

Addressing Food Security in South Africa: A Call for Empowerment and Partnership

A Talk to the National Church Leaders' Consultation

By Bishop Sithembele Sipuka,
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Greetings to all of you. As we come together today under South Africa's G20 presidency, we find ourselves at a pivotal moment filled with both great potential and pressing moral obligations. I stand here not just as a fellow church leader, but as someone who has first-hand experience in the Eastern Cape of the portion of the reported 15 million South Africans facing food insecurity. It's heartbreaking to learn that over 1,000 children lose their lives each year due to malnutrition in our beloved country. We can no longer accept the way things are

Today, I urge our government to prioritise food security on the G20 agenda. More importantly, I challenge all of us to rethink how we can work together to restore dignity to our people. This is not just about feeding the hungry; it's about reclaiming our sense of *ubuntu* and transforming our communities from being mere recipients of aid to becoming active producers.

Let's take a moment to reflect on the harsh reality reported in South Africa about food scarcity. It is reported that currently, 63.5% of South African households experience food insecurity. Nearly one in three children under five suffer from stunting, and 2.7 million children under six live in households below the food poverty line. Most tragically, cases of child malnutrition have surged by 33% between 2020 and 2023. The statistics are alarming and should deeply concern us.

In Gauteng, our economic hub, 35% of the population is reported as skipping meals simply because they cannot afford food. If this is the situation in our wealthiest province, we can only imagine the hardships faced by those in rural areas, such as the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. These numbers are not just statistics; they represent the faces of our children, mothers, and community members who go to bed hungry in a country that produces enough food to nourish everyone.

As we take on the G20 presidency, we have inherited Brazil's Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty declaration. This is a unique opportunity for us to lead by example. The Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development is committed to supporting this alliance. As religious leaders, we must ensure our government translates this international commitment into concrete policies and programs that address the food insecurity crisis facing 15 million South Africans and beyond our borders.

Our appeal to the government must include both immediate and systemic actions. The child support grant, which is R530, needs to be reviewed to ensure it meets the minimum required for a basic standard of living. The expansion of the National School Nutrition Program to include weekends and holidays should be seriously considered, because hunger doesn't take a break when schools close. Beyond these immediate needs,

we require systemic changes, which will include regulating essential food prices to keep them affordable and prioritising land redistribution for productive agricultural use. Consideration should also be given to supporting seasonal and informal workers during periods of unemployment, as well as implementing the 2023 food waste strategy to recover the reported 10 million tons of food waste annually.

While we rightfully call for government action, we must also confront a more complex and uncomfortable challenge—the erosion of human dignity through dependency. Grants are necessary, but they should be a temporary solution. No nation can rely solely on grants; it is neither sustainable nor dignified. People will regain their dignity when they can actively participate in the economy rather than relying on handouts.

I speak from experience in our Eastern Cape, where I see the transformation of once-productive landscapes into fallow land. Fields that once flourished with maize now lie barren, and grazing lands that sustained cattle are now littered with waste. Meanwhile, queues at government offices grow longer each day, filled with young people seeking grants instead of opportunities to contribute to their communities.

What worries me even more than the situation itself is the mentality of our young people. At a recent business development meeting, the keynote speaker shared a situation in which young individuals were offered the opportunity to make deliveries using motorbikes. However, many refused this opportunity because they feared losing the R350 government grant for the unemployed. This mindset reflects a troubling shift towards dependency, over the chance for self-realisation, growth and self-sufficiency. It is this mentality that poses a significant challenge to our community's future.

The mentality of getting things for free sometimes manifests in our people gathering around a capsized truck, hurriedly and competitively taking whatever goods, it was carrying. Similarly, when a cow is struck by a vehicle and left immobilised, it does not perish from the impact; rather, it succumbs to death and eventually disappears because of the actions of those who cut it into pieces, running away with chunks of meat, leaving only traces of blood and dung on the tar mark as evidence that the cow once existed.

This issue extends far beyond food security; it strikes at the core of our identity as African communities, which have historically been producers rather than mere consumers. We are the descendants of those who cultivated their own sustenance and generously shared with others. We must not allow ourselves to become permanently reliant on handouts and adopt a scavenger mentality.

The solution requires a four-pillar approach: government leadership, business partnership, faith-based communities' involvement, and citizen empowerment.

The government must lead through effective policy, adequate resources, and efficient coordination. The Global Alliance Against Hunger provides a framework, but implementation requires political will and adequate funding. We call on the private sector to move beyond corporate social responsibility to genuine partnership. We must

not see businesses around Christmas time and during natural disasters dishing out handouts and posing for cameras, but we must see businesses supporting smallholder farmers, investing in rural infrastructure, creating jobs in agricultural value chains, and collaborating with faith communities on food security initiatives.

A significant challenge and opportunity lie in citizen empowerment. We need to shift people's perspective from viewing themselves as objects of delivery to recognising themselves as active agents of economic growth. Just as Jesus needed the young boy's willing participation in Jn 6:9 —his offering of five loaves and two fish—to perform the miracle of feeding the multitude, so too does sustainable development require the active participation of our people. This means reviving subsistence farming through training and support, establishing home and community gardens, and providing agricultural inputs.

We need skills development programs that align with the needs of the food system, entrepreneurship initiatives for young people, and financial literacy training. Most importantly, we need to mobilise our communities, with faith groups leading the way through productive projects. Traditional leaders should champion agricultural revival, and youth programs must focus on agriculture and food production, ensuring that the community takes ownership of food security initiatives.

We cannot overlook the impact of crime on food security. Theft of livestock and crops undermines both commercial and subsistence farming. Farmers are hesitant to invest in production when their harvests are stolen. Rural communities struggle to achieve food security when their animals, an essential part of their wealth, disappear overnight. We need effective rural safety strategies to protect agricultural assets, community policing initiatives in farming areas, well-resourced units to tackle stock theft, and community courts to address food-related crimes swiftly.

When the disciples wanted to wash their hands of the responsibility, telling Jesus to send the hungry crowd away, Jesus responded: "You give them something to eat" (Mark 6:37). Like those disciples, we cannot send our people away hungry—we must take direct responsibility for feeding them with their cooperation of five loaves and two fishes.

Historically, missions and parishes served as vital oases within their communities where people gathered not only to pray but also to be educated and learn the skills necessary for self-sustenance. We must demonstrate productive partnerships between faith and life and mobilise our communities for agricultural production, provide training and support for food security initiatives, advocate for policies that promote dignity and empowerment, and address the spiritual aspects of dependency and empowerment.

Every church and traditional authority should have a food security project. Faith-based organisations should collaborate with the government on nutrition education.

Religious institutions can provide land for community gardens, land which we have in abundance and use it for farmer training and support programs.

True partnerships in food security must restore dignity. Between faith and government, we need to jointly implement nutrition programs, collaborate on community development projects, share training and capacity-building efforts, and coordinate responses to food emergencies. Between communities and businesses, we need local procurement for school feeding programs, contracts for smallholder farmers with large retailers, skills development partnerships, and support for technology transfer. Between citizens and institutions, we need community ownership of development projects, participatory planning and implementation, local leadership development, and accountability mechanisms.

Our vision must be clear: every South African should have access to nutritious food, not as charity, but as a result of a functioning economy where everyone can participate productively. In the short term, we must expand social grants while building productive capacity, establish food security projects in every community, train extension officers and community facilitators, and address immediate malnutrition crises. In the medium term, we must reduce dependency on grants through increased production, develop local food systems and markets, build processing and storage capacity, and create sustainable employment in agriculture. In the long term, grants must be an exception, where the government minimally intervenes to do what people locally are unable to do, and consistently empowers them to achieve food self-sufficiency at the community level, following the principle of subsidiarity.

The path forward requires us to shift from dependency to dignity. Food security is not just about calories; it's about ubuntu, our interconnected humanity. When children die of malnutrition while food rots in warehouses, when fertile land lies barren while people queue for grants, and when communities that once fed themselves now depend on handouts, our ubuntu is broken.

But Ubuntu also offers a solution. When government, business, faith communities, and citizens work together with mutual respect and shared responsibility, when we treat people as agents rather than objects, and when we build systems that empower rather than create dependency, then we restore not just food security, but human dignity.

A Call to Action

To our government: Use the G20 platform to champion not just emergency relief, but sustainable food systems that empower people. Learn from Brazil's success but adapt solutions to our African context. Part of this must include providing enough budget for agriculture in the national budget. One expert believes that if African countries could allocate 10% of their national budget to agriculture, it would go a long way toward ensuring food security.

Brazil's achievements are not theoretical; they are proven and measurable. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, Brazil achieved its goal of

not only halving the percentage of people who suffer from hunger but also halving the percentage of those who suffer from chronic hunger. Between 1990 and 1992, 14.8% of the population in Brazil suffered from hunger; however, this number had fallen significantly by 2014. Between 2003 and 2012, malnutrition rates decreased by 82%, and overall poverty rates dropped from 24% to 8.5%.

This is what political will and comprehensive action can achieve. However, we must address a critical issue that undermines the effectiveness of social development programs, including food security initiatives. Too often, the government adopts an approach of wanting to "do it alone," systematically excluding churches and faith communities from program implementation, opting for isolation over collaboration.

This approach fails to recognise that churches have the organisational structure and unwavering commitment for social service and development that the government desperately needs. We are present in every corner of our country—in cities and in the most remote rural areas where government services barely reach. More importantly, we have deep personal connections with communities that government officials cannot replicate. Instead of viewing faith communities as competitors or obstacles, the government should provide funding and support to leverage our existing infrastructure and community trust.

To Business Leaders: It's time to go beyond just making donations; let's focus on making real investments. Partner with our communities to help build local capacity and create sustainable livelihoods.

To Faith Communities: We have a vital role to play in shifting from dependency to empowerment. Our moral authority comes with a practical responsibility to lead this change.

To Our People: It's time to reclaim your dignity as producers, not just consumers. The land that once sustained our ancestors can nourish us again.

As we participate in the G20 process and work on our national development agenda, let's remember that our success will not be measured by the size of our grants or how efficiently we deliver services. Instead, it will be about whether our children can hold their heads high, knowing they live in communities that produce, create, and sustain themselves.

The choice is in our hands. We can either continue the cycle of dependency or choose the more challenging but dignifying path of empowerment. I believe our people are ready for this change. The real question is: Are we as Church leaders prepared to lead them there?

May God bless our efforts and help restore the dignity of our people.

People should not be seen as mere recipients of aid, but as active contributors to the growth of our economy.

Acknowledgement: I want to conclude by thanking the various media outlets and journalists who continue to address food security issues with the seriousness they deserve. Your reporting and analysis have been invaluable in bringing these critical issues to light and informing our advocacy efforts. A well-informed public discourse is essential for driving the changes our communities desperately need.

Thank you.