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Apartheid’s Agricultural Legacy

South Africa lies at the southernmost tip of Africa and is home to about 63.5 million people. It's a nation with 12 official languages and 3 capital cities and often referred to as the rainbow nations because of its cultural, ethnic and racial diversity.. The country has various climates ranging from the arid Sahara to the subtropical ocean. The average African household has about three to four people although families and households can look very different across the country. Families in South Africa with stable incomes may be able to shop at supermarkets and regularly afford fresh and nutritious food while other families in South Africa may have to make difficult choices about what and what they cannot afford.

Apartheid, the system of institutionalized racial segregation enforced in South Africa from 1948 to 1994, significantly shaped the country’s agricultural system and continues to play a role in the countries plaguing issue of food insecurity today. Government policies systematically removed Black and Colored South Africans from fertile land, limited their access to agricultural resources, and created economic inequalities that have lasted for generations after. Although South Africa produces enough food to meet the country's overall needs, millions of households still experience food insecurity because they cannot access or cannot afford that food. Apartheid fundamentally shaped South Africa's agricultural sector by enforcing land dispossession and deepening the economic inequality. Today, its effects continue to contribute to food insecurity demonstrating hunger is not simply a problem of food production, it is also a problem with access to economic opportunity, land ownership, and historical injustice.

One of the most significant impacts of apartheid on agriculture was the dispossession and unequal distribution of land. The 1913 Natives Land Act and later apartheid policies restricted Black South Africans to approximately 13% of the country's land, much of which was less fertile and less suitable for large scale agriculture. The forced relocation of people into overcrowded “homelands" contributed to overgrazing of soil, degradation of land, and declining agricultural productivity. (Missealhorn & Hendricks, 2017). Communities that had depended on farming for generations were no longer able to produce enough food for themselves; families were separated from their ancestral land and agricultural traditions and were forced into wage labor on white owned farms. As local food production declined communities became increasingly dependent on purchased food creating long-term vulnerability to food insecurity.

Apartheid is a major factor contributing to food insecurity, it restricted educational and employment opportunities for black South Africans and created patterns of poverty that have been passed from one generation to the next. Today approximately 20% of South African households experience moderate to severe food insecurity, with the rural communities facing particularly serious challenges (Tambe, 2023). Food insecurity is therefore less about whether food exists and more about whether people have the income and resources necessary to obtain it. Unemployment, low wages, and rising food prices make it difficult for many families to consistently afford healthy and nutritious meals. The effects of these inequalities are also visible in South Africa's urban communities. During apartheid racialized spatial planning separated many black South Africans from their economic centers and placed them farther away from major supermarkets and other services. Today many residents rely on informal food systems such as spaza shops, which are small convenience stores commonly found in townships. Spaza shops are important stakeholders of food security because they provide nearby and affordable food to communities that have limited transportation or access to higher supermarkets. However, the food available in the stores is often highly processed and less nutritious. This creates another challenge: affordable food is not always healthy food. The economic inequalities created must involve not only increasing the amount of food available but also making nutritious food more affordable and accessible.

Apartheid also created a deeply unequal agricultural system. White commercial farmers received government subsidies, access to credit, advanced technology, irrigation, transportation networks, and other forms of agricultural support, while black farmers were largely excluded from these opportunities. This created a dual agricultural system: A highly productive commercial farming sector existed alongside and underdeveloped small holder and subsistence farming sector. While commercial farms helped South Africa produce large quantities of food for national and international markets, high levels of national food production did not guarantee the marginalized communities could afford or access nutritious food. Agricultural development was therefore focused heavily on economic productivity rather than equal access to food and resources. (Bjornlund). Since the end of the apartheid in 1994, South Africa has attempted to address these inequalities through Land Reform and other agricultural policies. However, progress has been slow and many challenges remain. Agricultural land is still unequally distributed while many emerging farmers lack the training, financial resources, infrastructure, and market connections to succeed. Environmental problems including land degradation and water shortages continue to reduce productivity especially in former “homeland” areas. Small farmers also face competition from larger commercial farms and international markets. These challenges demonstrate that simply transferring land ownership is not enough. Farmers must also receive the resources necessary to make that land productive.

The first step toward addressing food insecurity should therefore be a stronger Land Reform program that combines land redistribution with long-term support for new and existing farmers. Land Reform should focus not only on transferring ownership but also ensuring that farmers can successfully use their land. The government should provide long-term training mentorship from experienced farmers and access to agricultural extension services and financial support including low interest loans and grants could help farmers purchase equipment, seeds, livestock and other necessary supplies. This approach would make Land Reform more effective because farmers would receive both land and the tools needed to succeed. The government should also invest in smallholder farmers and farmer cooperatives. Smallholder farmers should receive necessary resources to increase productivity. Creating cooperatives would allow farmers to

share expensive equipment, purchase supplies at lower cost and negotiate better prices when selling their products. Cooperative farmers could also help farmers reach larger markets that may otherwise be difficult for individual farmers to access. Government and non-governmental organizations could establish guaranteed purchase or local procurement programs that allow farmers to sell food to schools, hospitals, and other public institutions that would provide farmers with a more stable source of income while increasing the availability of locally produced food. Community-based agriculture could also improve food access in townships and cities. This would provide fresh produce while teaching young people about agriculture, nutrition, and environmental sustainability. During my childhood in South Africa, my elementary school ran a local based garden where students would grow fresh fruits and vegetables as part of a life skills and science lesson, and at the end we would get to take our harvest home. Because I grew up in a particularly impoverished township, the little we grew made a big difference in my house and definitely showed up on my plate.

Sustainable agriculture and climate action programs should be another part of the solution. South African farmers face increasing environmental challenges making it important to improve agricultural practices while protecting natural resources. Programs could promote crop rotation, soil restoration, water conservation, composting and drought resistant crops. Rehabilitating degraded land in former "homeland" areas should be a national priority because restoring this land could increase agricultural productivity while improving the ability of rural communities to produce their own food. These practices would also be culturally relevant because they can incorporate traditional agricultural knowledge and modern scientific techniques instead of replacing local knowledge entirely. Improving infrastructure and market access is equally important. Poor structure can cause farmers to lose food before it reaches consumers and make it more expensive to transport products to the market; better storage facilities could also reduce post harvest losses while improving roads and transportation could allow farmers to reach more customers; expanding both local and regional markets would also strengthen domestic food systems and reduce excessive dependence on imported food.

Growing up in South Africa, I experienced food insecurity first hand; the inequality created by apartheid affected my daily life because it affected what was on my plate. Seeing the contrast between wealthier communities and communities like mine struggle to meet basic needs showed me that food and security is not simply caused by a lack of food, it is also caused by unequal access to land, income, resources, and opportunities. My experience along with the experiences of other Colored and Black South Africans demonstrate how the legacy of apartheid remains connected to food insecurity today. Learning about this issue has helped me understand that solving food insecurity requires addressing the deeper structural problems that created it. It also inspired me to think about solutions that can be applied not only globally both in my own community such as supporting local agriculture and advocating for more equitable food systems, investment in more sustainable agriculture, rural development, urban farming, and social protection can further strengthen food security and make communities more resilient by addressing both historical causes and present-day effects of inequality so South Africa can move toward a food system that is not only productive but also sustainable, inclusive, and accessible to everybody.

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