irony is that some 40% of South Africa's economy is financial transactions via the JSE (which was never shut down), that many mines were deemed to be essential services and were never shut down and that IT companies, Zoom, Skype, cell phone companies etc. actually made record profits during the lockdowns.

As a result, in a country where our unemployment rate has hovered near the 40% rate since the 1990s, many millions more lost their jobs or were placed on even more insecure contracts. With some 17 million South Africans living on social grants, this was a huge crisis.

In response president Ramaphosa announced three things over mid-2020:

- a Solidarity Fund that would receive money from wealthy private individuals and be administered separately from government
- a R500bn 'stimulus' package
- small Increases in social grants and a new social grant.

As regards the Solidarity Fund many people asked why the South Africa government was putting people's lives in the hands of the philanthropy of rich people. Many of the rich people involved who promised money came from the very same wealthy families that had profiteered from apartheid capitalism in the first place.

As regards the R500bn stimulus package, progressive economists who studied the figures said that it didn't add up at all, and that that figure was little more than a mixture of restructuring the existing budget and providing loan guarantees to businesses.

But the increases in social grants and the promises of food parcels were important for communities already dependent on social grants.

4.1 The social grants, food parcels and community responses

As regards welfare grants government announced an increase in the Child Support and Old Age grants and a new unemployment grant of R350. For those workers who had been in work and paid UIF there would be a UIF-administered Temporary Employment Relief Scheme (TERS) which would be paid over to employers and from whom workers could claim, as well as a programme of food parcels to be administered via SASSA.

These were very relevant to the working class and the poor and so we asked our Community Voices what their experiences were...

Betty Mosime: "I have been receiving the Covid-19 relief grant. But when it came to the food parcels promised by government I didn't receive anything. Not even from any NGO around. Some people did receive food parcels, which were delivered to them by vans but no one understood the criteria for eligibility to receive the food parcels."

Lorato Setlholoeng: "During the Covid-19 pandemic I received the Covid-19 relief grant which helped in boosting my monthly household income.

"But, like most people I didn't receive any of the food parcels. During the lockdown and also everyone fearing for their health and wellbeing, it was difficult for me to even ask from anyone about the food parcels."

Betty Mathunda: “During the pandemic our monthly household income was boosted by the Covid-19 relief grant for two of my children.

“With the lockdown we were promised food parcels by the government with some NGOs also chipping in to help with their own food parcels. But I was one of many that did not receive any of the food parcels.”

Lesego Mabale: “During lockdown three of our unemployed family members received the monthly covid-19 relief grant.

“But I did not receive any food parcels as promised by the government. I can only think that it was because food parcels sent out by government were for a ‘special’ select few.”

Maletsatsi Ramapulana: “I was amongst the many who did not receive any food parcels from government or any local NGO.”

Onkgopotse Dube: “I did not receive any Covid-19 relief grant during the lockdown. Nor did I receive any food parcels from government or local NGOs to assist to balance our monthly grocery.”

Anonymous: “I do not receive any social grants, nor have I received any food parcels. But managed to survive nonetheless as I also sell personal care products which earns me extra money.“

Tshepiso: “I have been receiving the R350 relief fund, which came in handy.

“I also received several food parcels. Some of the items were either close to expiring or in small quantity but I am grateful as I have received from most entities such the government, the mine, NGO’S and local entrepreneurs.”

Lerato Motene: “My mother is on social grants and my brother received the Covid-19 relief grant. I also get assistance from the father of my children monthly.

“My mother has received food parcels which had a few ‘new-to-eyes’ brands especially maize meal, canned food and oil. We were sceptical about consuming them but had no intention to waste food.”

Tshegofatso: “My family have received food parcels from political parties. This helped the family a lot. But the canned food was near expiry so had to be consumed faster to avoid wasting.”

Palesa: “We received child and old age grants. The family received food parcels which had a few essentials and vegetables.”

Maria Tladi: “During the Covid-19 lockdown, the two unemployed persons in our family received the Covid-19 relief grant which helped boost the monthly household income.

“But we did not receive any food parcel from government or any NGO.”

Anonymous: “We received the Covid-19 relief grant but didn’t receive any food parcels from government.”

Margaret Nape: “During the Covid-19 one unemployed person was receiving the covid-19 relief grant.

“I was one of the lucky few that received food parcels from government. I received 5kgs of sugar, flour and maize meal; 250gs of tea bags, coffee and vegetables. I was however not satisfied with the food parcel as it didn’t last more than two weeks even after we resorted to only having one meal a day. It would have been much better if the food parcels consisted of 10kgs of maize meal, flour and rice and 2Ls of cooking oil.”

Martha Molotsane: "I luckily received food parcels from an NGO during the Covid-19 lockdown. I received one packet of beans; a small bottle of cooking oil; 500gs of sugar; two cans of pilchards; 2kgs of rice and 750ml of Wild Island juice. I was grateful for the food parcel but I was not satisfied because they didn't last long. It would have been better if the food parcel also included some vegetables and maize meal."

Steven: "During the Covid-19 lockdown my partner received the unemployment Covid-19 relief grant.

"Thankfully during the Covid-19 lockdown I received food parcels from government, even though it was a hassle because there was a lot of politics involved in the handing out of the food parcels. The food parcel included sugar; canned pilchards and beans; cooking oil; tea bags and sugar beans. I was dissatisfied with the food parcels and wished they had included washing powder; maize meal; bath soap and rice."

Tebogo: "I did not receive any food parcels during the covid-19 lockdown."

Nothemba: "I received food parcels from government. They included maize meal; rice; cooking oil; tea bags; canned pilchard and beans. I was not satisfied with the food parcels because they were simply not enough. I am grateful but I wish the food parcels had also included washing powder; toiletries and some sanitary pads."

Sebojang: "I was one of few who were lucky enough to get food parcels from government."

Anonymous (49): "Our family were lucky enough to get a food parcel during the Covid-19 lockdown which included cooking oil; sugar; canned pilchards; toilet rolls; salt and sugar beans.

"But we were not satisfied with the food parcel because they didn't last long. If the food parcels included maize meal; washing powder; sanitary pads and a little more toiletries it would have probably been close to satisfactory."

Anonymous (58): "I received the Covid-19 relief grant. But unfortunately like many others, I did not receive any food parcels during the Covid-19 lockdown from government or any local NGO."

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE AND FOR CAMPAIGNS

The most notable feature of people's responses to the rising prices is that people have already developed strategies for survival over a long time. Almost all of these strategies involved some form of collective – even if it was mainly the extended families. The Covid-19 lockdown profiteering by the food industry have brought these strategies into focus but have also made people think of broader collectives and campaigns.

Some of these ideas involve calling on the government to take action and they want those profiteering to be made accountable. But whether they highlight such campaigns or not almost all find the idea of self-sufficient food gardens an attractive one.

We highlight some of these:

Tsepho Mmusi has made a concrete suggestion of a community buying co-operative. Below is the outline of this idea.

5.1 A Community co-operative buying project

A Community co-operative buying project is a concept that gives back to members control of their buying power. This concept allows the community to cut unnecessary costs of the middleman, transportation costs and saves them money which can be used for other essential items in their households such as medicine and municipal services etc. This idea has long been there but most of the people have been using it for stokvels and society social groups for year-end purchases in order to save money.

The idea is to buy food items in bulk, thus getting benefits such as discounts and free transportation of goods to the local area where members live. Many people have been using these schemes as a way of surviving higher prices especially during the estive season and the month of January because many people would have spent heavily in December holidays and they need to get by in January. This model has never been tested before by people receiving social grants, and this could be their way out of poverty.

5.1.1 Project strategy

It is generally known that social grants recipients do not get enough money to meet the basic needs. They hardly afford the basic household food basket of goods and groceries. At most they receive between R420 and R1 800 from the various social grants.

The project anticipates to start small, grouping as low as three social grant recipients. They will be encouraged to put a small amount of money aside e.g. between R100 and R300 which will be used to purchase basic food stuff in bulk. Basic food stuffs could include maize meal, rice, samp, cooking oil, beans and canned food.

Because of price hikes, profitmaking etc. most foodstuff costs more when bought at chain retail stores. But buying at independent distributors is a solution, because spaza shop owners buy in bulk and sell to residents on a discounted mark-up.

This model could be discussed and negotiated with distributors to make them see the bigger picture i.e. that they will be giving the power back to the community and in the process increasing their profit margins as more community groups see and experience the benefit of buying in bulk from them.

Negotiations could be entered into with distributors to tailor packages to meet every group's needs in line with their budget. The more money they are willing to spend, the bigger the package they will receive.

Distribution of groceries can be arranged free of charge, thus saving on transportation costs.

Monies are collected from members and one or two of their number will make the purchase. Distributors could also advise on safer methods of making purchases.

Where is the project going to be implemented?

The collective buying model will be piloted in Klerksdorp in stages, and it will begin later in 2021. Trust and reputation will be an overarching principle for the success of the project. Each stage will be closely monitored and evaluated. The model will be implemented in Jouberton Township in extensions 1, 24, and 25. As indicated, the model will first involve the food prices survey participants and residents who demonstrated interest in the community monitoring activities. This will be expanded to other extensions in Jouberton and eventually to other townships in the greater Klerksdorp area.

Then, at a later stage, it can be implemented in other areas such as Rustenburg and in Limpopo.

Who should participate?

All social grant recipients

How do we identify and group them?

We can start off by members of the community who have participated in our food prices survey because they fully understand the objectives of the project. As indicated above they can be grouped into small collectives of people, from three people upwards, and they should reside in the same area. As the project gains momentum other residents will develop an interest, and the model can be announced in churches, community meetings and events.

How will this be implemented?

We begin by giving feedback on the food prices survey to those participating and in the process recommend the model as one of the remedial options. This will drive them to identify partners or people who they would like to include in their grouping.

The groupings will agree on the model together with the local monitor or project officer and the date of purchase will be set.

The local community monitors together with group delegates will organise a meeting with a local grocery distributor to present a model and to discuss benefits thereof. After everything has been finalised the community monitors will give feedback to groups. These could be done in a form of a WhatsApp group.

Then buying commences.

The process will be evaluated on a monthly basis to measure progress, growth and to mitigate possible challenges.

We then follow up with what the Community Voices had to say…

5.2 Community Voices speak about their ideas

Letty Mosime: "A consumer strike can help us to have access to cheaper and affordable food or to have a backyard garden for my household. I am keen to have my own backyard garden but I would need seeds and fertilisers."

Betty Mathunda: "If the government was to increase its subsidies on food items then that would help most people to get access to cheaper and affordable food.

"I don't have a home food garden, but it could also help to get cheaper and affordable food. I am keen on having a home food garden but i would need seeds and also, to protect my crops, it would also be best to have a net."

Lesego Mabale: "The government should fine retailers who inflate food prices, after the president had said at the start of the lockdown that food prices should remain the same as before the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I am also keen on having a home food garden. But I don't think it would be enough to solve the problem of expensive food. To help with the challenge of expensive food, government should increase the amount paid for social grants."

Martha Molotsane: "There could be access to cheaper and affordable food if the inflation rate can decrease. I already have my own home food garden. But to have a successful gardening project assistance from the Department of Agriculture would help."

Lorato Setlholoeng: "Having locally-produced food or a food garden at home could help. At the moment I don't have any food garden at home. But I am keen on having a home food garden. It would take nurturing and taking care of the plants."

Maletsatsi Ramapulana: "Producing our own food would help us get access to cheaper and affordable food. As much as I am keen to have my own home food garden, I have realized that I spend a lot monthly on buying vegetables. I currently don't have my own home food garden. To have a successful gardening project I would need seeds and watering the plants on a daily basis."

Onkgopotse Dube: "Having one's own fruits and vegetables could help to have access to cheaper and affordable food. I already have my own small vegetable garden at home which helps cut monthly expenses."

The Anonymous Mother: "I love gardening but being a working mother who has to travel daily to get to and from work means less time for my other passions. But the family believes a small garden would help to get fresh vegetables and can be an interesting activity to involve the kids so they don't go out to play and bring the virus at home. Instead they can take care of the garden and learn the importance of growing one's own food."

Tshepiso: "I had to go against lockdown restrictions as I depend on collecting recyclable materials and odd jobs. So I found myself risking my life for survival to make some cash to be able to buy medication should the need arise, as the local clinic rarely has medication.

"I would love to have a garden. If I was assisted with skills it would help to care for it as I have tried several times and had little produce and that has left me not using my big yard optimally. I believe without knowledge and resources such as fencing I wouldn't even have time for odd jobs."

Lerato Motene: "We have a herb and vegetable garden. We just need more vegetable variety as we currently have onions, tomatoes and butternuts only. My mother believes that vegetable gardening is a practical solution to current food challenges. Families can even go back to the bartering system to ensure no-one goes to sleep hungry."

Tshegofatso: "The backyard garden is a great idea. But there is no space in the yard due to rented rooms. But I have thought of using pallets and planting along the wall. I just need resources and skills.

"The country might need to go into a full-blown food sustenance project for households to avoid depending on retail for food, especially fresh produce."

Palesa: "Gardening is a way to go and my family would be able to grow our own food as we have access to water and a piece of land in our back yard. This will reduce the financial distress we experience."

Anonymous: "Currently we don't have any food garden in our yard because we feel it requires passion, hard work and relevant equipment to have a successful garden. We believe having a food garden would assist in having access to cheaper and affordable food."

Margaret Nape: "There should be co-operatives for food security. And also having a home food garden helps. I have my own home food garden, but to have a successful gardening project requires a lot of hard work, seeds, equipment and lot of water."

Steven: “A home food garden can help in getting access to cheaper and healthy vegetables. I have a backyard garden, but to have a successful gardening project it’s important to plant seasonal vegetables.”

Tebogo: “Being full-time employed I don’t have any interest in having a food garden. After all, I won’t be able to take care of it.”

Nothemba: “ I have a backyard food garden. It helps provide some vegetables and sustains the grocery. However, to have a successful gardening project teamwork, co-operation and passion for gardening is required.”

Anonymous: “I don’t have a home food garden. But it would be of a great assistance. To have a successful gardening project, a supply of seeds and enough land would be needed.”

“We dedicate this report to Kennedy Pholose, a community activist from Rustenburg, Thekwane community, who passed away due to COVID 19 complications. He was an active participant in the research for this report. Hamba Kahle Comrade."

No One Is Safe
Until Everyone Is Safe