

SA's hunger is everyone's problem - especially the well-fed

By [Mary-Jane Morifi](#)

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In a crisis, the urgency of need must trump market barriers. Now more than ever business must come together and act to save the vulnerable among us.



Mary-Jane Morifi, Tiger Brands

Covid-19 has split our already divided economy down two lines: either you're essential or you're not. So while essential workers are out there risking their lives, many non-essential workers are staying at home risking their livelihoods. For them, no work means no pay – and no pay means no food, especially in congested urban areas where subsistence farming isn't a viable option.

Many of the small-scale entrepreneurs and hawkers who would normally busy the streets with their goods have been forced back into their communities. The streets are empty – and therefore so are the grocery cupboards.

Already, we've seen how hunger causes social unrest. By mid-April, Tafelsig East residents in the Western Cape were so desperate for food they began throwing stones at police because they hadn't received any food hampers from their ward councillor. Facing a reporter's camera, one woman shouted, "Hunger will kill us long before Covid-19." Similar disruptions occurred in Macassar, Cape Town, where spaza shops were looted, including the burning of tyres and gunfire.

This is the frightening paradox of Covid-19 in South Africa, where being safe comes with immense economic risks. Now is the time for those of us in "big business" to help South Africa's most vulnerable survive the unintended consequences of this reality.



Tiger Brands Foundation supports beneficiary communities during lockdown

7 Apr 2020



Food insecurity intensified

Even before Covid-19 arrived on our shores, some 54% of South Africans were hungry or at risk of hunger. The economic recession and extended national lockdown has only intensified this problem in a country where millions of people spend more than half of their income on basic sustenance. While a lockdown deters the spread of the virus, it also creates new problems with competing (and likely longer-lasting) urgency that won't disappear when the lockdown is lifted.

If you can acknowledge that South Africa is facing an urgent food problem while you have a full fridge and a full stomach, then you're among the privileged few who only have one pandemic to face. Millions more face the double crisis of Covid-19 and hunger. Worse still: hunger means malnutrition, which only increases vulnerability to the effects of the virus.

This isn't just a state social security problem or the problem of a corporate CSI programme; it's a problem for all of us. But those of us in big business need to lead the way because we're able to channel our resources quickly and effectively especially during such an unprecedented moment.

If we think that hunger is not a “my” problem, but a “them” problem, we underestimate what people will do for food when pushed far enough. Covid-19 has reminded us all that despite the unity we feel when the President calls the nation to stand together or when the vuvuzelas sound at 7pm to cheer our frontline workers, our society remains socially and economically fragmented. That’s a bigger problem for a different day.

What can we do now?



Massmart leadership funds donation of 230 tonnes of food

16 Apr 2020



Give as much as you can

We should start by collaborating not just with our partners and charities, but with our competitors. Crisis moments make for unusual bedfellows, but the urgency of the present moment asks us to transcend traditional barriers like competitive advantage, market share and media visibility. Imagine the impact that farmers, food manufacturers and retailers could make if they collaborated to reduce food wastage. A third of South Africa’s food production goes to waste, yet over 10 million people go to bed hungry each night.

We may all be going through the same storm, but some of us have better boats to ride it out. Forget the “PR stunts” and piecemeal offerings – give as much as you can. It is our responsibility to lead this as corporate South Africa, not because it’s good for the bottom line but because it’s simply “good” business.

This is what is driving us at Tiger Brands. As the largest food producer in Africa, we are well placed to be able to unlock what we do to benefit those who need it most. Our current CSI programmes provide food to some 30,000 people every day, including 4,500 university students. We also donate food weekly to other needy South Africans via our partnerships with organisations like Food Forward, one of South Africa’s largest food banks.

Our Tiger Brands Foundation supports nearly 80,000 children with a nutritious breakfast. During Covid-19, we have kept all these programmes going and augmented our efforts by providing daily bread to frontline healthcare workers to salute them for their selfless service to South Africa. We have also made additional food hampers available to those in need, and restarted programmes like Plates4Days that traditionally only run when universities are open.



FoodForward SA bumps up food support operation amid Covid-19 crisis

2 Apr 2020



So, while we can never do everything for everyone – we can do part. The lesson in this is that if we all (as people or as big business) do something, the compounded impact on our society will be felt for years to come.

It’s a simple mindset shift. Forget about criticising those who are battling to lockdown effectively in crowded shacks. Rather ask yourself what this says about South Africa’s housing inequalities and how we can all play a role.

It reminds me of American author Herman Melville’s famous words – that nothing is so preposterous as “the criticisms [of] the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed and well-fed”. It’s time we each did something – either big or small so that we can show that we are a nation that comes together in our defining moments.

We are committed to doing so as Tiger Brands and we call on businesses and all South Africans to join us in doing the same.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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