

# Social work and food security: Case study on the nutritional capabilities of the landfill waste pickers in South Africa

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**Funded by the DST-NRF Centre  
of Excellence for Food security**















# Introduction

- Food (in)security and (mal)nutrition, impact on the daily existence and well-being of communities.
- A person's nutritional status directly influences (and is influenced by) their physical and mental health and work/school performance, and is regarded as the most critical development factor in the first three years of a child's life



# Intro

- Sen (1999) - food deprivation will not be found in corruption-free countries with good governance, freedom, democracy, good planning and an independent media that monitors government policies.
- Hunger and food insecurity should not be seen as only a family/individual problem;
- it relates to human rights and social justice, and has deep political roots. This should be of significant concern to the social work profession.



# Problem statement

- The literature produced by social work researchers on food security remains limited.
- Of concern is the fact that documented research findings on food (in)security in the global South have been produced by social workers from the global North (Burgess and Schier, 2016).



# Definition of food security

- Most common definition- The Committee on World Food Security (2012: 8) states:
- Food and nutrition security exists when **all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to food**, which is consumed in **sufficient quantity and quality** to meet their dietary needs and **food preferences (culture)**, and is supported by an **environment of adequate sanitation, health services and care**, allowing for living a healthy and active life.

# Nutritional capabilities

- Drèze and Sen (1989) - food security should place the focus on the person.
- The “capable” person will not be food insecure
- Enhancement of their capabilities, opportunities, freedoms and agency.
- Move away from the person being a passive recipient entitled to food.
- Ability to challenge unjust and discriminatory systems



# Dimensions of nutritional capabilities

- The five dimensions are:
- (1) Access to food and food availability;
- (2) Food utilisation;
- (3) Increased capabilities, opportunities, freedom;
- (4) Increased agency; and
- (5) the stability and sustainability of their access to food.

# Methodology

- Cross-sectional approach, coupled with a triangulation mixed method design.
- Qualitative and quantitative data
- Nine (six rural and three urban) landfill sites, situated in four of the nine, were sampled in consultation with the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Food Security (which funded the project) so as to coincide with other CoE studies being performed in the same areas.
- The team included researchers from Social Work (PI), Economy and Nutrition.
- 373 waste pickers were interviewed











# Methodology



# Table 1. Number of completed interviews conducted on each landfill

Landfill site	Estimated number of waste pickers on site on the day of the interviews	Number of waste pickers interviewed	Percentage of waste pickers interviewed (%)
ST(rural)	50	41	92
OU (rural)	50	32	64
BN (urban)	60	38	63
BS (urban)	60	49	81
BO (rural)	40	39	97
PR (urban)	200	98	49
BR (rural)	40	31	77
VR (rural)	30	23	76
PO (rural)	20	17	85
Total	505	373	74

### Table 3. Gender distribution (percentages).

[illegible]

## Dimension 1: *Waste pickers' access to food and food availability*

- Waste pickers access food
- 1. Through collecting waste and earn an income
- 2. Collecting food from the landfill
- 3. Other such as growing your own, from others - one landfill has a food garden
- 4. From each other and in the communities where they live



# Food collected from the landfill







**Table 2. Income for week prior to the interview per landfill (n=359).**

Landfill site	N	Minimum	Maximum	Median
BN (urban)	37	0	1800	600
BS (urban)	50	0	2000	600
BO (rural)	30	0	750	300
BR (rural)	31	0	1200	300
PR (urban)	92	0	2000	300
OU (rural)	33	10	1520	190
PO (rural)	17	100	2000	500
ST (rural)	45	0	1800	400
VR (rural)	24	120	1200	350
Total	359	0	2000	350

**Table 4. Food items collected on the landfills (n=179).**

Food items	N	%
Meat/chicken	107	59.8
Bread/buns	77	43.0
Fruit/vegetables	61	34.1
Tinned food	27	15.1
Maize	25	14.0
Rice/pasta/dry food/soup/spices	21	11.7
Juice/drinks/cold drinks	15	8.4
Milk/dairy/eggs	18	10.1
Anything still good enough to eat	11	6.1
Coffee/tea/sugar	10	5.6
Sweets/chocolates/chips/snacks/cakes/pies	10	5.6
Fish	3	1.7
Groceries/toiletries	8	4.5



**Table 5. Days without food during the last month.**

Landfill site	1–3 days	4–5 days	6–10 days	More than 10 days	Total
BN	1	0	0	0	1
BS	6	2	3	0	11
BO	7	1	1	2	11
BR	4	2	2	0	8
PR	26	9	7	2	44
OU	7	5	3	3	18
PO	2	0	0	1	3
ST	13	2	3	2	22
VR	4	2	0	1	7
Total	70	23	19	11	125

# Dimension 2: Food utilisation

- Not all food can be utilised
- Given the lack of resources such as access to running water and toilets -no means to follow food safety principles
- they confirmed that they seldom got sick and were knowledgeable about how to make a distinction between edible and rotten food.
- they cooked the meat they recovered from the landfill before eating it or take home.
- An initial review of the 24-hr recall intake instrument revealed that many waste pickers consume only one meal a day, with some reporting that they consumed nothing other than water for a whole day.

# Food utilisation

- *“’... you see somebody’ supper from last night and you eat it...”*
- *“ from my experience no one has died from food...”*
- *“Some people dry meat in the sun and dry it until their next trip home”*



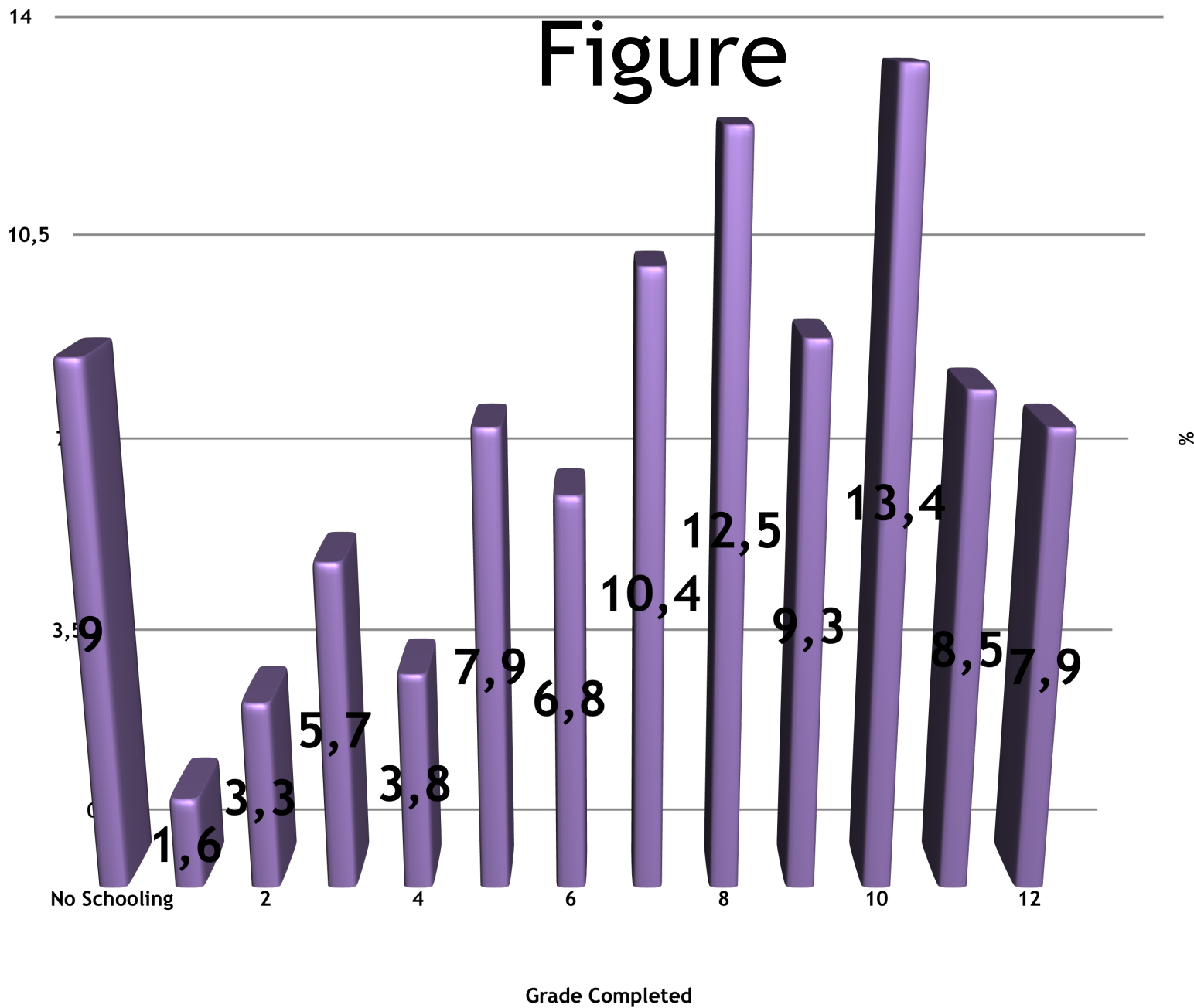


**Table 6. Access to basic amenities while collecting waste.**

<b>Basic needs</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Drinking water</b>	80	284	364
<b>Toilet</b>	180	182	362

# Dimension 3: capabilities

- Increased access to food (buying or growing) health, education/skills, work, shelter, networks and relationships.
- creating safety nets
- E.g. Of the total respondents, 9% did not have any schooling at all, while 43.5% had obtained some secondary level education, ranging from Grade 8 to Grade 11. Fewer than 8% of respondents had completed matric.





# Shelter on the landfill



# Dimension 4: Agency

- Agency refers to people's ability to reflect, to take decisions, to act independently, or to pursue or achieve their own goals
- the person who acts by taking responsibility for their own self-employment as one who has agency.
- Waste pickers are working for themselves -
- BUT
- do not participate in the management of the landfills.
- they care for (on average, four) dependants
- assist and support each other .
- In most cases, the income of waste pickers has to support their families and themselves. Among the 331 waste pickers in the study, a total of 1178 dependants relied on the waste pickers' income

# Agency

- *“ I am my own boss, no one tells me .... What to do, what, when and how....”*  
*“Your employer does not push you, even if you are not feeling well .... He does not push you, he is not after you, you push yourself, your pay is determined by you”*
- *“ I am my own boss”*
- *(they do not want to be organised)*

**Table 7. Number of dependants (n=331).**

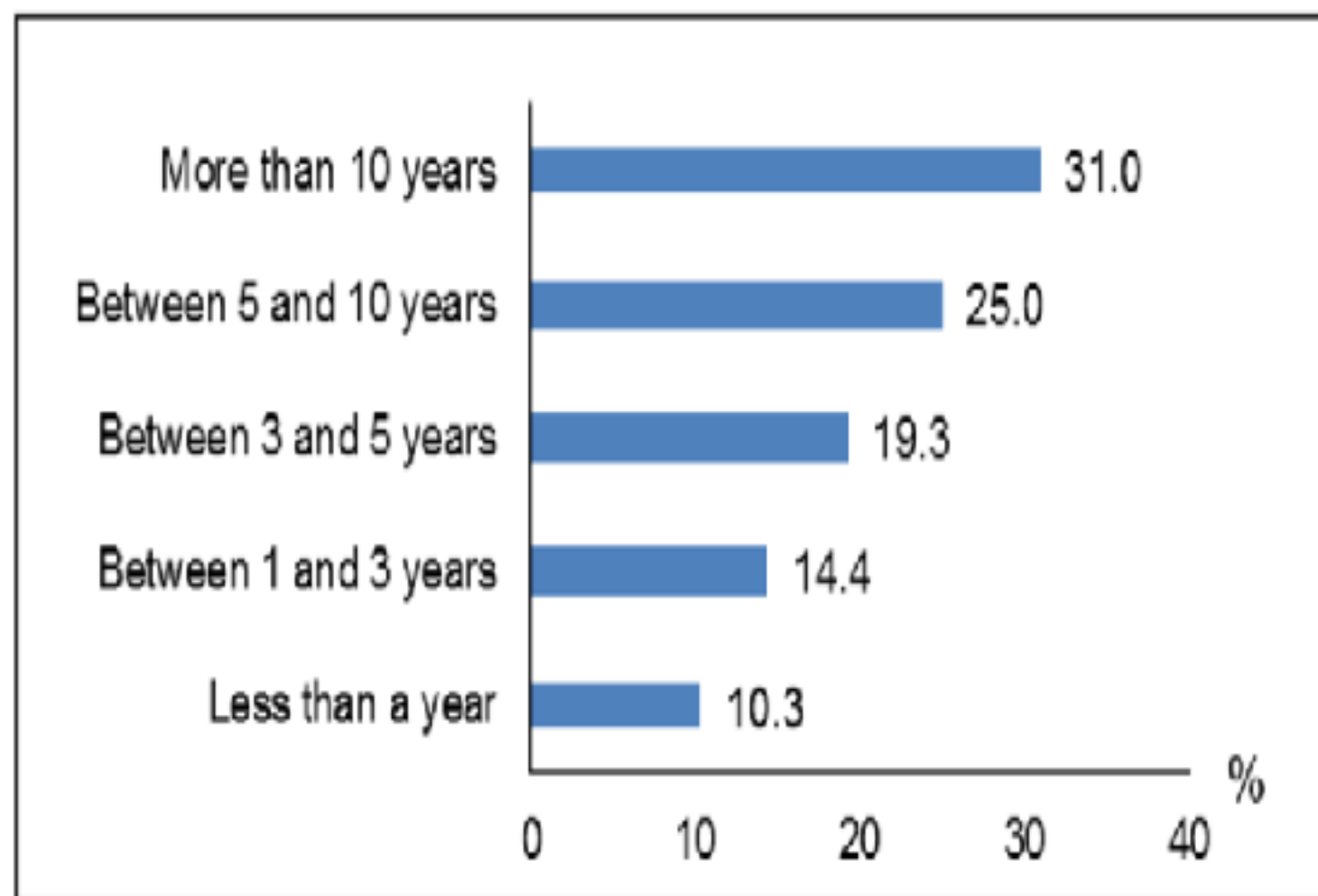
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Median
Dependants	1178	0	15	3
Children	764	0	12	2
Children under 18	521	0	9	2



## **Dimension 5: Increased Stability and sustainability**

- Waste-picking practices aimed at earning a living and accessing food do not offer sustainable food security to the waste pickers.
- Waste picking does offer some (albeit rather irregular) access to food.
- Exposed to outside factors which have an impact (eg weather)
- Survivalist activities depend on the viability and management of the particular landfill site, and the local government.
- no guidelines for municipalities on how to work alongside the waste pickers in the waste management system.

**Figure 4: Period involved in waste picking activities**



*Source: Survey data*

# Subjective Well being

• Landfill site	Median
• BN	6
• BS	5
• BS	6
• BR	5
• PR	5
• OU	7
• PO	5
• ST	6
• VR	7

# Conclusion

- The study highlighted the unequal and socially unjust socio-political and socio-economic environment in South Africa.
- Characterised by high unemployment, inequality, ineffective education and the lack of support systems or safety nets, all of which deprive people of the freedom to live the life they value.
- Riches (2011) states that the existence of food banks, for example, are symptoms and symbols of broken safety nets, failing policies and the lack of socially responsible citizens.



# Questions

Social work and people in the informal economy?

Social Work and Food security/ nutritional capabilities?

If food insecurity is the result of deep socio-economic political injustices then?

Relevance of social work?

# Recommendations

- Social work should focus on enhancing the dignity of waste pickers -
- enhancing the educational and socio economic capabilities and opportunities including how they access waste, food, and social and health services.
- ensure that the voices of the waste pickers are heard by listening to them
- **Value , visibility, voice**

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