

Feeding the nation

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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Food shortages and exorbitant taxes on bread was the spark that fuelled the French Revolution and brought down a monarchy. At a fundamental level, food security today is still as important for the well-being of a nation. The difference is it isn't just about providing food to the population, but also about access to good nutrition and the cost - in terms of health risks - of doing so.

At the first day of the Food for Thought conference in Cape Town on 20 May, panellists with various interests in the agricultural and food-production sector shared their views.



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Food supply in Africa

Alita van der Walt, editor of *Farmers' Weekly* outlined some of the challenges facing Africa when it comes to food security.

"Africa cannot feed itself, which is supported by the fact that even though there is a strong agricultural bias, one in four Africans suffer from malnutrition. It is therefore vital that food production is improved," she said.

In addition, 75% of land in sub-Saharan Africa is not suitable for agriculture because it is nutrient deficient and affected by

climate change.

"Economies need to become stronger, with investment in agriculture. Yet the infrastructure is not on par to facilitate this. This is complicated by 80% of farmers operating on a subsistence level, and can't guarantee a surplus to sell at market," she explained.

"I don't think subsistence farming is the only solution and commercial farming does have a role in food security."

"We've got a long way to go to achieve food security. Africa is a diverse continent, and we can't apply a blanket solution, but need to adopt a holistic approach," she said.

The other side of the coin

Passionate permaculturist, Paul Barker, agreed that there is no single remedy to food security, but stated that "commercialised agriculture can have a horrific impact". He cited the Chinese agricultural reforms in the 1950s that organised farming communities in collectives, which eventually became overburdened by bureaucracy.

"True food security for the country or continent needs to start in your own kitchen and supporting an agrarian lifestyle. We, as humans, have to take a look at ourselves and where we fit into the food security chain," he said.

The real cost of processed food

As a writer with a special interest in climate change, biodiversity and agriculture, Leonie Joubert said our concern should be how, with rapid urbanisation, we keep our cities well fed.

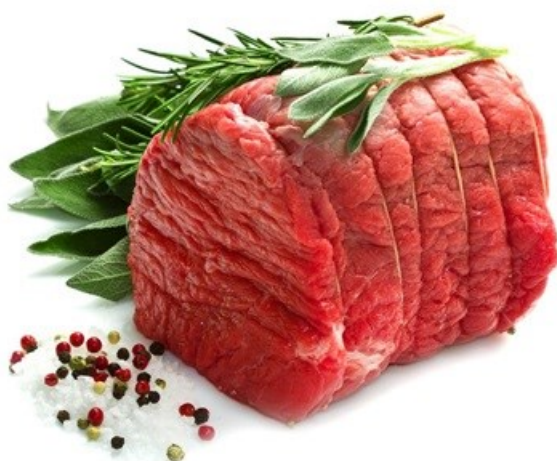
"How do we get wholesome food to the urban poor?" she asked. Her response was that we need to look at the system that produces the food.

Her primary concern that the over-processed food offered as an affordable alternative for the poor makes people sick and fat.

"We provide cheap food, but we are not thinking of cost attached - such as chronic medication - when it comes to the diseases such as diabetes that are a result of a high-sugar, over-processed diet."

"The medical profession looks at individuals and changing their eating habits, but does not look at the system that produces that food, which is broken," she explained.

She suggested that the supermarket system and how it supports highly-processed food, as well as the political influences, have a profoundly powerful effect on what the poor eat in cities.



What's the beef?

Meat is a traditional staple in the country, yet 1/10th of beef consumed in South Africa is not produced here, said Mpumelelo Ncwadi, founder and director of Indwe Trust - a non-profit agriculture development company.

He said that besides producing beef that is grain-fed, the feedlot system undermines rural farmers in terms of not always getting full market value for their cattle.

"We need a new value chain for animals from the veld. All the arable land is gone, and for rural people to survive we need grazing. If we are able to improve the quality of pastures, we are able to give you meat that is free of antibiotics," he explained.

Another part of the value chain that needs to be looked at is that South Africa does not have a residue monitoring programme. This is an agricultural best practice throughout the world that manages the risk of chemical contaminants such as antibiotics in food products including beef. As a result South Africa is less competitive in its own market against imported products.

Food security means different things to different people, but it will take a collective effort to make it sustainable in the long run.

The Food for Thought conference is taking place at the CTICC in Cape Town from 20-21 May 2015. For more info, go to <http://foodforthought2015.co.za>.

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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