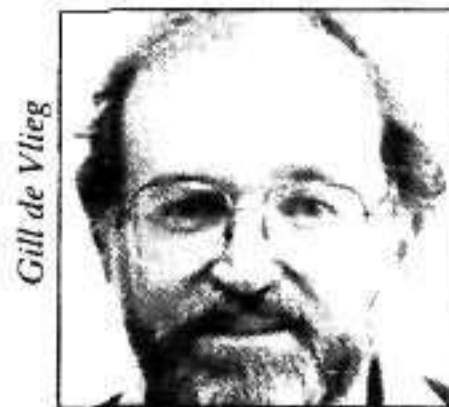


# Hunger in the homelands

The causes of chronic poverty, hunger and malnutrition in South Africa today go back to the 1870's when the 'drive for labour' gave rise to the most pernicious of all the effects of colonialism. DR DAVID WEBSTER, an anthropologist from the University of the Witwatersrand, charts the effects of colonialism on the rural indigenous economy until the 1930's in a paper entitled *The political economy of food production and nutrition in Southern Africa in historical perspective*. Extracts from that paper are reproduced below.



David Webster

## Past causes . . .

In 1807, a traveller in the Transkei described the health of the Xhosa as follows:

*'The abundant health enjoyed by these people must undoubtedly be principally ascribed to the simple food on which they live: milk, the principal dish, which is supplied in abundance by numerous herds of cows; meat, mostly roasted; corn, millet and watermelons, prepared in different ways, appease hunger . . .'*

Ludwig Alberti, 1807

Over a century later, a district surgeon from the Transkei made the following observation:

*'The tuberculosis scourge is undoubtedly on the up-grade in the Native Territories and especially in this district with its high rainfall and congested population. Unsatisfactory conditions of living and nutrition are amongst the chief factors in spreading the disease. The chief maladies have been those of malnutrition . . . the former accounted, I'm afraid, for a considerable infant mortality and pellagra-like conditions among the adults.'*

Engcobo district surgeon, 1937

The two contrasting quotations cited above cast into stark relief the changes that have overtaken the Transkei (and the rest of Southern Africa) from the pre-colonial period to the present.

Evidence on the state of health of pre-colonial peoples is rather scanty, but in South Africa we have been fortunate that a number of travellers, missionaries and, from earlier times, victims of shipwrecks, have recorded, sometimes in detail, the dietary habits of the peoples through whose land they travelled.

A consistent picture emerges from these early accounts of the East coast Nguni peoples: that the societies were well fed and healthy, practising cattle rearing as the main economic activity of men, supplemented by the agricultural pursuits of women. Milk, either fresh or sour formed the staple food, with varieties of grain and many other vegetables providing bulk and nourishment. Meat, mostly garnered from hunting (cattle were too highly valued to be slaughtered for their meat) was also quite commonly eaten.

Fynn, a trader and confidant of Shaka, recorded events in Zululand between the years 1824-1836. He recorded the following crops as being grown by the Zulu: four types of millet (of which guinea corn was the principal crop); beans of two kinds; two types of potatoes; four

kinds of sugar cane; pumpkins, melons and gourds. Hunting brought in meat, and wild fruits and vegetables were gathered — berries, *imifino* (wild spinach), mushrooms, etc. Overall, the diet displayed a variety of protein, calorific content and vitamins.

The coastal zone of South Africa, with its high rainfall and relatively rich soils, is, of course, better endowed than the interior, which was the habitat of the Sotho-speaking peoples. But even here, early reports show a varied and well-balanced economy and diet. Among Sotho peoples, less emphasis is placed on cattle, with a consequent consumption of less milk, and more emphasis is laid upon agricultural production. Dr P J Quin, an employer of black labourers for the Zebedeila Estates wrote a thesis on Pedi food and feeding habits in 1959.

He says 'The ancient Sotho, with their simple diet and healthy manner of life, generally lived to a great age and retained their health and intelligence up to the end of their days. Since those days, however, the health of Pedi has degenerated to such an extent that they have today become an undernourished and disease-ridden people.'

It is dangerous to generalise about early Southern African societies from the scanty evidence available, but there appears to be consensus on certain key issues. Most important is the general acceptance by observers that the indigenous population was adequately fed and were of outstanding physique. Shortages and hunger only occurred in times of ecological disaster — a prolonged drought, livestock epidemic, etc.

Production was conducted by domestic units — a man, his wife or wives, and their children, and the unit of consumption was the same group. The goal of production was 'livelihood not profits', which meant that a family would attempt to grow enough to last a full year, with a small surplus which would be used for sacrifice to ancestors, or to exchange or reciprocate with neighbours or kinsmen, or to pay as tribute to a headman or chief.

The societies seem to have been structured by a simple division of labour along the lines of age and sex (men doing short, intensive and heavy bursts of labour, like tree felling and field clearing, also cattle herding, while women did the more tedious, long-term tasks of planting, weeding, threshing and cooking). The implements used were essentially extensions to the human body, needing human power to guide them.

It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that pre-colonial Southern Africa was a uniformly



The abundant health enjoyed by these people must undoubtedly be ascribed to the simple food on which they live — Ludwig Alberti, 1807  
Picture drawn and engraved by C C Mitchell

egalitarian garden of Eden. Production for subsistence rather than surplus is prone to failure whenever there is ecological pressure, such as drought or pestilence.

Also, many pre-colonial societies were not strictly egalitarian, most notably when the Zulu state began to emerge, followed by the Swazi, Pedi, Sotho and Ndebele. These states were built upon the centralisation of power, in the form of regiments, which broke the autonomy of domestic units and their production. The regiments gave surplus labour to their kings in their fields, plundered neighbouring societies for the fruits of their hard labour, or used the threat of violence to extract tribute from subjugated groups. Most societies were able to adapt to these changes. The advent of colonialism, however, was to set in train a much more serious series of changes, from which the indigenous societies would never recover.

### **The great transition: from subsistence cultivator, to peasant, to proletarian**

The transition of the independent black population of Southern Africa from a condition, if not of plenty, then at least self-sufficiency, to one of underdevelopment, poverty, over-crowded reserves and townships is a long and painful one, brought about by a multitude of interlocking causes. The most important was that of colonialism, which is historically linked to underdevelopment.

'Colonialism is a system of rule which assumes the right of one people to impose their will upon another. This must inevitably lead to a situation of dominance and dependency which will systematically subordinate those governed by it to the imported culture in social, economic and political life'.

**E A Brett:** *Colonialism and underdevelopment in East Africa*

Colonialism is usually a blatantly coercive system, which uses all the means at its disposal — violence, the economic, political and ideological, to dominate, control and exploit its colonised population.

In their original state indigenous societies were 'undeveloped' or non-developed', and it is only later, when subjected to pressures from colonialism and capitalist development, that they became progressively *under-developed*. Certainly, the history of Southern Africa is testimony to this hypothesis.

A pattern emerges across South Africa which shows that, at first, the indigenous population responded with alacrity and vigour to the new opportunities which emerged with colonisation. Not surprisingly, the Transkei and Ciskei were the first to respond: they were in intimate contact with the white settlers, and responded positively to market opportunities, so that, between 1830 and 1870 a thriving peasantry had emerged in the region, not only meeting subsistence requirements, but producing a healthy surplus for the market.

In an article in *African Affairs* published in 1972 Dr Colin Bundy wrote:

'Throughout the Ciskei, north-eastern Cape and western Transkei, peasants gained a foothold as land-holders and cultivators, selling grains, forage, stock, and animal products. They won prizes at agricultural shows in competition with white farmers, and a statistician noted in 1870 that, "taking everything into consideration, the native district of Peddie surpasses the European district of Albany in its productive powers".'

The 1870's saw an explosion of peasant activity. Dr Bundy records that:

'Five hundred wagons of corn were sold by Fingo-

land's peasants in 1873, as well as a wood crop worth £60 000; and in 1875 the trade of Fingoland "at lowest computation" was adjudged to be worth £150 000 . . . African produce in 1875 was estimated to be worth £750 000 . . . New methods and resources rippled from tribe to tribe, and even amongst the most "backward" tribes crop diversification and wider cultivation were common in the 1880's.'

In Glen Grey (now one of the most impoverished areas of the Eastern Cape), a traveller remarked:

'Man for man the Kafirs of these parts are better farmers than the Europeans, more careful of their stock, cultivating a larger area of land, and working themselves more assiduously.'

Similar events were taking place in Lesotho, Natal, OFS and Transvaal. But there were two important trends emerging simultaneously. First, the flourishing peasantry was becoming stratified, so that a class of small farmers was emerging alongside peasants and a poorer group of unsuccessful peasants were being forced back into subsistence cultivation, or worse, to sell their labour to other peasants or to white employers. Second, as the peasantry reached its zenith in the 1870's, so too were the seeds of its destruction being sown, for the discovery of minerals, first diamonds and later gold provided wider markets for agricultural produce, but the mine owners wanted something else more — their labour.

The drive for labour came not only from the mining magnates, but also from white farmers; both found that it was impossible to dislodge labour from the midst of a successful peasantry — coercion was required.

- The peasantry was attacked in the most vulnerable area for an agriculturalist — the land. Successive land appropriations took place, with the black population being forced onto smaller and smaller pieces of land.

- In the Ciskei a kind of enclosure system was adopted, where blacks suddenly found themselves as tenants on white farms.
- Later, legislation was employed to dispossess blacks, culminating in the 1913 Land Act, which officially allocated only 13% of South Africa's land to blacks.
- Taxation was another means of pressuring the peasantry, as Rhodes so clearly saw: 'We want to get hold of these young men and make them go out to work, and the only way to do this is to compel them to pay a certain labour tax.' Taxation was progressively increased.
- And furthermore, white farmers formed themselves into co-operatives to market their goods, excluding black participation, and cutting African competition.
- Infrastructure, such as railways and roads, was provided to white farming areas, not black. Small wonder that by the 1890's the Transkeian peasants were in crisis, and almost destroyed by 1920.

A similar pattern emerges from the rest of Southern Africa, and Lesotho is perhaps as graphic an illustration as any. In his Ph D thesis Colin Murray charts the progress of the region from being a granary to a labour reserve. Compare the following description of Lesotho in the 1880's with the barren country it is now:

'Hitherto our Basotho have all remained quietly at home, and the movement which is taking place beyond their frontiers has produced no other effect than to increase the export of wheat and other cereals to a most remarkable degree. While the district in which the diamonds are found (ie Kimberley) is of desperate aridity, the valleys of Basutoland, composed as they are of a deep layer of vegetable mould, watered by numerous streams and favoured with regular rains in the good season, require little more than a modicum of work to cover themselves with the richest crops.'



*People dispossessed of their land wander around in search of a place to settle*

Impetus was added to the process of peasantisation by the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley. Suddenly an urban area mushroomed in the arid Karoo, and it needed food and manpower. Sotho peasants responded to the former but not the latter; they increased production, but shunned work in the diggings. In 1873 they exported 100 000 bags of grain and 2 000 bags of wool (Murray 1976:15), but this was the zenith of their success, for the pressures on the diminished portion of land began to take their toll, and a series of economic recessions, coupled with ecological crises, led to peasants moving into the inhospitable mountains, and many began to turn to migrancy. Rinderpest decimated herds, so much so, that bridewealth was calculated as future surety for cattle.

The Basotho peasantry made attempts at recovery, the most successful being in World War I, and wheat exports reached a peak of 256 000 bags in 1919, but stratification and division between rich and poor was growing, and in the early 30's a combination of the world recession and a crippling drought which destroyed crops and killed half the cattle, finally broke the back of a self-sufficient peasantry. In 1933, more than 350 000 bags of maize had to be imported, while as recently as 1929, Lesotho had exported 100 000 bags. The decline continued, and at the time of Murray's study, villages were producing much less than half their subsistence requirements themselves.

### **The consequences of underdevelopment for health, food production and nutrition**

Successive South African governments were faced with a dilemma: whether to support and encourage the self-sufficient peasantry which emerged in the 19th century, or whether to respond to the white (capitalist) farming community and more importantly the mining industry in their demands for large supplies of cheap (black) labour, which would undermine the peasantry. We know that the latter demands were acceded to, and the processes of proletarianisation set in motion (appropriation of land, taxation, the penetration of consumer goods, such as blankets, lamps, etc, which soon became necessities of life for the indigenous population, and aided by ecological problems such as droughts and the 1896 rinderpest epidemic) ensured the creation of that supply of labour. It also created a large labour reserve, surplus to the immediate needs of employers, but which has historically worked to suppress worker militancy and living standards.

There are, however, costs to the employer and the state in pursuing this strategy: once the destruction of a pre-colonial economy has begun, it is almost certainly irreversible. The underdevelopment of the rural reserve areas proceeds apace, quickly becoming unable to support even a fraction of the population inhabiting it. A settled black farming strategy to accommodate some of the surplus population was advocated by the Tomlinson Commission, but rejected.

The alternative is a rapid industrial expansion to soak up the extra labour, but South Africa is a peripheral capitalist country, and lacks the level of accumulation necessary. The result is enormous dislocation and extreme unemployment, with all the implications for nutritional levels and morbidity that accompany this.

Migrancy, and its cause, underdevelopment, are

locked in a vicious spiral. There are social problems — children without one or both parents for long periods, illegitimacy, prostitution, and the social pathological problems such as delinquency and drunkenness.

But the economic and nutritional problems are perhaps worse. One of the most serious consequences of labour migration is that the one group of people who are likely to be progressive and innovative, and therefore indispensable to progressive health and agricultural programmes, ie the young men and women, are absent from the place they are most needed.

Apart from the absence of those young men and women able and willing enough to introduce agricultural, nutritional and health innovations, migrancy exacerbates existing problems. Already too large a population of both humans and animals have been pushed into inadequate land areas, forcing them to overwork the soil and overgraze pasturage; now, women, who are often unable to clear new fields, continue to work overused ones in the already impoverished soil.

The rural population is therefore caught in a downward spiral of intensified underdevelopment; the absence of the potentially progressive young and the accompanying decline in agricultural productivity means that economic self-sufficiency slips even further away. The balance swings decisively away from home-production to reliance on cash remittances from migrants and food bought in the trading store. The influence on health is massive.

This pattern of increasing erosion of the nutritional status of South Africa's rural black population, so vividly portrayed in the 1930's, continues into the present, but I wish to end by looking at the corroborative evidence from Quin's thesis on the Pedi in the 1950's. He also bemoans the loss of traditional food supplies and its effect on nutrition:

*'Whereas nature balanced the food supply of the Pedi, "civilization" has created a condition that hovers between mere existence and starvation and which has manifested itself in a problem of gross malnutrition.'*

He attributes this decline to the restriction on land, the change in food habits that was influenced by the arrival of the money economy, and he places much blame at the door of the trader. He argues that the trader soaked up any surplus crops that would otherwise have been hoarded against times of shortage. The Pedi apparently sold the bulk of their crop to meet cash requirements (tax, clothing, lamps, etc), only to be faced with having to buy it back, at increased prices, later in the hungry season. The trader's demand for some of the most nutritionally valuable crops, such as beans, was such that almost the entire crop was sold, and not locally consumed.

In a Chamber of Mines report the same bleak picture emerges around the period of World War II. The rural black population had by then reached a point where it was manifestly failing to feed itself; the remainder of the pre-colonial, pre-capitalist economy had long since been shattered, and was now in its death-throes. Both men and women were leaving rural areas, many of them permanently. Thus emerged the urban consequence of the destruction of pre-colonial economy in the homelands: a massive housing shortage in the cities, in part overcome by the emergence of large and well organised squatter camps to house the surplus population, who felt they had a better chance of survival in the city than in the homelands.

The picture I have painted of the changing historical patterns of food production, diet and nutrition in South Africa is indeed gloomy, and for many black people, trapped by legislation and enforcement in our homelands today, the position is probably worse. The person who is committed to the social, economic and health development needs of the majority of South Africans is therefore confronted with almost insurmountable odds.

The causes of the problem are deep lying and structural. Perhaps a starting point in the struggle to change them, however, is to analyse those structural conditions, to determine which is cause and which is effect and, in laying bare the means of oppression and exploitation to which the people are subject, make a small start on the long struggle to overcome them.



*Migrant workers returning home when their contract is over — amongst other causes the drive for labour sowed the seeds of destruction amongst the successful black peasantry in the 1870's*

\* Pictures by courtesy of Luli Callinicos, researched for her book *Gold and workers*

## **... present conditions**



**Ina Perlman**

*It's a mystery to me how people in the homelands survive. Updating figures of the Institute of Social Research at Natal University's we found that an average family of five should not have been able to survive in the homelands in 1982 without a cash income of at least R92 per month, over and above whatever they can grow or gather. Compared to this the average household in the homelands received a cash income of R49,60 per month in 1982/83.*

*The average person is lucky to get a daily bowl of mealie meal with or without some wild spinach (mirogo) or other vegetable the family can grow. Meals are almost entirely without protein, for eggs, milk, meat and even bread are all luxuries.*

*Ina Perlman, Operation Hunger*

**M**rs Ina Perlman has been running Operation Hunger since January 1981 when the project, then under the Institute of Race Relations, set out to provide

temporary emergency feeding for 15 000 people. In 1985, five years later, the project fed 662 000 people, mainly children, with one cup of specially-formulated