

Submitter: Dr Jo Hunter-Adams

Author: Jo Hunter-Adams

Co Author: Vanessa Daries

Topic: The impact of food systems on nutrition, diet and health

Title: Food experiences and memories in a Cape Town Township

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Introduction While much has been written coexisting hunger and obesity in South Africa, the voices of the urban poor are often absent. We propose that a better understanding of the nutrition transition from the perspective of township and informal settlement residents offers important insights into how policy makers, activists and community members might collectively respond to increasing levels of obesity amongst the urban poor in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC).

Methods Using an oral history approach, we interviewed 20 middle-aged residents in the township of Masiphumelele, south of Cape Town, focusing on their memories of food and eating as a child, as a young adult, and in Masiphumelele. In addition, we conducted nine focus group discussions and observed shops and restaurants to add diverse, collective perspectives of the food environment in this township.

Results In this preliminary presentation of results, we will tell the stories of Masiphumelele residents, and the ways that eating has shifted in light of changing urban and rural spaces, as well as in the context of negotiating the priorities of time and money in relation to food. Where members of a single household experienced overweight and hunger, this juxtaposition was intertwined with broader socioeconomic forces that shaped the food environment.

Conclusion In public health nutrition interventions, diet tends to be framed in terms of prudence and education, rather than in terms of the day-to-day experiences of the food environment in historical context. These experiences should occupy a prominent space as we plan policy and grassroots interventions.