

# **HUNGER: A COMPLEX, MANY-HEADED MONSTER THAT WE CANNOT AFFORD TO IGNORE**

**Zukiswa Kota**

**Researcher: Public Service Accountability Monitor**

Taking action against hunger is an economic imperative and a non-negotiable human rights obligation.

An Oxfam report published earlier this week (Monday, 13 October) revealed heart-wrenching realities about hunger in South Africa. More heart-wrenching is what the report revealed about the Eastern Cape. Perhaps saddest of all is the fact that most South Africans reading the report are unlikely to be shocked by the fact that the Eastern Cape is where the most affected by food insecurity live.

The province is often ranked amongst the worst where statistics relating to socio-economic inequality, poverty, unemployment and household vulnerability are concerned. This is no different with hunger as confirmed by the most recent General Household Survey released by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA).

In 2013, the South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (SANHANES) revealed that 28% of our nation is vulnerable to hunger while a sobering 26% actually experience hunger. This effectively means that more than 50% of South Africans are either hungry or at risk of hunger. StatsSA in 2012 revealed that 36.2% of food-insecure households were found in the Eastern Cape. While South Africa is not ranked amongst the countries that are hardest hit by hunger globally, South Africans are particularly vulnerable to micro-nutrient deficiencies.

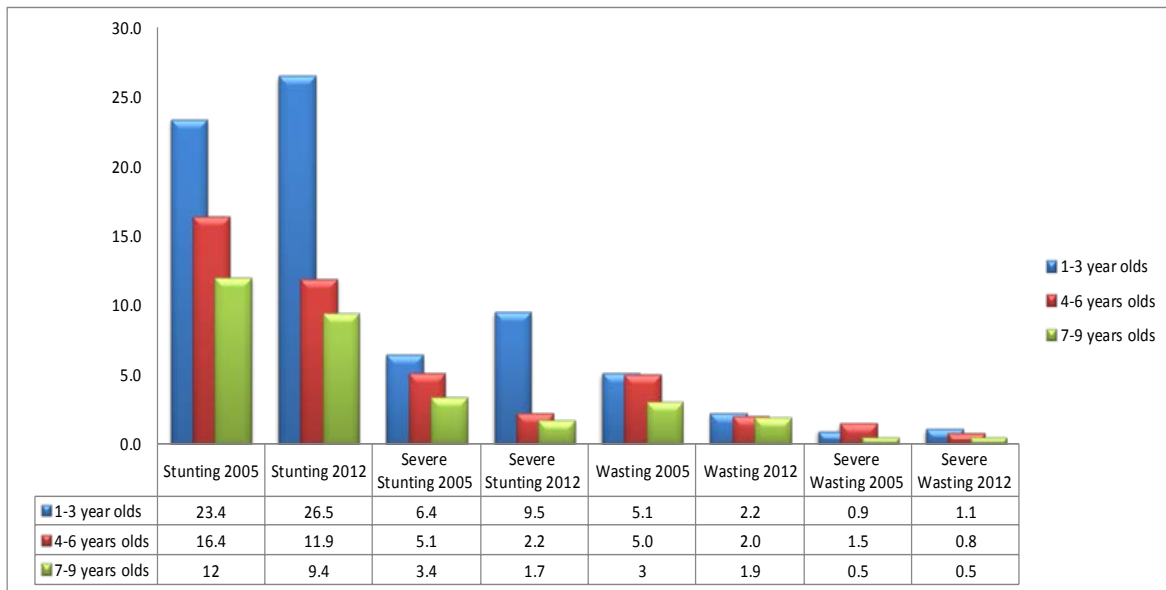
## **Children are the hardest hit by Malnutrition and Hunger**

This is particularly devastating for children. Micronutrient deficiencies in the early stages of life have the most significant implications. Iron deficiency prior to 3 years of life can have deleterious and potentially permanent impacts on myelin which in turn has damaging effects on nerve cells in the brain that facilitate the transmission of information and other complex neural processes. Combined with other factors, maternal and infant iron deficiencies place children at increased risk for future mental and physical impairments. In fact, according to studies such as Grantham-McGregor and others in 2007, adults who experienced malnutrition during childhood earn an income that is at least 20% less in later life.

The South African Human Rights Commission also reminds us that “(T)he lack of adequate food and nutrition is arguably the most critical issue facing children in South Africa today”. It is especially shocking to note that the levels of stunting and severe stunting- consequences of malnutrition- amongst children between the ages of 1 and 3 years increased between 2005 and 2012. Considering the significant nutritional needs of children within the first 1000 days of development and the emotional and cognitive implications of hunger- this should be devastating news for us all.

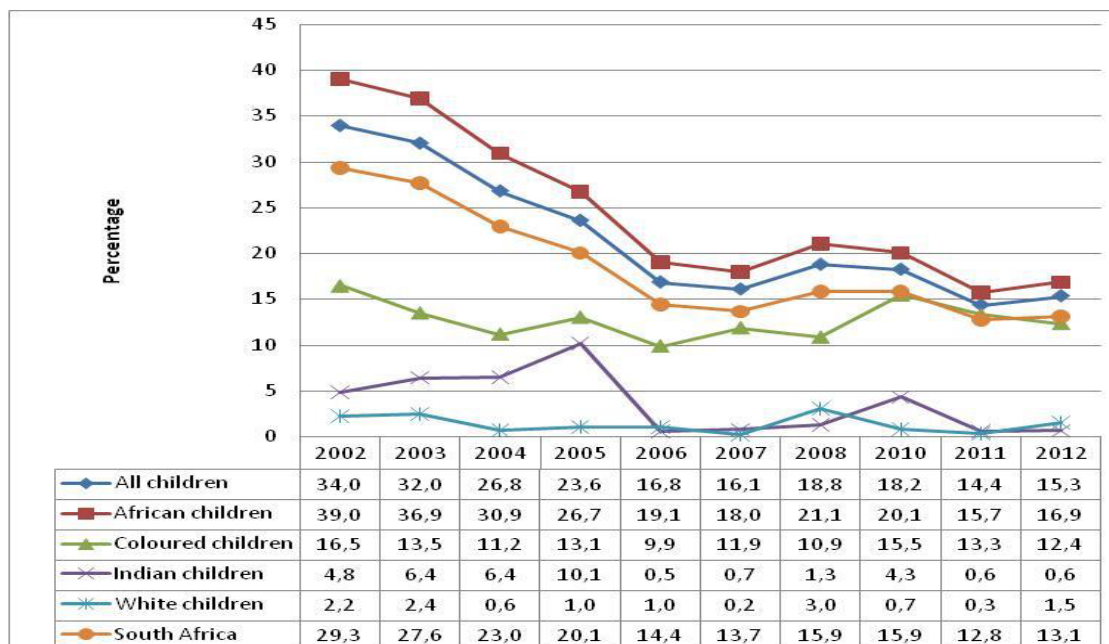
We cannot afford to ignore hunger and food insecurity however we choose to look at it. We certainly cannot ignore it from a human rights perspective. Section 27 of the South African Constitution guarantees us all the right to basic food and water and obliges the state to protect and promote the progressive realisation of this right.

**Figure 1: Malnutrition amongst select age groups in South Africa; 2005 and 2012**



The Oxfam report; *Hidden Hunger in South Africa: The faces of Malnutrition and Hunger in a Food-Secure Nation* aptly highlights the status of South Africa as a food-secure country. Several research reports have shown that South Africa produces enough food to feed the entire population. Hunger is clearly a complex, many-headed beast that also seems to carry serious political baggage. Is this part of the reason that a middle income country that is neither landlocked nor constrained by tight foreign exchange regulations and is a net exporter of agricultural commodities can be in this position? Add to that the advantage of a beautifully progressive, innovative Constitution and the picture becomes a real puzzle.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Children Living in Households that Reported Hunger (Extracted from StatsSA 2013)**



### **Why should you care about the right to food and government budgets?**

Understanding government budgets in relation to the right to food is central to determining the extent to which a government is utilising the maximum available resources to address hunger. Given limited government resources; it is imperative to ensure that these are used in the most efficient manner possible to address socio economic rights. It is also important to create spaces for close scrutiny of government policies relating to 'all things food and food security' in order to effectively and sustainably tackle hunger.

Given all that we know about hunger- can we afford to be silent?

The Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM) has contributed to a booklet to be published by the Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII) which places a specific focus on South African government budgeting for the right to food.

We call for a concerted effort from the South African government in tackling hunger and food security. More importantly we call on all South Africans to take a stand on their right to access basic nutrition as enshrined in the constitution and to provoke action-oriented dialogue.