

SOUTH AFRICA

WHERE FOOD INJUSTICE WANDERS NEXT

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 increasingly 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),¹³⁹ and is quickly approaching the 403 Coke products consumed each year by the average American.¹⁴⁰

Along with Coca-Cola, KFC is a significant presence in South Africa, with more than 700 locations in the country.¹⁴¹ 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,¹⁴² and more dependent on processed convenience foods,¹⁴³ 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 Pay¹⁴⁴ 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.¹⁴⁵ 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.¹⁴⁶

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.¹⁴⁷ 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.”¹⁴⁸

Dr. Zandile Mchiza, senior scientist at the Medical Research Council of South Africa, has found that early



A KFC in Plettenberg Bay, one of hundreds in South Africa

childhood under-nutrition can lead to obesity later in life. This is cause for concern for low-income South Africans, many of whom probably did not get enough nutritious food when they were young. Obesity is a well-known risk factor for diabetes.¹⁴⁹ In 2015, according to the Heart and Stroke Foundation of South Africa, 70 percent of South Africans were overweight or obese. Black women have the highest rates of obesity, affecting about one-third of the population. Among men, whites have the highest obesity rate, at 18 percent.¹⁵⁰

In 2014, about six percent of the South African population was diabetic, according to Dr. Larry Distiller, founder of the Centre for Diabetes and Endocrinology in Johannesburg. But, as Distiller told *Health 24* recently, some in the nation are bracing for a “diabetes tsunami.” The International Diabetes Federation estimates that the prevalence rate will nearly double in South Africa by 2030.¹⁵¹ In 2015, the Federation reported the prevalence rate in South Africa at 7 percent.¹⁵²

Cultural norms in South Africa often favor bigger bodies, especially among women. Thinness has come to be associated with the scourge of HIV, which, in 2015, affected 19.2 percent of South Africa’s adult population aged fifteen to forty-nine.¹⁵³ HIV can also be a risk factor for diabetes because antiretroviral drugs can cause glucose intolerance as a side effect.¹⁵⁴ The adoption of the nutrient-poor American-style diet in urban South Africa now means that doctors and patients in the region must be aware of the potential link between HIV and diabetes.

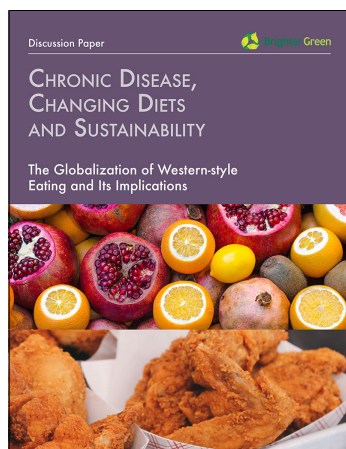
The South African public health community has starting taking steps to encourage healthier eating. Because sodium causes high blood pressure, and high blood pressure is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease and stroke, the South African government in 2013 passed

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.¹⁵⁵ (Initial restrictions took effect in 2016.)

Public health professionals hope that with this measure, along with help from industry,¹⁵⁶ 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.”¹⁵⁷ 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.¹⁵⁸

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. ♦



This is an excerpt from a Brighter Green discussion paper, which can be cited as: Bankman, Judy. “Chronic Disease, Changing Diets and Sustainability: The Globalization of Western-style Eating and Its Implications.” Brighter Green, 2017.

The full paper can be accessed at http://brightergreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/brighter_green_public_health_paper.pdf.