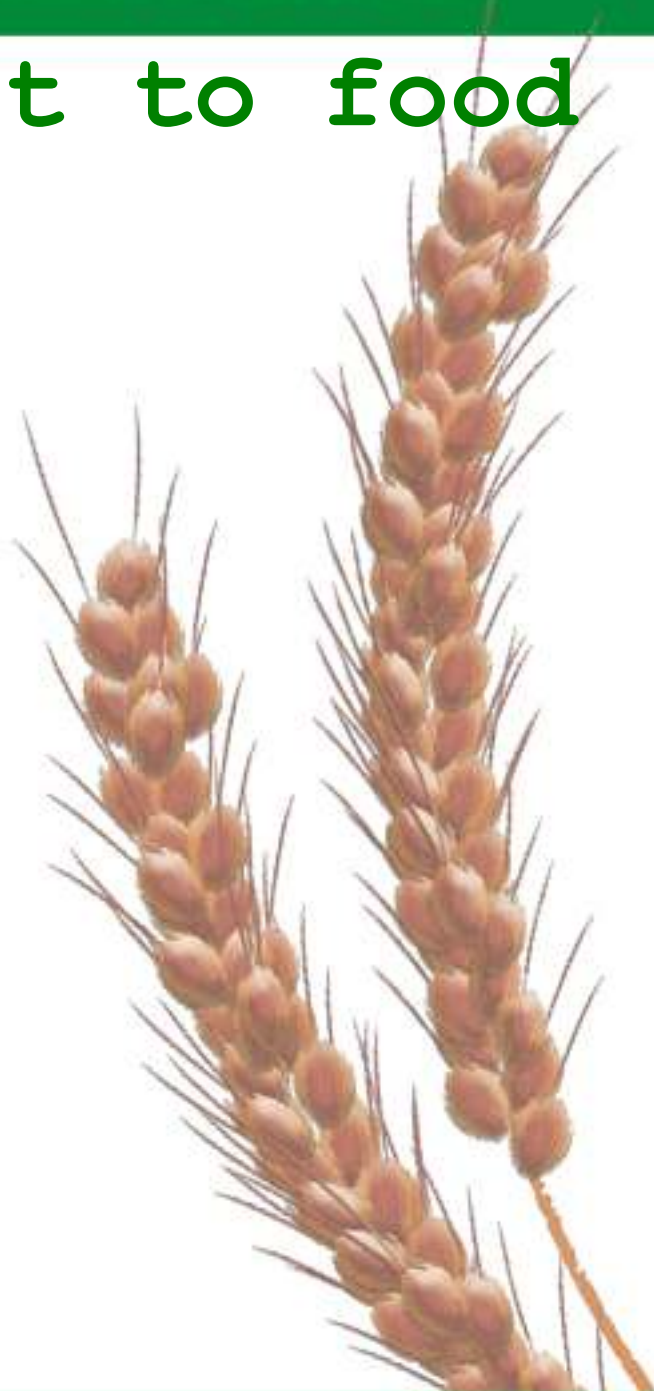




GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

Seeking a just and sustainable LIFE for ALL

The right to food



An occasional publication of the
Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation
(ESSET) aimed at creating a space for churches to
understand and confront current socio-economic factors
that generates acute poverty and inequality in society.

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A CASE STUDY

“Hunger is a scandal. It robs people of the possibilities of a good and abundant life, and it is an affront to God. Hunger has become so deeply rooted and widespread in Southern Africa that churches cannot but be moved to action” From hunger to justice – Food security and the Churches in Southern Africa, August 2005, Church Land Programme.

Below is a case study of Lizi from Soweto. We share the story with churches with the hope that it will help us to reflect on the crisis we are faced with so that we can develop informed decisions.

35 years old Lizi lives in Soweto with her family of five. Soweto is a mixed residence area with upper, middle, low and no income families. Some residents are under-employed and unemployed community.

Her father was shot during the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa and left paralysed. Her mother is unemployed. She is not yet 60, which is the age that the government of South Africa uses as a benchmark for social assistance to senior citizens. In 2003, Lizi had to suspend her studies at a college in Johannesburg in order to find employment so that she could take care of her family. She found a job as a casual worker in one of the stores in Johannesburg.

This means that the store she works for only invites her to work when they need her. She cannot take initiative as to how long she can work for, even if she wants to work for a little longer time than the shop requires. For this she earns an amount of about R1500 per month which is the only source of income for her family. Lizi's salary is generally used for meeting the most basic needs for the family. It is used for electricity, transport to work, school fees for her two siblings, medical and other expenses.

Lizi's youngest brother was diagnosed HIV positive three years ago. He has recently started taking antiretroviral drugs from the local clinic. The family need to spend more money on quality and healthy food and on transport to health clinics thus reducing the amount available for food.

The family also struggles with access to clean water on a regular basis because of the prepaid water system installed in their township. This system prevents them from even accessing free water promised by government when they have not replenished their supply.

With the increase in food, electricity and fuel prices, their lives will change for the worst. This means they will no longer be able to afford the basic food staffs. Already they can no longer pay for electricity which has been cut off due to non-payment. With the energy crisis and rising interest rates in the country, some companies are already threatening to retrench some of their staff to cut down on costs. Lizi runs the risk of being retrenched herself.

REFLECTING ON LIZI'S SITUATION

“The tragedy is that there is enough food to feed everyone in the world, with estimates varying between 110% and 150% global food supply per person. The problem of hunger then is not about the total supply of food but about access to that food, and therefore about the just distribution of the available food supply.

And the question of access and distribution is a question of entitlements. People have to earn the ability to acquire food, either directly in the fields, or through wages from other labour that is then exchanged for food through some form of market. ... [W]e should not be seduced into thinking that our concern with food should end with total aggregate food supply, or even food supply per capita; but with whether that food is justly distributed so that all of us, receive our daily bread. And this is a question of distributive justice that must challenge Christians to question the dominant economic paradigm in the world today. ...

[T]he direction that the Lord's Prayer, with its radically egalitarian stance, is taking us ... is pushing us to be concerned not just with our own access and entitlement to food, but to that of our neighbour, and particularly our neighbour whose own entitlements to food is rather weak” [De Gruchy S. “Give us this day our daily bread: four theological theses on food and hunger”, presentation to a workshop hosted by the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA), Pietermaritzburg]

There are many issues we can raise from Lizi's life outlined above. Though she has job, Lizi family is one of many that falls within the poverty trap even when there is someone employed in the house. Her status is that of a 'working poor' or an underemployed person. The family needs access to basic services such as water and electricity; and her brother needs to access medical care. It can be argued that all the needs are ultimately a need for a quality and sustainable life. And she needs a decent income or employment for her to meet the needs of the family.

Without over simplifying the situation we can argue that at the centre for this quest for life is a quest for food. They need money to buy food and they need water and electricity to cook the food. Food is life, food is us and food is work. There is no one person on earth who can live fully without food. Food is thus the basis of our nurture, health and growth. It is understood as one of the essential needs and rights for human beings. It is important, therefore, for all of us to understand food as an issue that affects our lives, our relations, our economy and even our faith.

We need to understand that the problem (and solution) is not just the lack of full plates in the table. Food is an economic, political, social and relational issue. It is a faith question that reminds us to ask:

- Why do some people go to sleep without food in a world that has plenty?
- How does our faith enable us to address the questions of high food prices, food insecurity and injustices?
- How do we tackle the issues of who is affected by food prices, how and why?
- And the last important question to also ask is: what we ought to do in these situations?

The challenge facing Lizi's family and millions others in similar situations is caused by many different factors. For us to make meaningful and lasting solutions we need to understand these factors.

It is a historic problem

There has been an imminent food crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the world today. As early as 2001, many millions of people were at risk of death or illness through hunger and huge numbers of children and adults were already recorded to have died of starvation. Toward the end of 2001 and early 2002 there were many reports about the possible shortages of staple food in Southern African region. It was claimed that these had a huge impact on the prices of the basic staple food commodities such as maize, wheat and oil, in the region.

It is sustained by monopoly corporate control

Further we have seen a situation where the control of the production and distribution of food lies in very few global companies.

“Only six corporations control 85% of the world’s grain trade. This essentially means that one company controls the production of wheat, the distribution and the price. The resultant impact is felt at the supermarket in bread prices. . . According to Corporate Accountability International, the world’s 15 top grocers ‘collectively take in 30% of the 2-trillion spent globally on food each year; and the four largest packaged food producers together account for more than 11% of the food dollars on earth, with the top 50 companies accounting for 28.3% of global food sales”.

If one were to map the control of the food industry in South Africa, a similar oligarchy is evident with Tiger Brands, Pioneer Foods and Unilever among the few companies controlling the food products found on our supermarket shelves.

[Mohau Pheko, “At these prices, the only one getting fat on food is bloated big business”, article in the Sunday Times 20 April 2008]

It is worsened by new food technologies and the energy crisis

Modern technologies that are supposedly meant to help address the world’s food problems are having the opposite effect. The use of genetically engineered crops has increased in recent years. This development has seen the patenting of seeds so that whoever wants to plant any crop remains forever indebted to the company holding the patent. Local food production is undermined as well as indigenous production systems that have sustained our communities for ages.

The price of oil has also had an impact on the price of food. Modern agricultural and industrial activity uses a lot of energy. This means the high input cost of oil is transferred to the supermarket shelves. The growing use of biofuels as alternatives to oil puts further upward pressure on food prices and because of the possible high returns drives farmers to produce crops for the ‘petrol tank rather than the stomach’.

It affects the human dignity of people

People affected by food shortages and the sharp increases in the food prices are mostly people already living below the poverty line. Not being able to provide food for family makes many feel like they are less of human beings. It is worse when one cannot access the means of doing so such as employment and land to till their own garden.

The implication of the above is that food has ceased to be just a question for individuals about their individual nurture and health, to a public, socio-political, economic and ecological issue that requires deep discernment and moral solution. It raises questions such as:

- Are food prices just and affordable to all?
- Is the market economy which shapes economic and prices for food and other commodities helpful and or relevant for countries such as South Africa where inequality is entrenched, adequate for the wellbeing of society and the poor?
- Are the market driven mechanism we use to distribute food the best methods at our disposal and adequate to meet the basic needs of people?

Are we exaggerating the situation?

Some will be quick to point that things have since 1994 been changing. That those who are poor, like Lizi and her family, needs to work harder and climb the ladder into the so-called first economy or wait for their turn to hit the jackpot. They say that Rome was not build in one day; that much has been done by the post 1994 government.

Responding to this argument, Jeremy Cronin writes:

“So have things changed since 1994? Absolutely! But the flurry of change, whether directed at fostering capitalist growth or at ameliorating the plight of workers and the poor, is, by and large, not transforming the reality that continues to reproduce agonising levels of poverty and inequality for the majority.” (Amandla!, Issue No. 1, March 2008)

WHAT CAN CHURCHES DO?

“We, churches and believers, are called to look at the world’s reality from the perspective of people, especially the oppressed and the excluded. We are called to be non-conformist and transformative communities. We are called to let ourselves be transformed by the freeing our minds from the dominating, conquering and egoistic imperial mindset, thus doing the will of God (according to the Torah) which is fulfilled in love (agape) and solidarity (Romans 13:10, 1 John 3, 10-24). Transformative communities are transformed by God’s loving grace. They practice an economy of solidarity and sharing.

Paul’s good news is that, in the face of today’s principalities and powers, another world is possible. Christian traditions, together with wisdom in other religions and cultures, can contribute to this vision of life in just relationships realized by God’s Spirit, and can offer inspirational visions for alternatives.

We as churches are called to create spaces for, and become agents of, transformation even as we are entangled in and complicit with the very system we are called to change. We witness the massive violation of the human dignity and the integrity of creation. We confront the suffering, enormous economic and social disparity, abject poverty and the destruction of life, which result from the neoliberal model of economic globalization.

As churches, we need to accept and assume the vocation to challenge the thinking of the present age, to be transformed ourselves by God’s grace, and to boldly develop visionary long-term strategies. It is a pastoral and spiritual task for the churches to address the false spirituality of conformity, and to encourage Christian believers and faith communities to embrace a spirituality of life and transformation rooted in God’s loving grace. This is the way in which agape, the love of God and neighbour is translated into social and economic life.

We are called to be with the suffering people and groaning creation in solidarity with those who are building alternative communities of life. The locus of the churches is where God is working, Christ is suffering and the Spirit is caring for life and resisting destructive principalities and powers.

The churches that hold themselves apart from this concrete locus of the Triune God cannot claim to be faithful churches.” [*Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE)*, a background document, World Council of Churches, 2005].

The call by the World Council of Churches made in 2005 incorporates multiple responses to the complex and multifaceted nature of poverty as Lizi’s story illustrates. In the call of the WCC and this document the challenge to Christians and churches is to engage with the issues of economic injustice, hunger and food scarcity beyond the traditional responses of the church. Traditionally churches respond to acute poverty and hunger aims largely at relief and ameliorating the pangs and pains of poverty without appreciating the systemic and structural nature of the poverty and unemployment challenges of South Africa. Poverty relief efforts are noble deeds which should continue. But the bigger challenge is how to address the root causes of the current situation. Not doing so will allow a permanent underclass of people dependent on handouts from some generous benefactors to subsist.

Taking this route of working for transformation towards a just economic and social order requires a concerted struggle of all citizens and sectors of society. The history of the world teaches us that the marriage of global capital and political power will not easily give up its privileges. Like the struggles for ARVs led by the Treatment Action Campaign; the struggle for free access to basic services being gallantly waged by the Anti-Privatisation Forum; and the struggle for just working conditions that has seen labour rights extended to domestic and farm workers, led by workers unions; the quest to have all South Africans have access to quality food sustainably calls for a concerted struggle.

1. Be in solidarity with those struggling against the status quo

It is our view that in the first instance, churches must be present in the communities of suffering people. This is an example set for us by our Lord Jesus Christ, whose ministry was not based in the centres of power of Jerusalem, but outside the camp where there was wailing and groaning and much hunger. This is the hope the church, nationally and locally can give. This is the expression of the love of God that cannot be shared with beautiful words only.

The churches presence means more than having church buildings in communities of the poor. It means participating in the struggles that communities wage in the quest for abundant life.

2. Creating spaces for reflections and analysis of the current situation

It is imperative for the churches to engage in the questions related to food from a theological and ethical perspective. It is however, even more important for theology and ethics to dialogue with other disciplines in order to discern why, how and what are the key concerns and issues related to food. It is through such multi-dialogical approaches that the churches can clearly articulate why it is our business how food is produced, distributed and or priced fairly or justly? It will also be easier for the churches to identify and contribute to discussions or efforts which attempt to shape the just conditions in which food production and food prices and distribution are considered fair and just.

3. Challenge pillars of the current system

The church much challenge and work for the destruction of the current ideology of the market. This is the ideology used to sustain high and unaffordable food prices under the guise that the only markets know what a fair price. Recent findings by the Competitions Tribunal against major South African companies for anti-competitive behaviour show how hypocritical this assumption is.

The concept of just and fair prices for food has been with us for ages. In the early 1300's Thomas of Aquino formulated the idea of just price "as the price that will not give unfair advantage to either the seller or the buyer." His view was that prices for goods had to be guided by one's conscience. In the early 1900 Adam Smith argued that "under certain ideal conditions the market price will be determined on the level of the true value (or natural price of the good, but the natural price was not determined by market forces, but by public opinion in a well organised society."

Other economists and philosophers such as the French scholar, Quesnay argued that prices were fair if only if:

"Under stable equilibrium conditions, business could not charge more than a price equal to the least cost of production where a normal rate of profit determined by the opportunity cost of management is included. Only under such conditions is the price charged legitimate and represents a positive equilibrium value. Equilibrium prices satisfy not only the condition of a free open market but also other standards of social justice of equity, social peace and human solidarity in the community or society."

We propose that the following questions based on Lizi' story be used in local groups to help create awareness and develop strategies for action.

1. What are the different social, political, economic and cultural factors that prevent the family from accessing quality food and their ability to produce their own food?
2. How can Lizi's family survive on R1500, 00 per month in the context of rising food prices? What implications does this have on the quality of their lives generally?
3. In your experience who is mostly affected by the high food prices?
4. What is your understanding of the petition 'give us this day our daily bread' made Christians and the continuing high cost and lack of access to food for many people?
5. What policy options can you recommend for government and business to ensure that everybody has access to food?
6. How do you suggest the churches utilise the Lord's Prayer to agitate for the right to food for all?
7. What can your local church or church group do in response to the challenges faced by families like Lizi's?
8. Who should the church work with in responding to these challenges?
9. What resources and capacities will you need to do this? And how will you acquire these?

This publication is an occasional publication that the Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation (ESSET) produces under the theme "give us this day our daily bread". This petition, the fourth in the Lord's Prayer, raises the socio-economic challenges that the people of God in first century Palestine faced. Jesus Christ highlights the plight of people not having bread – an essential ingredient for sustainable livelihood, and the means to acquiring it. Christ announces God as one committed to providing this 'bread' despite the prevailing conditions of the time.

This situation remains with us today. Millions of God's people live in acute poverty without access to the means to produce the bread; access to the land for production and resources to acquire the bread in the modern market place. The petition is an injunction for us to wage a concerted effort against poverty. It is not a cap in hand give 'me' 'my' bread command. It is a radical claim for people to be involved in the making and distribution of bread as co-creators with God. Prayer for us must also be seen as an offering of the self to be an agent of God in the delivery of the object of the prayer. It is not a substitute for action on our side.

If, as we believe, it is God's will that all people should have an abundant life, and that God does provide the daily bread, as evidenced by the wealth of the resources of the earth, we must then ask why in these times of plenty some continue to be poor and hungry.

The series seeks to help churches and communities to:

1. Understand factors that sustain unjust production of and unequal distribution of food;
2. Understand why economic development of the country does not reach the majority of the poor;
3. Create space for the development and sharing of strategies and alternative policies to overcome the current system;
4. Translate national campaigns for socio-economic justice into the language of the church to enable Christians to be part of global campaigns for a just world.

"Surely the petition for our daily bread comes with the submission 'Thy will be done'. So whatever happens here on earth must of necessity be a representative of 'as it is in heaven'. Until we deal with the "undesired" reign, we will not be able to access the 'daily bread'. For people of God to survive and to leave in peace and stability where there is none in want, including of the daily bread, we need to remove any other thing that makes it impossible to have the bread and the means of access to its production."

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