

Food Safety Problems an Industry Problem, Better Controls Needed

By Siyabonga Mviko
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Following the recent tragic deaths of five children – Monica Sebetwana, Otlotleng Msimango, Isago Mabote, Zinhle Masilela, and Karabo Rampou, earlier this month, there has been a more serious discussion about food safety and fraud around corridors, taxi rides, offices and all manner of platforms in South Africa. The reason is because the children's deaths are suspected to have been caused by poisoned or expired food which the young ones allegedly ate shortly before passing away. One child had still been fighting for his life in hospital but later died.

The tragic events led to residents shutting down spaza shops owned by migrants in Naledi, Soweto as the children's deaths happened in the context of charged relations following a previous attack on migrant-owned shops in August this year, after a shooting incident where a young man was shot by a migrant shop owner.

Enraged community members have pointed the finger at migrants and there are reported views about food safety concerns linked to migrants. The failure of government to manage food safety and to enforce existing policies, to administrate properly, have all allowed for misinformation, under information and conspiracy theories to fester in society about migrants and food safety or the lack of it.

Although communities make a strong link between unsafe foods and migrant store owners, the problem is quite big as even the big retailers have also had bouts of food concerns. According to numerous reports Woolworths had to recall foods affected by listeriosis during an outbreak in 2018, but it was not only one company struggling with the problem. Other affected stores included Tiger Brands, Rainbow Chicken Wolwehoek, Checkers, etc., with cold meats being recalled over public health concerns.

Another problem around food safety relates to food fraud. Although not quite well-defined, science direct say "**Food fraud** refers to the **deliberate and intentional substitution, addition, tampering, or misrepresentation of food, food ingredients, or food packaging**. It can occur at any point along the farm-to-table food supply chain and is done for economic gain."

It does not always refer to unsafe food products, but mainly the mislabelling and misrepresentation of food for financial gain and will sometimes result in food safety problems, especially where expired products are listed for destruction but then diverted through 'grey markets' and sold as okay to unsuspecting buyers.

The problems of large retail stores did not end with the listeriosis outbreak, researchers such as Sandra Boatemaa, McKenna Barney, Scott Drimie and others say, "In addition to the listeriosis crisis, other food safety challenges that can affect health have been reported in the food retail sector in South Africa. For example, bacterial infections, pesticide residues and antimicrobial/antibiotic residues have been found in food products displayed for sale"

It is the problem of pesticides which led to the deaths of the six children from Soweto,

according to a statement released by the Department of Health. The pesticide, terbufos, is classified as a highly hazardous pesticide (HHPs) but is sold legally in South Africa. Problems of regulation and food safety checks by the state means that many die accidentally from this and other similarly toxic products.

According to the African Centre for Biodiversity, already in 2008, “the WHO and FAO recommended that this class of highly hazardous chemicals [HHPs] be eliminated from use worldwide, yet 15 years later, South Africa is still legally using these chemicals on our food and in our environment.”

The Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (dtic), the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) and the Department of Health are responsible for food safety oversight, with different responsibilities for each. Although all three have a responsibility to find solutions to food safety and the problem of food fraud, the health department’s scope – which covers food control and legislation, the certification of acceptability, hygiene requirements for food premises and even offences related to food legislation – means that they have to shoulder much of the blame.

There are state policies to help achieve food safety, for example the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, No 54 of 1972 which is meant, “to control the sale, manufacture and importation of foodstuffs, cosmetics and disinfectants; and to provide for incidental matters.”

This same Act also regulates the ‘advertisement’ or labelling of food. So, where is the problem? It seems that South Africa may be struggling with enforcement of its food legislation policies more than anything else.

Although food safety threats should not be tolerated from anyone and communities are right to protest the problem, some have conveniently blamed migrants while the problem of state neglect and abandonment of working class people is swept under the proverbial rug. If South Africa is to win the struggle against hazards to food safety and against food fraud, it is important to avoid taking the convenient route of blaming owners who are non-nationals but to view the problem from its source and to remember that some 216 people died between 2017 and 2018 during the listeriosis crisis which affected foods sold by big South African chain stores.

The challenge with food safety is not a migrant-owned store-specific issue, it is something linked to both the food industry, storage issues, and the pursuit of economic gain but sometimes it happens by pure accident.

And, hopefully, there will be no more deaths of children and anybody else, linked to foodstuffs that are not in a condition to be eaten.

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