One of the defining landmarks in Johannesburg, South Africa was the Coca-Cola Dome (now named the Ticketpro Dome for its new corporate sponsor): a 19,000-person arena sponsored by the beverage giant. Coke has become increasing popular in South Africa, where an average of 254 Coke products were consumed by each South African in 2010. That’s more than the international annual average of 89 Cokes per person (and nearly double the number consumed per capita in South Africa in 1992), and is quickly approaching the 403 Coke products consumed each year by the average American.

Along with Coca-Cola, KFC is a significant presence in South Africa, with more than 700 locations in the country. Thanks to the increasing availability of soda and fast food, South Africans are developing the chronic diseases associated with the nutrient-poor Standard American Diet.

As diets around the world are becoming less varied, and more dependent on processed convenience foods, few places demand attention more than South Africa does. With its history and present determined by persistent inequalities and a fierce ongoing battle for racial and economic justice, South Africa today poses these questions: What is fueling the adoption of the Western-style diet here? Who is affected the most?

In recent years, South Africans have been migrating from rural areas to urban centers in search of work. Along with more opportunity, life in an urban environment offers easy access to big supermarkets and fast-food chains. While access to supermarkets can often be a good thing, large chains like Shoprite and Pick n Pay carry mostly packaged foods that contain processed meat, refined flour and sugar, and artificial preservatives. These are the very ingredients that are tied to diet-related illnesses across the industrialized world.

Many of those who have recently migrated to urban centers consider their rural diets of unprocessed starches such as pap (a porridge made from ground corn), high-fiber vegetables, and plant proteins to be “poverty foods,” and have come to embrace the fried fare and animal protein readily available in commercially dense environments. Meanwhile, steep food and fuel prices make food insecurity a persistent and pressing issue in South Africa. From 1999 to 2008, access to healthy food improved in both the country’s rural and urban regions. However, the rate of food insecurity remains higher in South Africa’s rural areas than in urban ones. More than 33 percent of rural residents were food insecure in 2008 compared to about 20 percent of urban dwellers. A more recent study, conducted in Johannesburg, found that 70 percent of people living in the city’s “informal settlements” (often shacks) either skip meals or eat the same foods each day.

The Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) also found that, in 2008, 79 percent of households in the major cities of Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Msunduzi went without food because of a sharp rise in food prices. The DBSA also found a direct link between poverty and food security; predictably, more money means better access to healthy, safe foods. Whereas many South Africans go without adequate calories and nutrients, many also deal with a range of Western, chronic diseases associated with over-nutrition. In other words, South Africa is a stark example of a country suffering from the “double burden of malnutrition.”

Dr. Zandile Mchiza, senior scientist at the Medical Research Council of South Africa, has found that early
In legislation that capped the amount of salt that can be added to some processed foods sold in grocery stores. The legislation includes a 50 percent reduction of sodium in bread and comparable reductions in margarine, soups, and gravies. (Initial restrictions took effect in 2016.)

Public health professionals hope that with this measure, along with help from industry, rates of high blood pressure will go down. “Help from industry” is a tricky concept though, since companies’ bottom lines often take precedence over public health or corporate social responsibility. According to Kelly Brownell of Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy in the U.S., “The arresting reality is that companies must sell less food if the population is to lose weight, and this pits the fundamental purpose of the food industry against public health goals.” This is as true in South Africa as it is in the U.S.

In 2015, in an effort to link food, health, and concern for animals and the environment, Humane Society International (HSI) launched “Green Monday” in South Africa. It is a campaign akin to Meatless Mondays, which aims to decrease meat consumption and promote a plant-based diet for better health and environmental sustainability. The Green Monday initiative is supported by several media personalities, including actress Natalie Becker. It has worked with chefs and urban agriculture groups to popularize affordable vegan meals that are cooked with traditional vegetables and grains.

In a country like South Africa, where healthy indigenous diets remain fresh in many people’s minds, the question remains: is it possible to leave one’s rural home, make more money, and enjoy the benefits of urban life without experiencing the diet-related illnesses that often accompany this journey? The health and wellbeing of millions of South Africans stand to benefit from the answers.