

Food security 'experts' don't have all the answers: Community knowledge is key

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South Africa is in the grips of a food system paradox. It's a country known for its agricultural production and has a sophisticated policy framework. Yet, millions of its residents [are malnourished](#). Nearly [one in four children are stunted](#) as a result of their mother's poor nutrition during pregnancy and their own malnutrition in early life.



Source: Kate HoltAusAID via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

It is a complex crisis. And responding to it is being made even harder as climate change increasingly hits food production. [Evidence suggests](#) that wildfires, irregular rainfall, heat and droughts will increasingly endanger agricultural production. This will threaten jobs in the agricultural sector. It will also affect the quantity, quality and price of food.

Too often, potential responses or solutions don't take people's own daily experiences into account. Researchers fall into the trap of habitual thinking. They make assumptions. But they do not listen to or learn from communities on the front lines of the crisis.

That's why, in a rural South African town, we [adopted](#) a "learning journey" approach. This is an [innovative research process](#) whereby a broad and inclusive range of participants literally undertake a journey to explore a complex system and gain firsthand experience of problems.

During several "[learning journeys](#)", both we and the research participants gained new perspectives on the complexity of processes related to food. Rather than looking at the issue generally, we were able to home in on place-based challenges – and potential solutions. This breaks with traditional modes of thinking that focus on "one size fits all" solutions.

Participants were empowered to take stock of existing local potential. They identified local assets such as crèches and informal traders that might be used to tackle elements of the food system crisis. The research also reminded us, powerfully, that people don't live in economic sectors. They live in places.

Immersing into Worcester

Worcester is about 110 kilometres from Cape Town in South Africa's Western Cape province and has a population of nearly 128,000.

It is typical of many rural towns in South Africa with a stark reality: a [quarter of its children under five are malnourished](#). Many adults subsist on nutritionally poor diets, resulting in [poor health outcomes](#) like obesity.

Our research group has conducted three learning journeys in Worcester since late 2021. Participants include community members, local and provincial government officials, academics, activists, food advocacy groups and early childhood development practitioners. Together we have visited sites where residents procure both monthly staples and fresh fruit and vegetables and where early childhood development facilities are concentrated. It's in these places that many Worcester residents purchase food and young children receive both care and food.

Immersing into these places, hosted by people affected by the food system, revealed how different systems overlap to shape dietary health.

The “learning journeys” offered valuable insights. For instance, it emerged that crime is a problem for food retailers as much as for consumers. Without adequate safety, people are vulnerable to crime. Another issue is that a great deal of the fresh produce sold by retailers in Worcester is sourced in Cape Town, rather than locally. This transportation of food, particularly fresh vegetables – when the same produce is grown locally – raises costs and is bad for the environment.

Street traders and spaza shops – small, informal food retailers that are often home-based – did much better in this regard. They offered reasonably priced and diverse fruit and vegetables sourced from local farms.

It also became clear that early childhood development centres play a potentially crucial role in providing nutrition to young children. But school principals complained that it was difficult to officially register their institutions. This prevented them from getting government subsidies to help feed children and from accessing land which they wished to use for food gardens.

After each “learning journey”, participants gathered for “learning labs”. There, people shared their experiences and insights. This is a way for everyone to share their knowledge – and to recognise that “experts” don't have all the answers. A ward councillor reflected that when programmes don't address food explicitly, they too often have a negative effect and perpetuate the ills in the food system.

Consolidating learning, committing to action

In the final session, representatives from the provincial and local governments and from civil society organisations identified new opportunities for collaboration and implementation.

First, the lessons of this research will be complemented with detailed urban food system mapping data using household

surveys. This will be paired with spatial modelling approaches, enabling town planners to predict the likely effect of external shocks to the food system, such as those caused by climate change. They can then take local, targeted mitigating actions.

Work will also be conducted to help local government use food systems management to try to offset the negative impacts of climate change. The Breede Valley Municipality, of which Worcester is part, will be a critical partner throughout this process.

If a climate-resilient food system is to emerge in Worcester, or in similar towns throughout South Africa, it is clear that it will only do so through local cooperation, knowledge co-production, collective action, and the creation of a shared vision of what a socially just and sustainable food system looks like. We believe that our work in Worcester is an important early step in this process.

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