



Socially vulnerable groups at greater risk for food insecurity

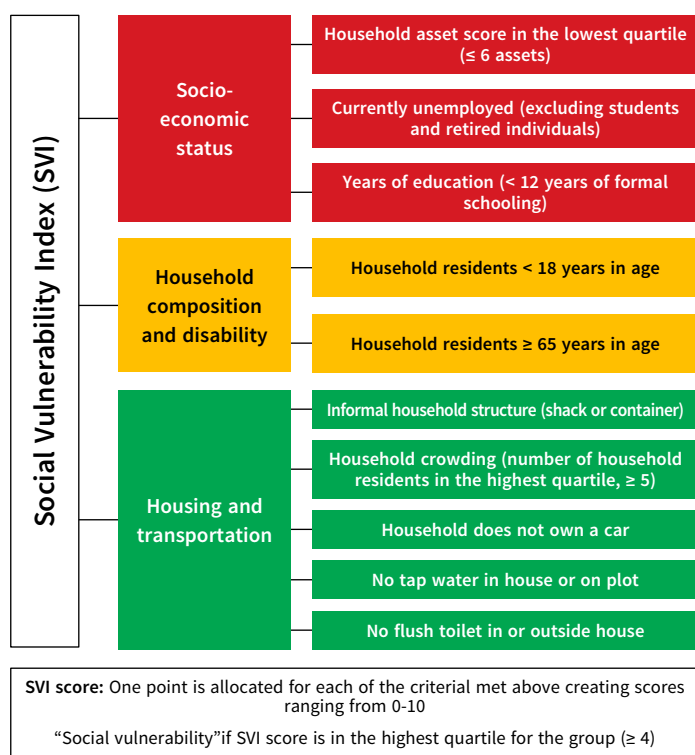
South Africa's socially vulnerable groups are at a greater risk of experiencing food insecurity

Although everyone is inherently at risk of suffering in a natural disaster, or developing infectious and chronic diseases, and experiencing food insecurity, some people are at greater risk than others due to having poor or unfavourable social, economic, and environmental outcomes. This phenomenon is known as social vulnerability and it is defined as the attributes of society that make people and places susceptible to natural disasters, adverse health outcomes, and social inequalities. In terms of income distribution, South Africa (SA) is the most unequal country in the world. Unfortunately, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the country's economy has further exacerbated this inequality, widening the gap, for example, between Black Africans and Whites, rich and poor, and employed and unemployed. Despite social inequalities being well documented in SA, there is a lack of studies that have measured the prevalence of social vulnerability using a

national representative sample with key socio-demographic factors; and examined the association between social vulnerability and food insecurity.

Therefore, to investigate social vulnerability prevalence and its relationship with food insecurity in SA, we, at the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Human Development at the University of the Witwatersrand, conducted a survey of 3402 South Africans across the country, aged 18 and older, in October 2021. We calculated social vulnerability index (SVI) scores using an SVI developed by the US Centre for Disease Control and adapted for a South African context. The socio-demographic indicators used in the calculation of SVI scores are presented in **Figure 1**. We also measured food insecurity using a modified Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project.

Figure 1. Social vulnerability domains and indicators



What is the prevalence of social vulnerability and food insecurity in SA?

Overall, we reported that 20.6% and 20.4% of participants were classified as socially vulnerable and food insecure, respectively.

Which groups are socially vulnerable in SA?

High social vulnerability was reported in respondents residing in Mpumalanga, rural areas, including those who were older (the prevalence increased exponentially from 45 years of age), in Black Africans and females, and in those without high school certificate, poor, and unemployed (Table 1).

Table 1. South Africa’s most vulnerable groups

Socio-demographic variables	Most vulnerable group(s)	Social vulnerability prevalence (%)
Province	Mpumalanga	41.4
Community size	Rural areas	36.8
Age groups	≥ 45 years of age	15.8-37.6
Race	Black Africans	24.0
Gender	Females	23.5
Education status	Groups with no high school certificate	32.9-74.8
Household monthly income quintile	Lowest income group	34.0
Employment status	Unemployed	42.8

Poor socio-economic circumstances contribute to greater risk of experiencing food insecurity

We also showed that the risk of food insecurity was almost 3-fold higher in the socially vulnerable group compared to their counterparts. Out of the ten social vulnerability indicators represented in Figure 1, we showed that socio-economic status (SES) indicators contributed to a greater risk of experiencing food insecurity. This means that participants living in poor households, who were unemployed and did not complete high school were most likely to experience food insecurity.

What are the implications of our findings?

Socio-economic factors are well established as the main drivers of poverty, food insecurity, and social inequalities in SA. Like many previous studies, our current findings also report SES factors as the major determinants of food insecurity. Consequently, various initiatives (policies and programmes) centred around production, access and utilisation of food including social grants have been implemented to address poverty, food insecurity and inequalities in SA. Out of all these initiatives, the social grant system remains the largest source of support for many vulnerable groups and the government’s primary response to poverty and food insecurity in SA. It is well established with a wide reach of 18.4 million beneficiaries. Despite such efforts, **poverty and food insecurity has remained high in SA**, largely driven by a series of complex factors including the fact that social grants have not kept up with inflation of food prices and are used for many household needs. Our findings suggest that SA needs **comprehensive and effective social initiatives to improve the economy, job market, and education systems**, and subsequently reduce or eliminate social inequalities.



What are the possible solutions or recommendations?

Use the COVID-19 pandemic as a reference

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a collaboration between government and various external partners such as corporate, NGOs and faith-based organisations that worked together to provide goods and financial assistance to vulnerable individuals and communities. This partnership can be retained in the fight against food insecurity. Through this partnership, the relevant organizations can use the COVID-19 pandemic as a reference to learn from the mistakes (e.g., mismanagement of funds and resources), identify areas of improvement, and make use of the new extensive database of social relief recipients to effectively direct efforts (e.g., social assistance initiatives and job opportunities) to those most vulnerable.

Take advantage of the dynamic nature of social vulnerability and food insecurity

Since social vulnerability and food insecurity are interlinked, and both dynamic in nature, we propose monitoring their patterns over time. This will guide government and affiliated partners to re-evaluate and develop new initiatives to combat current and future food insecurity. Also, this approach will enable government and affiliated partners to always direct social relief efforts to the relevant people or communities, thus creating an efficient social support system.

Implementation of the Basic Income Grant

Although many might argue that social grants are not feasible and sustainable considering the poor economic state of the country, however, our findings suggest that they are needed to help mitigate and deal with the effects of food insecurity, particularly in those who are poor, unemployed and did not complete high school. Our results support the proposal by the Department of Social Development to introduce the “Basic Income Grant”, which will provide income support for the unemployed individuals between 18 and 59 years of age, and to those who are currently not receiving social grant. Until the “Basic Income Grant” is implemented, we call on the government to increase all social grants and to make temporary relief measures such as social relief of distress grant (SRDG, also known as the “COVID-19 grant) and food parcels/vouchers permanent to vulnerable groups until they reach a low vulnerability state or are no longer vulnerable or qualify for the old age grant.

Conclusion

In summary, government requires an urgent and innovative framework to grow a stable economy, create jobs, improve the education system, and develop new effective social initiatives that will reduce or eliminate social inequalities in SA, in particular food insecurity.

Reference:

Social vulnerability and its association with food insecurity in the South African population: Findings from a National Survey

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