

EVENT

Webinar: Student Hunger and COVID-19: Stakeholders' Roles in Realising the Right to Food of Vulnerable Groups (1 October 2020)

Wilson Macharia

On 1 October 2020, the Socio-Economic Rights Project at the Dullah Omar Institute (DOI), University of the Western Cape (UWC), hosted a webinar on 'Student Hunger and Covid-19', an event forming part of a series of such events aimed at addressing food insecurity in tertiary institutions nationwide through research and advocacy.

The webinar was moderated by Paula Knipe, a researcher at the DOI. In her introductory remarks, she presented a brief history of the project since its inception in 2017 and outlined the objectives of the webinar. These were to identify the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders in addressing the impact of food insecurity on students in the context of COVID-19 and to highlight collective solutions.

Dr Yvette Basson, a lecturer at the UWC Faculty of Law gave a presentation entitled 'Reimagining the food environment on campuses: What roles can non-state actors play in addressing student hunger?' She began by describing the food insecurity situation at UWC and avenues available to address it.

First, the university's Central Student Affairs Office has a feeding scheme which assists needy students through a special fund. Dr Basson noted, however, that despite the level of confidentiality that is observed by the Centre when handling requests, students are often hesitant to approach it out of shame and embarrassment.

Secondly, a staff member of the university established a social media platform called 'Fairy Godmother', through which she accepts request for assistance by students. The forms of assistance include food, toiletries, and

financial assistance. The platform receives between 2,200 and 2,500 requests a year. Dr Basson pointed out that this avenue was preferable to the students due to its level of anonymity.

In January 2020, Dr Basson set up a foodbank in collaboration with Fairy Godmother, which gave her greater insight on the student experience. Between its inception and 15 March 2020, the foodbank received about ZAR 13,000 in financial donations, six donations of actual food items, and other ongoing financial commitments. The sources of the contributions included private individuals, alumni, parents of students, companies, university staff, and international sponsors. Beneficiaries are assisted with food parcels that last about 10 days.

Dr Basson made several observations about what she had learnt from doing the project. First, many people in society at large are willing to contribute to such initiatives, but the challenge is linking potential donors to needy students. Secondly, there are benefits to having private individuals run initiatives like these – in particular, students are more comfortable about approaching them than institutions. Thirdly, potential donors, especially in the private sector, are often discouraged by institutional bureaucracy.

Also, it is difficult for one person to run such an initiative, considering the number of requests received. It is important to explore alternative ways of linking donors to the needy students. In conclusion, Dr Basson called upon other stakeholders to consider such initiatives, since universities can only do so much.

The second panelist, Natalie Mansvelt, is a lecturer in the Department of Social Development Professions at Nelson Mandela University. Her presentation was entitled 'Advocating for hungry students: Adopting a people-centred approach to addressing student hunger'. It was informed by research conducted for one and a half years until December 2019. The objectives of the study were to conceptualise student hunger, identify the needs, and find solutions to address them, with the research involving surveys and dialogue sessions with students off-campus.



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In conceptualising student hunger, the study employed two components: the hunger of the stomach, and the hunger of the mind. The causes of the former are related to the social-economic status of the students. Its negative impacts include poor academic performance and decline of mental health, resulting in anxiety and depression. The latter is determined by the choices that students make. These include using resources for activities that are not in their best interests while ignoring the hunger of the stomach. The problem is linked to a lack of financial literacy. For example, some students prioritise outward appearances to mask their backgrounds and gain a sense of belonging, while neglecting needs such as food.

The research led to four key findings. First, there is no single solution to student hunger. Secondly, there is a

need for collective effort, which involves coordinating stakeholders in pursuit of a holistic approach to the issue. Thirdly, students should be involved in these efforts, including by involving them in the planning processes and undertaking meaningful consultation with the student community. Fourthly, it is important to provide financial literacy skills to help students make informed decisions about their resources. This should take a broad approach and cover, among other things, peer pressure, culture, thought processes, and attitude. In her conclusion, Mansvelt reiterated the value of including students in such projects and humanising all the processes that involve them.

The third panelist, Hopolang Selebalo, is a co-head of research at Equal Education. Her presentation was entitled 'Lessons from the school learners' COVID-19 litigation: What CSOs should know'. Her presentation dealt with the South African National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). Anchored under the Department of Basic Education (DBE), it serves to fulfil the rights to education and to food. Throughout the years, the programme has had several positive impacts, including improved school punctuality, regular school attendance, and improved concentration in class.

These, however, were negatively affected by the national lockdown in response to COVID-19. During this period, all schools were closed and the NSNP was suspended indefinitely. The DBE stated that it was the duty of the families and communities to feed children while they were at home. According to Selebalo, it was clear from the outset that children would struggle, given that most of their guardians would lose their jobs due to the lockdown restrictions. This was confirmed by subsequent surveys, including one that Equal Education conducted in five provinces, which found that a majority of households experienced financial difficulties due to the lockdown.

Additionally, it was found that 82 per cent of participating learners were receiving food in school before the lockdown. However, 63 per cent of them did not have sufficient access to food during this period, and 91 per cent had not received support in form of food parcels from the government; 86 per cent of learners said they would be able to collect food parcels from their schools if these were available.

As a result, various stakeholders took it upon themselves to engage with the DBE on behalf of the learners. For its part, the DBE stated that the NSNP would resume the programme only when schools reopened. Following several other engagements, the DBE minister committed to providing meals to all learners during this period, a commitment which was later retracted. On 12 June 2020, a consortium of organizations presented the matter in court, where they obtained a favourable decision. The High Court directed the DBE to immediately resume the NSNP and furnish the applicants with a detailed plan of how it intended to implement the decision. (Click here to read the Court decision: <http://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZAGPPHC/2020/306.pdf>)

Selebalo noted several challenges that she had observed following this decision. These include lack of information among the learners and their families about the resumption of the programme, lack of disaggregated data on the beneficiaries of the NSNP during this period, and lack of transport to school for the learners.

The Q&A session was moderated by Aluwafunmilola Adeniyi from the DOI. Several key points emerged:

- It is rare for students to abuse the process of receiving food aid. As such, the foodbank was not subject to abuse.
- Considering the nature of the foodbank project, there is no concrete structure to partner with the government.
- Many students still do not know of the existence of such projects. The majority of the beneficiaries of the foodbank were female.
- Only one person with a disability asked for assistance. Interventions are needed in this regard.
- Substance abuse, specifically of alcohol, was a major point of discussion in the study. The issue of 'blessers' was also raised, especially as a common practice among students.
- Monitoring and evaluation has not been carried out. Students should be involved in the process.

- The programme at Nelson Mandela University employs a means test to identify needy students. Students with disabilities also have access to food parcels.
- Lobbying, research, and litigation are the main advocacy tools that were employed. Consultations with relevant stakeholders were prioritised.
- A good number of organisations advocated for the resumption of the NSNP during this period.

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