

Food for the Urban Poor: Safety Nets and Food-Based Social Protection in Manzini, Swaziland

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Abstract This paper aims to contribute to the urban food security debate by exploring the role of informal safety nets and formal food-based social protection in addressing food insecurity challenges facing low-income urban households in Manzini. The empirical data used in this paper came from two surveys: the first involved 500 households and was undertaken in three low-income areas of Manzini. The second involved a series of in-depth interviews with senior staff at supermarkets and spaza shops. The results reveal that food security challenges are considerable in the low-income areas of Manzini and that, at the same time, various forms of community and intra-household food sharing are an important food source for a minority of poor households in the city. In this regard, the national government needs to consider strengthening food-based social safety net programmes that assist poor and vulnerable groups.

Keywords Urban food security · Social protection · Neighbourhood care points · Manzini · Swaziland

Introduction

Food security, which is the ability to secure an adequate daily supply of food that is affordable, nutritious and hygienic, has become a chronic development problem in most urban areas of Southern Africa. According to Crush et al. (2011), household food security challenges in Southern Africa have intensified during the past decade due to a combination of factors that include increasing poverty, climate change, global food

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inflation and the HIV and AIDS pandemic. According to studies by the Swaziland Vulnerability Assessment Committee (Swazi VAC), urban food insecurity has become a major development problem in recent years due to climate change-induced food production shortages, increasing poverty and social protection challenges (Government of Swaziland 2008). In urban areas, food insecurity revolves around access to cash for food which is tied directly to wages, prices and safety nets. However, opinion is sharply divided on how to engage urban food insecurity challenges at the policy level. While food insecurity in African cities remains relatively invisible to policymakers, it is worth noting that many international organisations and governments are now looking at food-based social protection as a way of addressing poverty in general and food insecurity in particular (HLPE 2012).

This paper aims to contribute to the emerging discussion on food security and social protection in Swaziland by interrogating the relationship between urban household food insecurity and food-based social protection in Manzini. Three questions frame the issues addressed in this paper. First, what is the extent of food insecurity in Manzini? Second, to what extent are community food kitchens, shared meals with neighbours and food provided by neighbours, alternative approaches to food provisioning for poor households in Manzini? Third, what is the overall coverage of food-based social protection programmes and to what extent do they address the food security challenges facing poor households in urban areas? Finally, the paper draws various conclusions about policy approaches to deal with food insecurity challenges in urban areas.

Food in Security Swaziland: an Overview

About 26 % of Swaziland's population is urban with rural-urban migration contributing between 3 and 5 % to urban growth each year (CSO 2007). Almost two thirds of the national population are below the poverty datum line for basic goods and services (CSO 2007), while 43 % live in extreme poverty, consume less than the required minimum in terms of caloric food energy and subsist on less than a US dollar per day (CSO 2007, Swazi VAC & UNWFP 2008, Tevera & Matondo 2010). Staple food production (especially of maize) has been declining considerably in the last two decades, and domestic production now falls far short of domestic consumption requirements. The area under maize decreased from 84,000 ha in 1990 to 52,000 ha in 2009, and the maize harvest fell from 88,000 to 62,000 tonnes over the same time period (Oseni & Masarirambi 2011, p. 389).

Several factors account for this situation including recurring droughts and floods and the loss of agricultural labour to HIV and AIDS and rural-urban migration (Masuku & Sithole 2009, Terry & Ryder 2009, Edje 2010, Tevera 2011, Oseni & Masarirambi 2011). Food prices rose sharply after 2005, pushing many urban households in Swaziland into food insecurity and greater dependence on food aid. For example, the price of cooking oil and rice increased by over 150 % between June 2007 and July 2009. Vulnerability assessments by the Famine Early Warning System estimate that between May 2008 and April 2009, the number of food-insecure people was 238,625 or roughly 25 % of the national population (Swazi VAC & UNWFP 2008). The urban poor, who spend over 60 % of their household income on food, have been particularly hard hit. The situation would have been far worse were it not for the fact that the

government controls the price of maize meal which has remained relatively steady over the same period (Mabuza et al. 2009).

Manzini is a highly unequal city with a large migrant population. Urban poverty and food insecurity are also on the rise. The urban population of the city of Manzini is estimated at over 35,000, while Greater Manzini contains over 70,000 people, many of whom reside in unplanned settlements. During the past 20 years, there has been a rapid growth of many unplanned settlements with low-quality housing, poor sanitation and high levels of poverty (Sihlongonyane 2003, Tevera & Zamberia 2010). Data from the last two censuses (in 1997 and 2007) show that the percentage of female-centred households in urban areas of Swaziland continues to rise and the majority are poor (CSO 2007). Most vulnerable and deprived households qualify for the government's social protection grants provided by the Social Welfare Department (DSW), which falls directly under the Deputy Prime Minister's Office (DPMO). Other organisations that administer social protection grants include the National Children's Coordinating Unit (NCCU) and the Alliance of Mayors Initiative for Community Action on HIV and AIDS at the Local Level (AMICAALL).

Research Methodology

This paper is based on findings from two surveys that were undertaken in December 2008 and November 2012. The first survey was conducted as part of the African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) regional study involving 11 cities in nine SADC countries. In this survey, three suburbs (Moneni, Standini and Tincancweni) were selected on the basis of their low socio-economic status (Fig. 1). Moneni (with a 2007 population of 3,729 in 1,071 households) is in the eastern part of the city, 4 km from the city centre. Tincancweni (with 1,374 residents in 390 households) is a newer informal settlement south of the city centre. Standini (660 residents in 201 households) is an older suburb which has been impoverished for many years. Systematic sampling was used to select the 500 households that were interviewed (250 in Moneni, 150 in Tincancweni and 100 in Standini). The second survey interviewed randomly selected supermarkets and spaza shops and recorded data on food items sold and food prices.

Levels of Food Security Amongst Poor Urban Households

The AFSUN household survey found that 42 % of the total household expenditure by poor urban households in Manzini is on food purchases and that the levels of food insecurity were extremely high. The Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) score ranges from 0 (least insecure) to 27 (severely food insecure). The average HFIAS score for Manzini was 14.86, the highest score out of all 11 cities surveyed by AFSUN, comparable to Harare but significantly higher than similar cities such as Maseru (12.8), Gaborone (10.8) and Windhoek (9.3) (Tevera et al. 2012, p. 16).

The Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence Scale (HFIAP) for Manzini city showed that most households were severely food insecure. A total of 79 % of surveyed households fell into the severely food insecure category and only 6 % classified as food secure (Fig. 2). The proportion of severely food-insecure households was the highest in

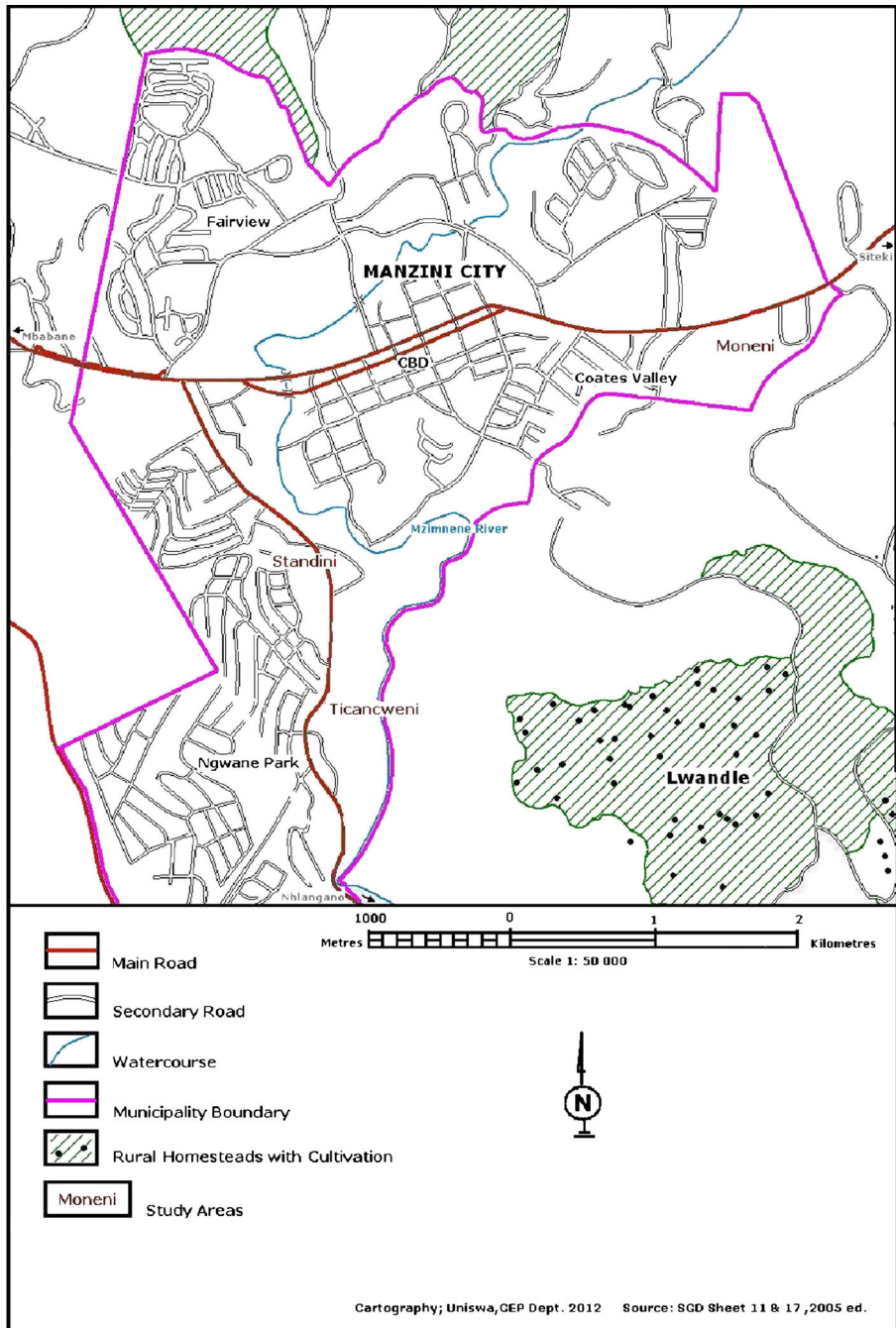


Fig. 1 Location of surveyed areas of Manzini

the region, even worse than Harare at 72 % (Tevera et al. 2012, p. 17). During the 4 weeks prior to the survey, 28 % of household heads and members had often or sometimes had to go to bed hungry because they did not have enough food, 41 % had

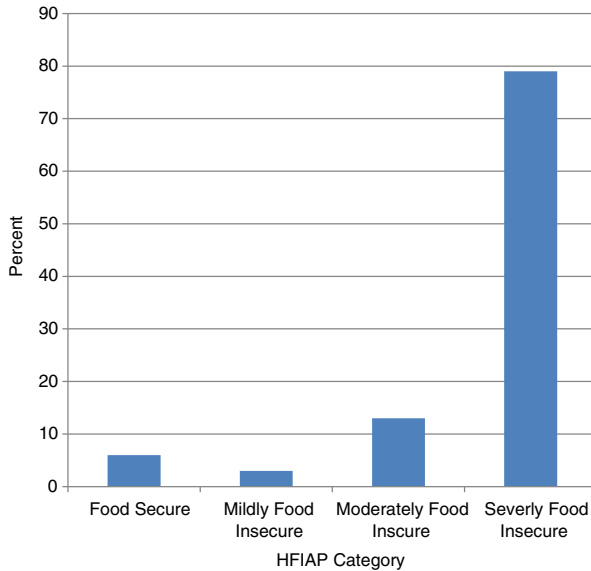


Fig. 2 Levels of household food insecurity in Manzini

often or sometimes gone a whole day and night without eating anything and 24 % had often or sometimes eaten a cooked meal less than once a day. The few food-secure households had three common attributes: a monthly income of at least SZL 1,300 (about US\$165 at the time of the survey), multiple livelihood strategies to secure income and food, and being part of a close extended family that provided informal safety nets.

The Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS) determines whether households are food secure based on the range of foods they had consumed in the previous 24 h. The HDDS ranges from 0 (least diverse, where none of the food groups are eaten) to 12 (most diverse, where all of the food groups are eaten). Most households had eaten cereals (96 %) and between 40 and 50 % had eaten vegetables and meat or poultry. Less than 20 % had eaten fruit, legumes, eggs, fish or milk products. The computed HDDS of 4.09 (out of a possible 12) is very low and is indicative of the poor levels of diversity in the diets of the Manzini urban poor. Such low dietary diversity is likely to have negative implications for the health of household members. In addition, the Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP) score of 5.87 shows that food insecurity in Manzini has a clear temporal dimension with households having only 5–6 months of adequate food provisioning per year (with April, May and December being the most food-secure months.)

Profile of Food-Insecure Households

The main variables used in building a profile of food-insecure households in Manzini were household income, household structure, gender of the household head, size of the household and the migrant status of the household. Food-insecure households are certainly also the most poor. For example, 94 % of households with monthly incomes

of less than SZL 600 per month were severely food insecure, compared with 66 % of households with monthly incomes exceeding SZL 1,300. There were also variations in the levels of food insecurity by gender of the household head. For example, 82 % of female-centred households were severely food insecure, compared to 77 % for those headed by men.

The higher prevalence of severe food insecurity amongst female-centred households is directly related to their lower income-generating capacity. As many as 39 % of female-centred households earned less than SZL 600 per month, compared with only 23 % of male-centred households. On average, female-centred households were poorer than male-centred households (SZL 1,071 versus SZL 1,603 per month). Women also have a harder time accessing formal credit than men and are forced to rely on informal lenders, increasing their economic vulnerability and food insecurity. These results support earlier findings which showed that households headed by women faced major food insecurity challenges (Swazi VAC & UNWFP 2008).

Food Sources in Manzini

An analysis of the major sources of foodstuffs shows that food purchase is the major means of access while own production is not important at all. The majority of surveyed households (90 %) do not engage in urban agriculture and none do so for sale. Unlike cities such as Harare and Lusaka, food insecurity challenges have not induced low-income households to engage in food production. An earlier survey found that only 20 % of urban households in Swaziland had a home garden, of which 82 % cultivated less than 0.5 acres on average (Swazi VAC & UNWFP 2008). Only 9 % of urban households in the Manzini District have a home garden, which is consistent with the findings of the AFSUN survey. Overall, 25 % of households said they cultivated 'other land' apart from the home garden (20 % in the Manzini District) which is likely to be rural Swazi Nation Land held by the household under customary tenure. A total of 35 % of the Manzini households in the AFSUN survey said they receive food from the rural areas, some of which is clearly grown on land 'owned' by the household and farmed by relatives (see below). The reasons for the low rate of participation in urban agriculture are partly physical (residential plot sizes are extremely small in these areas) and partly institutional as urban agriculture remains technically illegal despite its potential benefits.

The three main sources of food are supermarkets (patronised by 90 % of households), small outlets such as corner stores and take-aways (49 %) and the informal food economy (48 %). Supermarkets (primarily South African-owned) are a reliable source of clean, quality food and, given the small size of Manzini, reasonably accessible. On the other hand, take-aways which generally sell cooked foods, such as rice and beef or chicken stew, have limited variety, and the lack of storage facilities (in all but the chain stores such as KFC) means that food cannot be kept for long after it has been cooked. Informal vendors buy uncooked food from the main food market in central Manzini and from nearby farms. Groups of food vendors in Manzini are heterogeneous and include poor women selling small amounts of cooked food on the streets.

The fact that most households depend mainly on marketed foods means that food prices are key determinants of the state of food security. The Swazi VAC and UNWFP

(2008) have shown that food prices affect households' access to food by enhancing or suppressing their buying capacity when prices are low or high, respectively. There are two main reasons why low-income households prefer to buy food from distant supermarkets and not from spaza shops that tend to be ubiquitous in low-income residential areas. First, supermarkets generally sell higher quality food items at lower prices than the spaza shops. Second, most spaza shops are not connected to the electricity grid and hence do not normally stock food items that require refrigeration.

Table 1 presents data from the 2012 survey which compares the prices of various foodstuffs from large supermarkets and smaller informal food outlets (spaza shops). The picture is mixed. Some fresh produce is cheaper in supermarkets (bananas, onions, beans and potatoes), and some is cheaper in the spazas (tomatoes, oranges and apples). Since most of the surveyed households have low dietary diversity, the more pertinent comparison is between staples such as cereals and products such as meat and sugar. The most significant price difference is beef which is much more expensive in supermarkets (SZL 339.15 per 5 kg) compared to the spaza shops (SZL 250 per 5 kg), although the quality may well be lower in the latter. Cereals (mealie meal and rice) also tend to be slightly cheaper at the spaza shops. In other words, a simple price comparison does not shed much light on why households might prefer supermarkets to the informal food economy.

However, households can buy non-perishable staples in bulk at supermarkets which reduces their unit cost. Supermarkets therefore tend to be patronised less frequently (Table 2). Three quarters of the households who buy from supermarkets only do so

Table 1 Comparison of food prices between supermarkets and spaza shops

Food group	Specific foods	Price (SZL) per 5 units (kg, lb, dozen)		Price difference (SZL)
		Supermarkets	Spazas	
Cereals	Mealie meal	41.00	38.67	2.33
	Rice	42.50	38.33	4.17
Vegetables	Tomato	69.60	60.00	9.60
	Onion	44.90	54.20	-9.30
Legumes	Beans	93.50	120.00	-26.50
Meat	Pork	249.50	250.00	-0.50
	Beef	339.15	250.00	89.15
Fruits	Oranges	32.75	28.00	4.75
	Apples	43.30	42.90	0.40
	Bananas	32.40	38.50	-6.10
Roots/tubers	Potatoes	34.65	39.30	-4.65
Oils/fats	Margarine	102.50	150.00	
Dairy	Milk	50.00	55.00	-5.00
	Sour milk	53.75	69.17	-15.42
Eggs		55.50	65.00	-9.50
Sugar		41.75	38.67	2.33

Source: Fieldwork, November 2012

Table 2 Frequency of patronage of food outlets in Manzini

	Daily (5 days per week)	Weekly (at least once per week)	Monthly (at least once per month)	Number
Supermarkets	6	20	74	450
Small shops/take-aways	25	49	13	265
Informal markets/street food	22	60	13	235

once per month, most probably soon after payday so they can take advantage of the cost savings of buying staples in bulk. Another 20 % shop there once per week and only 6 % do so daily (at least 5 days per week). In stark contrast, other food outlets are only patronised on a monthly basis by 13 % of households. A quarter of households that patronise small informal outlets do so on a daily basis, as do 22 % of those who patronise the informal food economy. Nearly half of those who buy from small outlets, and as many as 60 % of those who utilise the informal economy, do so on a weekly basis. The frequent patronage of these sources (and spazas in particular) is undoubtedly related to the fact that, unlike supermarkets, they offer food on credit and in smaller quantities.

Safety Nets and Access to Food

Informal and reciprocal food exchanges offer a measure of security and occur through diverse forms of relationships including shared village or regional identity, friendships, kinship and neighbourliness. These potential reciprocal arrangements include food remittances from rural areas and other cities, shared meals with neighbours or food from neighbours or friends, community food kitchens and borrowing of food. Stretched households with members in both urban and rural areas are the main recipients of food from rural areas. Many urban dwellers maintain links with the rural areas, and these links can be important for urban households that are food insecure. Linkages are associated with having a home or family in the rural place of origin, and these linkages provide support to migrants in times of chronic food shortages. As many as 35 % of the households had received food, especially cereals, vegetables and food made from beans and nuts, from relatives and/or friends in the previous year, but most of them noted that while the food was welcome, it was not critical to household survival.

Rates of inter-household food sharing are considerably lower in Manzini, however. The vast majority of surveyed households (over 80 %) do not engage in any form of inter-household food sharing and therefore cannot rely on such informal safety nets. Borrowing food is the most important form of informal strategy (by 18 % of households), followed by donations of food by other households (12 %) and sharing meals (a mere 8 %) (Table 3). This suggests that informal safety nets cannot be relied upon in times of crisis or to ameliorate everyday hunger.

In terms of more formal non-market food access, community food kitchens are used on a regular basis by a small number of households (around 16 %). However, food aid is virtually non-existent (with only three households in total receiving food this way). This is more surprising given the extent of food aid in Swaziland as a whole. According

Table 3 Frequency with which free food is normally obtained

Inter-household	Number	Percent
Remittances (food)	16	3.2
Shared meal with neighbours and/or other households	41	8.2
Food provided by neighbours and/or other households	60	12.1
Borrow food from others	88	17.8
Other		
Community food kitchen	81	16.5
Food aid	3	0.6

to Mabuza et al. (2009, p. 89), food aid in Swaziland includes maize grain, rice, beans, skim milk and vegetable oil, the majority of which is imported and funded by the USA, the EU and Switzerland. In 2006, 250,000 households in the country received emergency food aid. These households were all in the rural areas of the country. In general, food aid tends to target those whose harvests have failed rather than those downstream (such as in the urban areas) whose need may be just as great.

Food-Based Social Protection

In recent years, the Government of Swaziland has attempted to address food insecurity challenges at the national level through three main social welfare programmes that fall under the Deputy Prime Minister's Office (DPMO): the Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC) grant, Neighbourhood Care Points (NCPs) and Old Age and Public Assistance Grants. Although these programmes are national in scope, we need to ask if and how they have specifically attempted to mitigate food insecurity issues amongst urban vulnerable groups in areas such as Manzini.

The most vulnerable groups in Swaziland include orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs), the elderly (especially those having OVCs under their care), the disabled and the non-employed who have no alternative source of income or food. Schools are an essential part of social protection strategies especially concerning food insecurity. Through the schools' feeding scheme, many children have benefitted from free meals provided at school. Almost a decade ago, slightly above one third of both primary and secondary schoolchildren in the country were OVCs (Government of Swaziland 2005). According to World Food Programme (2006), as many as 65,707 primary and secondary schoolchildren in Swaziland received school meals in 2006 and this figure has increased with rising total enrolment in schools during the past 5 years. Also, the National Emergency Response Council on HIV/AIDS (NERCHA) shows that the orphans group, which is quite vulnerable to food insecurity, has benefitted from the school feeding schemes (NERCHA 2012).

While the OVC programme offers the country the opportunity for the government to mitigate food insecurity challenges in both urban and rural areas, the programme does not specifically target children from food-insecure households. The meals are accessed by all children in school. However, in official circles, it is believed that schools form a

reliable source of food for school-going children, especially those from food-insecure households. In some instances, the school is the sole source of a balanced diet for children and hence the emphasis on its importance in addressing food insecurity. The meals served at many schools in Manzini consisted of cereals, legumes, meat, roots and tubers. Although most of the foods are served less than five times per week, cereals are served throughout the week with legumes and meats served interchangeably.

Amongst the social protection strategies in Swaziland was the establishment of NCPs. The NCP initiative began in 2001 when a few communities established NCPs in their localities in an effort to provide care and support for orphans and vulnerable children. In that same year, UNICEF began funding the NCPs programme, and by 2006, the 438 NCPs distributed throughout the country were serving 33,000 OVCs (UNICEF 2006). In the urban areas, NCPs are under the administration of the Alliance of Mayors Initiative for Community Action on HIV and AIDS at the Local Level (AMICAALL). In October 2012, the total number of children receiving social protection services from the NCPs in Manzini city was 1,883 (AMICAALL 2012). In addition to the free food given to children, NCPs provide some food to the elderly and HIV/AIDS patients taking antiretroviral drugs.

According to RHVP (2007a, b), the Old Age Grant (OAG) was introduced in April 2005 to cover vulnerable older persons (aged 60 years or more) who faced challenges of poverty, neglect, abuse and ill health. The Public Assistance Grants (PAG) provide coverage to all vulnerable groups below the age of 60 who are not beneficiaries of any other grant or source of income (RHVP 2007b, p. 2). According to official pronouncements, through the grants of SZL 600 per quarter (or SZL 200/monthly), the Government of Swaziland is addressing the issue of food insecurity amongst the elderly urban population. The number of OAG beneficiaries increased from 28,000 in 2005/2006 to 49,218 in 2011 (DPMO 2011). According to RHVP (2007b), the OAG has helped improve the food security status of low-income households with elderly members who are OAG beneficiaries. The RHVP (2007a) asserts that one of the most visible outcomes of vulnerability amongst the elderly is hunger and food insecurity, and receipt of Old Age Grants seems to reduce hunger and food insecurity amongst elderly people through improved meal frequency, meal quality and ability to purchase food.

Conclusion

Several findings emerge from this study of food security in Manzini. First, the majority of the city's urban poor are severely food insecure in terms of access (as measured by their HFIAP, HFIAS, MAHFP and HDDS indicators). Second, access to food is being secured largely through commodity channels at a time when the purchasing power of the poor is shrinking. Third, informal social protection networks play a fairly limited role in helping the poor survive through 'care chains' that involve food. Only a small minority of households get food from food aid, remittances, urban agriculture or neighbours.

Formal food-based social protection, in the form of Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC) grant, Neighbourhood Care Points (NCPs), Old Age Grant (OAG) and Public Assistance Grants (PAG), may have indirectly helped some urban households to be more food secure. There is certainly an official perception that social

protection is a very important mechanism for addressing food insecurity amongst the low-income households in Manzini city. Yet, at current levels, it is certainly not having a major impact on household food insecurity. The one exception is the school feeding scheme which ensures that school-going children have at least one good meal per day at least 3 days per week. The impact of this food security strategy could not be assessed by a survey that focused only on the household as a unit and not on intra-household differences in food security between household members. Further research is therefore needed on the food insecurity of individual household members.

There is great potential for enhancing the effectiveness of the government's food-based social protection programmes. The big challenge for the Swazi government and urban local authorities, however, is to find ways of creating space for the urban poor to improve their nutritional status through pro-poor planning processes that allow the urban poor to produce some of their food and to market it, while at the same time consolidating social safety networks. Lessons learned from elsewhere in Africa show that city councils and national governments need to support livelihood strategies pursued by the poor in order to help them to be more food secure. Also, there is a need for citywide policies that aim to strengthen targeted safety net mechanisms for urban households that are food insecure. For example, the pro-poor food security policy that targets schoolchildren in urban areas should be broadened so that all children who are food insecure are assisted, but this requires a better targeting policy that ensures that all children from food-insecure households benefit from the programme. At the same time, the government should consider creating conditions that enable the informal food economy to flourish so that the poor can access cheaper and locally produced food.

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