

Press Conference with Brian Sibeko-Ngidi: Hunger and food insecurity as obstacles to being fully integrated in society

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Brian Sibeko-Ngidi at a Uthingo Network event, courtesy of Uthingo Network

“When lunch hour came, and I already had an idea of the kind of people we were about to serve, people drove in to Khalid for food...” said Brian Sibeko-Ngidi, a critical food studies researcher and director of Uthingo Network, a South African human rights organization.

“...I couldn’t marry the two ideas, that people had money for a car but no money for food.” he said.

On Sept. 22, Sibeko-Ngidi held a press conference in Walker Hall, speaking about his research on hunger in South Africa.

“Hunger and poverty look different in Africa than they do in the U.S.” said Sibeko-Ngidi.

While U.S. poverty is often related to affordability and access to an existing supply of food, South African poverty is linked to societal structures such as land dispossession, governmental corruption, and sometimes a wide scale unavailability of food due to infertile land.

In South Africa, food is a status symbol. Through his research on food's intersection with self expression and specifically queer identity, Sibeko-Ngidi has observed that this is reflected in African-American queer communities as well; saying that people take pride in eating “fancier” meals as they are healthier and more difficult to access.

“They were using food to basically improve their social standing, to demand respect. Because in society, if you have money, you get respect...” he said. “...So gay people are using food experiences or food ways and food paths to basically say, ‘I am human and I could be more affluent or wealthier than you.’”

He believes that the situation of food insecurity, and the societal mindset that has been developed by it, is likely because of the lingering effects of Apartheid. [Ongoing racism in South Africa causes structural barriers](#) such as social mistrust, unequal pay, and job insecurity.

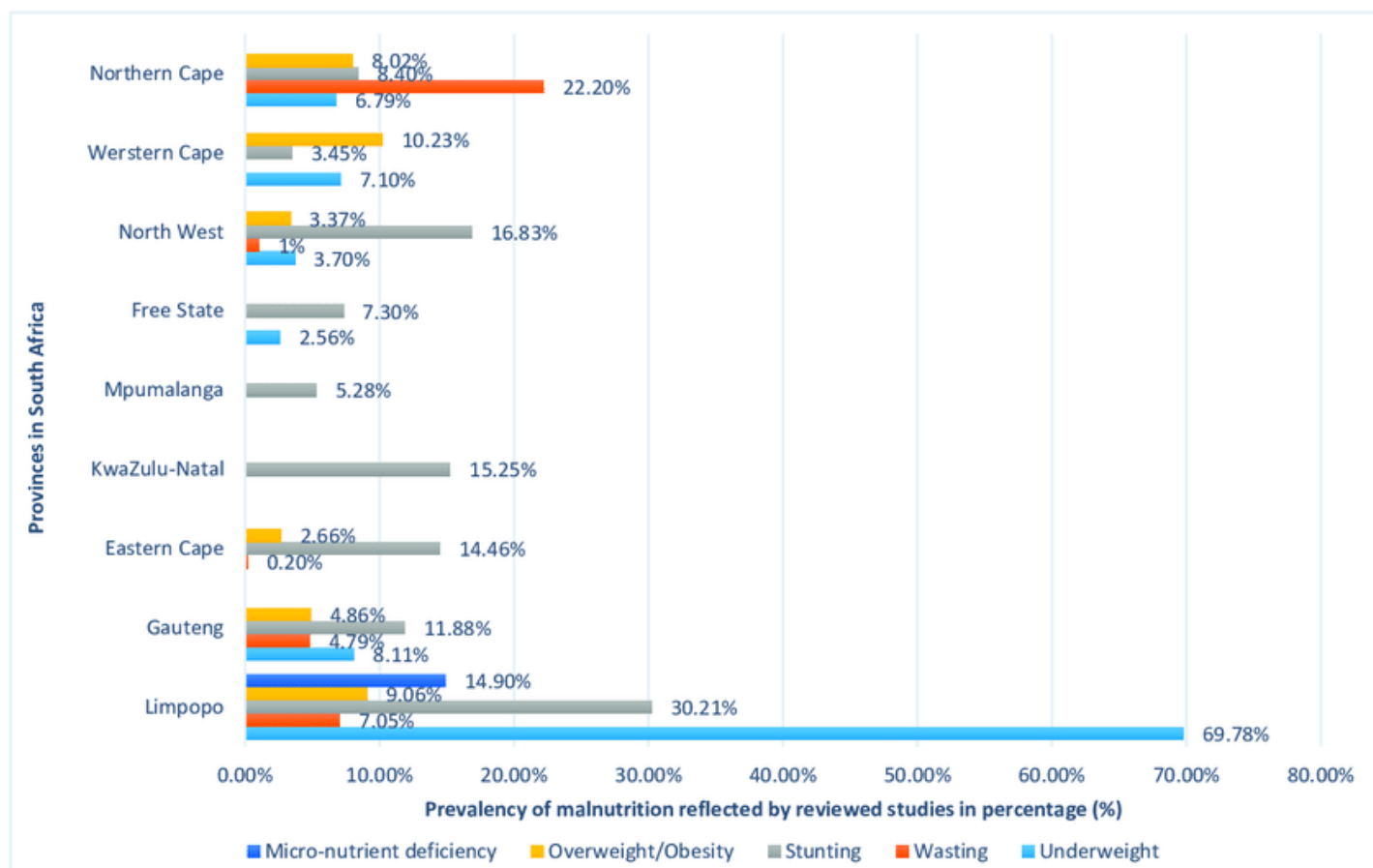
Many citizens lost their farm land due to apartheid, as black South Africans were previously forced into areas with poor soil and limited infrastructure. Today, new generations who remain in these areas experience a lack of access to food outlets; causing ‘food deserts’. Food deserts are often seen in urban areas of South Africa where there is a limited access to fresh ingredients. In these food deserts, people rely on non-perishable foods which lack adequate nutrition; (beans, maize, oats, etc.)

Additionally, marginalized groups- including queer individuals- are often excluded from community farming cooperatives that do exist. Their exclusion further limits their ability to participate societally, as well as their access to fresh and nutritious food.

Even when growing their own food, Sibeko-Ngidi explains that a lack of education on proper diet gives citizens a false sense of security in what they're eating. Farming techniques are often unsustainable, and can be dangerous if the food had been exposed to animal waste.

Often, [food production is poorly monitored](#), and is sometimes derived from unsafe exploitative labor practices. With unsafe food on the market, and citizens who lack dietary education, citizens may unknowingly consume this food. Sibeko-Ngidi explains that one's choice of diet can severely impact one's health, and a poor diet can even be known to cause diseases such as cancer.

“Cancer was seen as a white man's disease, right? But now when you reflect back, we have a lot of black people now who are struggling with cancer as well..” said Sibeko-Ngidi. “...Cancer is not necessarily a white man's disease. It was a lifestyle disease...” he said. “...We are killing ourselves”.



Prevalence of malnutrition in South African Provinces

He explained that aside from the apparent health issues individuals could experience from lack of nutrition, lack of an overall *balanced* diet could also affect a community's education, and stunt the brain development of learners. Over time, stunted cognitive development can lead to reduced self confidence, lower academic achievement, and eventually affect opportunities for higher education, which can [already be hard to come by in South Africa](#).

This is a large factor in their integration into society. When children experience malnutrition, it can cause them to feel at distance from their peers due to insecurities about societal status, and hinder their ability to gain social and career oriented skills during their school years.

Through the understanding that food insecurity is an issue caused by societal inequalities, which further complicates the social integration of a South African who experiences it, Sibeko-Ngidi explained that there is a responsibility to uphold, especially for the sake of marginalized groups.

“... Despite the constitution, the law on the ground is not well-implemented and people's ideas are still backwards and problematic.” “... that there's still a need for community engagement or work to ensure that societies uphold the rights of everyone no matter how they identify or how they express themselves.”

