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Strengthening community ties in South Africa: tackling food insecurity and structural challenges through community-led initiatives

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine how precarious access to food and other essential resources, shaped by structural violence, poverty, and inequalities, is mitigated through community ties and community-based action. Communities in South Africa face chronic socioeconomic challenges, including high unemployment and inadequate access to resources such as food, water, energy, and shelter. We highlight how governmental neglect and exclusionary policies exacerbate these hardships, creating entrenched cycles of deprivation. Drawing on ethnographic research, including two case studies from Lorentzville (Gauteng province) and Mqanduli (Eastern Cape province), we explore community-based initiatives that demonstrate how residents leverage social networks to share resources, address immediate needs, and sustain livelihoods. Our findings show that while these grassroots efforts provide critical support, they remain constrained by broader structural conditions that perpetuate food insecurity and economic marginalization. Ethnographic evidence illustrates how the spatial and social organization of these communities influences the effectiveness of informal support mechanisms. This article contributes to scholarship on well-being and space by illustrating how localized strategies of resource-sharing shape survival within contexts of chronic deprivation.

Introduction

In South Africa, many communities struggle to meet basic needs due to systemic neglect, inadequate service delivery, and entrenched inequalities (Ngumbela, 2019). Food insecurity remains a critical concern, compounded by unreliable access to essential resources such as water and electricity and exacerbated by high unemployment and low household income. In this article, we examine the complexities of and responses to food insecurity through two case studies: the People's Pantry in Lorentzville, Johannesburg, and the Mqanduli Community Garden in the Eastern Cape. These grassroots initiatives play a crucial role in addressing immediate needs and supporting their communities. However, while they provide temporary relief, their limited capacity prevents them from disrupting the broader structural conditions that perpetuate food insecurity. Without systemic interventions, these efforts remain stopgap measures rather than catalysts for long-term change. Unlike much of the literature that positions soup kitchens and food pantries as temporary safety nets in times of crisis, our findings show that food insecurity in Lorentzville and Mqanduli is not episodic but endemic. These initiatives highlight both the possibilities and the fragility of community-led interventions, unsettling assumptions that all communities have equal capacity to respond to shortages.

To frame this article, we draw on the concept of structural violence, coined by Galtung (1969) to describe the harm caused by social, economic, and political structures that restrict individuals' ability to meet basic needs. Unlike direct violence, which is overt and physical, structural violence is embedded within institutions, policies, and historical processes, making deprivation and inequality appear normalized and inevitable (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969; Montesanti, 2015). It disproportionately impacts marginalized populations, particularly women, and in some contexts gender-diverse[1] individuals, who face compounded disadvantages due to intersecting factors such as gender, race,

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[1] Our study sample included only two participants who did not identify with a gender-specific category, limiting the extent to which we engage this dimension empirically. We nevertheless recognize the importance of this lens for future research in South Africa's inner-city contexts.

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and socioeconomic status (Lee, 2019; Ndhlovu, 2024; Sinha et al., 2017). For example, through limiting access to vital services like healthcare, education, and justice, structural violence deepens gendered poverty, reinforces racial inequalities, and perpetuates human rights violations (Farmer, 2004; Lee, 2019).

Food security itself takes different forms in urban, peri-urban, and rural South Africa. In Lorentzville, insecurity is primarily shaped by economic exclusion and lack of purchasing power, whereas in Mqanduli it is tied to access to land, water, and the agency to control productive resources. Clapp et al. (2022) propose a six-dimensional framework that situates food security beyond availability and access, including stability, sustainability, and agency. This framing helps clarify how structural violence manifests differently across our two sites.

In the context of food insecurity, structural violence exposes how social and economic systems restrict access to food, reinforcing inequality. Lindberg et al. (2025) study, conducted in Australia, demonstrates how social services, though intended as safety nets, often reproduce marginalization by reinforcing dependency and limiting long-term solutions.

In South Africa, food insecurity is shaped by enduring structural inequalities that persist despite the formal end of apartheid. Post-apartheid economic policies, such as market liberalization and reduced state support for small-scale farming, have further entrenched these inequalities, privileging commercial agriculture over localized, community-based food production (Sithole and Moyo, 2024). Consequently, the historical dispossession of land, contemporary economic policies, economic exclusion, and precarious labor conditions create systemic barriers to food access, disproportionately affecting Black and working-class communities (Ntsebeza and Hall, 2007; Seekings and Nattrass, 2015). These manifest differently in urban and rural settings. In Johannesburg's Lorentzville neighborhood, economic exclusion, informal labor, and the high cost of living contribute to food insecurity, even in proximity to supermarkets (Khofi et al., 2024; Moyo and Moyo, 2017; Zack and Lewis, 2022). In rural towns like Mqanduli (pseudonym), historical land dispossession and the erosion of smallholder farming have left many households dependent on unstable food supply chains (Ndhlovu, 2024; Ngumbela, 2019; Tantoh and McKay, 2023). Social grants are inadequate alone to meet household needs in both settings. Both cases illustrate a food system rooted in historical and contemporary inequalities.

These inequalities are rooted in apartheid-era spatial planning, which forcibly relocated Black South Africans into segregated "homelands" or bantustans, while pass laws controlled movement into urban areas. Dispossession from fertile land and concentration in marginal areas created enduring rural poverty and restricted urban access to resources, effects that continue today despite formal democratic reforms (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Tafira, 2015; Ntsebeza 2003).

Community-led initiatives have emerged as responses to food insecurity, establishing alternative food networks, urban farming projects, and communal food distribution systems that challenge dominant market-driven approaches (Greenaway and McDowell, 2019; Mangqalaza, 2020). However, these initiatives often operate within the constraints of the structural forces they seek to resist, and are dependent on external funding, volunteer labor, and policies that may not align with their goals (Cele, 2019; Lastikova, 2023; Mudzinganyama, 2012). While they provide immediate relief, their capacity for long-term structural change is limited by the broader economic and political landscape (Das, 2001; Lastikova, 2023; Ndhlovu, 2024).

By examining food insecurity through the lens of structural violence, in this article, we highlight how precarity shapes food access in South Africa; in rural areas, land dispossession compounds this. Using Lorentzville and Mqanduli as case studies, we explore the challenges and limitations of community-led initiatives in addressing hunger. In engaging with broader debates on structural violence, food sovereignty, and community-led responses, we position food insecurity not as a localized crisis but as a deeply embedded structural issue requiring systemic transformation (Datta et al., 2024; Mayer and Anderson, 2020; Tilzey, 2017).

In our two cases, community 'outsiders' played a central role in addressing gaps created by a largely absent state. In both places, new residents mobilized key local institutions to act in response to hunger. In Lorentzville, a well-known food franchising company, headquartered in the community, played a supportive role in the early development of the People's Pantry; in Mqanduli, the traditional authority, or Chief, became a mediator of resources and opportunities. Structural violence operates differently in each site. Exclusion and inequality play out along lines of race, class, and gender in both places, but in Lorentzville, those who suffer most are generally migrants to South Africa, living in various states of legality; in Mqanduli, proximity to traditional rulers allows some individuals to benefit while others continue to experience hunger. These dynamics illustrate the intersection of structural violence and food insecurity with local power structures, shaping access to food and resources in complex and uneven ways.

Poverty and inequality in South Africa

South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, with deep-rooted disparities stemming from apartheid-era injustices and ongoing structural economic exclusion (Francis and Webster, 2019; Kakwata, 2024; Saka, 2024). Post-apartheid, from 1994, the Black middle class has expanded, and there has been some economic redistribution, but poverty persists, particularly in rural areas and among migrant communities (Ndaba, 2023; Ndlovu, 2020; Southall, 2016). Rural-to-urban migration has altered poverty dynamics, with many younger South Africans seeking economic opportunities in cities, leaving behind older generations and children in rural areas with limited employment prospects and state resources (Crush and Tawodzera, 2024, 2025; Ramuhulu, 2021).

Access to basic resources such as water, energy, food, health, and shelter is constitutionally enshrined in Chapter 2, Sections 7–39 of the South African Constitution's Bill of Rights (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). However, barriers to essential services, underfunded schools, and inadequate healthcare highlight the structural, political, and economic challenges that perpetuate poverty (Cheteni, Khamfula and Mah, 2020; Ndhlovu, 2024; Sithole and Moyo, 2024). Government policies have aimed to redistribute essential services such as water and electricity and expand job creation for historically disadvantaged groups. However, both urban and rural communities suffer from ineffective governance and systemic inequality. In Lorentzville, apartheid-era spatial planning continues to shape socio-economic marginalization. Infrastructure deficits leave many residents in overcrowded dwellings with unreliable access to water, sanitation, and electricity (Khofi et al., 2024; Moyo, 2017), while economic displacement due to gentrification and rising property values has reduced affordable housing options (Ndhlovu, 2024; Saka, 2024). The failure of local government to address these issues undermines constitutional commitments to socio-economic rights (Lastikova, 2023; Moyo and Moyo, 2017).

Meanwhile, Mqanduli, despite its natural resources, faces increasing hunger due to land dispossession and shifts in agricultural practices (Bese, 2020; Cheteni et al., 2020; Thibane et al., 2023), and the population faces challenges rooted in geographic isolation and weak government presence. Poor road networks, unreliable electricity, and inadequate water supply hinder economic development (Bese, 2020; Cheteni et al., 2020; Thibane et al., 2023). The influence of traditional authorities complicates governance, often conflicting with state policies and exacerbating development disparities (Ntsebeza, 2003; Matsiliza, 2024). Unequal resource distribution prioritizes urban over rural areas (Ntsebeza and Hall, 2007).

Land dispossession in the Eastern Cape involved both colonial and apartheid processes. Families were forcibly moved into overcrowded and less fertile "homelands," undermining smallholder farming and

entrenching dependence on wage labor or state grants. This spatial marginalization continues to shape food insecurity, as residents of Mqanduli have limited arable land and weak tenure security (Ntsebeza and Hall, 2007).

Women disproportionately experience poverty, as economic exclusion intersects with gender inequality (Montesanti, 2015; Gibertini, 2025; Ndhlovu, 2024). In Lorentzville, women often work in informal sectors such as street vending and domestic labor, which lack job security and legal protections. Systemic barriers and entrenched gender norms restrict their access to formal employment, further compounded by unpaid caregiving responsibilities (Cheteni et al., 2019; Sithole and Moyo, 2024). In urban informal settlements, inadequate public service delivery exacerbates gendered poverty and violence (Adebayo et al., 2022; Meiring, 2017; Mntambo et al., 2023). In Mqanduli, patriarchal structures restrict women's economic independence despite their significant contributions to both formal and informal economies (Langa, 2013; Ndhlovu, 2024). Women face additional barriers as a result of historical land dispossession and colonial-era exclusion, which have limited their access to education, healthcare, and economic resources. Their labor in agriculture remains both unpaid and undervalued (Camngca, 2024; Mamdani, 1996; Ndhlovu, 2024, 2024; Ntsebeza, 2003). Colonial systems reinforced male dominance in decision-making, sustaining gendered economic inequalities (Francis and Webster, 2019).

Social grants, including child support and disability benefits, provide crucial financial relief for many women-led households. However, these grants often reinforce economic dependency without addressing structural inequalities (Duma, 2019; Hlatshwayo, 2023). Ferguson (1999) critiques individual-focused interventions, arguing that systemic barriers keep women trapped in poverty. Limited funds are spent on survival rather than long-term economic opportunities like education or entrepreneurship (Albertyn, 2013; Ndhlovu, 2024).

Methods

Conducted between 2022 and 2023, the study on which this article is based employed ethnographic methods to examine community-driven responses to food insecurity and structural challenges in Lorentzville and Mqanduli. Participant observation, informal discussions, focus groups, and in-depth interviews were utilized to capture a holistic understanding of community-led initiatives. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and everyday survival strategies of marginalized communities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

The first author conducted participatory fieldwork in local initiatives and engaged directly with residents. In Lorentzville, a dense inner-city area in Johannesburg characterized by overcrowded informal settlements and deteriorating infrastructure (Khofi et al., 2024; Moyo, 2017), participation focused on The People's Pantry (TPP), a local soup kitchen addressing immediate food insecurity. In Mqanduli, a rural town, engagement centered on Kingdom Community Gardens, a community-driven initiative promoting food sovereignty and hunger alleviation. Additionally, the first author attended community meetings where intersecting issues of gender, food security, and grassroots poverty alleviation strategies were discussed.

Data collection involved 20 in-depth interviews and four focus groups in Mqanduli and 35 in-depth interviews and six focus groups in Lorentzville. Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball and purposeful sampling, with all participants being part of TPP and Kingdom Community Gardens to ensure a targeted examination of these community-led initiatives. Sampling was designed to capture diversity in age, gender, and levels of involvement in community responses (Creswell and Poth, 2017). The sample in Lorentzville included 23 women, 10 men, and two individuals identifying as other, while in Mqanduli, it comprised 13 women and seven men. Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, facilitating participants' articulation of their lived experiences with food insecurity, local responses, and broader implications of grassroots initiatives (Bryman, 2016). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min. In the Eastern Cape, interviews were conducted in both isiXhosa and English, depending on the participant's preference. The first author is a fluent isiXhosa speaker, with isiXhosa as her mother tongue, and carried out the translations into English. Most interviews were conducted in isiXhosa, with some participants using English. All isiXhosa notes were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. In Lorentzville, all interviews were conducted in English, as all participants were able to speak English. Interviews took place in participants' homes and community spaces, allowing for candid discussions in familiar environments. In total, approximately 150 h of participant observation were conducted across the two sites. The study is limited by reliance on one researcher's perspective, though reflexivity and peer feedback helped mitigate this.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated where necessary. Data were analyzed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Saldaña, 2016). Predefined themes, such as food insecurity, gender, and structural violence, were examined alongside emergent themes, including informal support networks, interpersonal violence, and community-led resilience strategies. Deductive themes were informed by existing literature, guiding the initial stages of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic coding was carried out iteratively, with the research team engaging in continuous discussions to refine emerging themes. These discussions helped ensure data quality and rigor; external validation was sought through peer review. Reflexivity was integral to the research process, with the first author engaging in continuous reflection, listening to recordings, and refining interpretations based on emerging insights. Field notes were maintained throughout the data collection process to document observations and reflections, which were shared with co-authors for further analysis and validation.

The study received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Medical) at the University of Witwatersrand, Ethics Number M220760. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without consequence. Pseudonyms were used in all reporting to protect participants' identities. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, and all data were securely stored in compliance with ethical research standards (Tracy, 2020).

CASE study 1: Mqanduli

The Kingdom of Mqanduli, like other traditional kingdoms and chieftaincies throughout South Africa, operates within a framework that is officially recognized by the national government and promoted by the Department of Traditional Affairs. This recognition enables local municipalities to engage directly with traditional leaders. Traditional leadership is not a historical relic; it is (often) a crucial mechanism for maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity among the Xhosa people. Kings and chiefs hold significant influence over crucial aspects of community governance, particularly regarding land allocation, resource distribution, and the initiation of community projects. They are also regarded as custodians of communal values and norms, guiding their communities through cultural practices such as initiation rites, marriage customs, and ancestor worship, and addressing socio-economic challenges. Their roles include mediation and conflict resolution, particularly in relation to land and water, which are vital for sustaining local livelihoods. Other cultural practices, including rites of passage, family disputes, and the regulation of communal resources, also fall under their jurisdiction.

In many rural areas, traditional leaders play a significant role in making decisions about community affairs which hold cultural importance; in consequence, the relationship between traditional leaders and modern government is often tense. For example, traditional leaders control ancestral land but must adhere to national land redistribution laws, and the growing influence of formal governance structures complicates decision-making. The system is deeply influenced by patriarchal

customs, which prioritize the voices of elder men while sidelining women and younger people. For residents, these structures present both opportunities for stability and significant barriers to progress. This duality is complicated by limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, which are critical for improving living conditions. The struggle to navigate these challenges creates a pervasive sense of hardship within the community as residents grapple with poverty and systemic inequities. These realities were poignantly captured by Libanzi, a young resident:

> Most people are struggling in this area, we have nothing… *siyahlupheka sisi* (we are struggling, my sister). Each small opportunity makes a huge difference. Some young people like myself did not even finish grade 12 (final year of secondary school); we cannot get higher education, we cannot improve our lives, *impilo inzima, sisi* (life is hard).

Similar sentiments were expressed by many younger participants, who linked poor school completion rates and lack of employment opportunities to persistent cycles of poverty.

Power dynamics between traditional leaders and municipal or provincial governments can result in conflict. Community members may find themselves navigating between traditional leadership expectations and modern governance demands, leading to complexities in community projects and resource management. For example, acquiring land for farming or building homes often requires the kingdom's approval. Proximity to power and access to the patronage of leaders can advantage certain families, as one participant, Lihle, reflected: "My family is fortunate to be close to the kingdom because my father works there, and we benefit from many kingdom projects." People who lack direct access to traditional leaders are excluded from the resources that flow from development programs and other activities centered in kingdoms and chieftaincies. Further, while residents often depend on their leaders for assistance in accessing basic services, their ability to fulfill these needs is limited by economic stagnation, deficiencies in government, and inadequate support from the government for essential service delivery. Even so, traditional leadership plays a crucial role in mobilizing local networks in community responses to hunger and resource insecurity. Leaders often facilitate initiatives, such as community gardens, to improve food security. These efforts provide much-needed relief and, as we suggest below, may strengthen community ties and mutual support among members.

Not all interactions between the kingdom and the community are viewed positively. Some participants see the system of traditional chiefly power as inherently patriarchal, with customary laws that often marginalize women. Mam'Xolo remarked: "In our kingdom, leadership is passed down through the male line, and women rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to hold positions of power." Despite these limitations, some still find value in the *inkundla* (kingdom council), a traditional space for community members to voice their concerns. Tat' Dlangamandla shared: "We don't vote for our leaders, but we have spaces like the *inkundla*, where we can express our views." For many, the chieftaincy represents more than a political institution; it serves as a connection to heritage and ancestry.

In this community, which falls under the king's jurisdiction, residents who live closer to the king's residence (Komkhulu, 'the great place') benefit from infrastructure provided by the local municipality. This includes paved roads and access to clean running water, enhanced services such as improved road maintenance and electricity connections, and local government support for community development initiatives. This contrasts sharply with the neighboring community, where residents lack paved roads and rely on large rainwater storage tanks (widely marketed as JoJo tanks) for their basic needs, including water for cooking, drinking, washing, and bathing. The disparity in services between those close to the kingdom and those slightly further away highlights inequality. While both groups of residents face challenges, including high unemployment rates, those proximate to the king and the kingdom's influence generally enjoy additional informal support, such as aid or involvement in local leadership decision-making. Consequently, those nearest to the king's residence feel privileged; residents further away perceive that they have been neglected.

With limited infrastructure and fewer direct ties to the kingdom, survival often depends on informal social networks and traditional systems of mutual support. Some community members reported that when they ran out of basic necessities, they turned to nearby maternal or paternal households for essentials like maize meal and vegetables. Despite the discomfort of seeking help, they emphasized the importance of having a place to turn to and people to rely on. When faced with water shortages, they sought assistance from neighboring villages. Mam' Dlamini shared:

> When things get really bad, my child and I return to the land of my ancestors in the villages to get vegetables, maize meal, cooking oil, and other essentials. When there is no water, I ask the neighbors… when there is no electricity, I use wood or paraffin. But it's hard, my child, to live here.

Other participants expressed a shared belief that returning to their rural homes for food when needed was frequently their first choice.

Community-driven initiatives such as Mam' Qwathi's community garden project, as we now describe, offer insight into how collaboration between the kingdom and local leaders can foster economic growth and empowerment. Mam' Qwathi (pseudonym) is a 44-year-old woman who initiated the community garden project. She had grown up near Mqanduli, near King Williams Town (now Qonce), the provincial capital under British rule from the 1830s. She earned a degree in economics and agriculture from the University of Fort Hare, some 60 km away, then spent 15 years working in Johannesburg in government and leading agricultural initiatives in Johannesburg. She then returned to the Eastern Cape, farming and selling produce in local markets in Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth). While there, she tried to expand community gardens in rural parts of the province to supply fresh vegetables to various markets. She applied unsuccessfully for multiple grants and, without funding and collaborators, struggled to realize her vision.

Mam' Qwathi was committed to the potential of community gardens to transform the lives of rural residents and so sought patronage and support from the traditional authority in her home area. She explained that she always aspired to work closely with local communities and "dreamed of making a huge impact in poor communities." However, resource constraints made this difficult until she identified an opportunity in Mqanduli. She approached members of the royal family, and they encouraged her to develop a project in collaboration with the kingdom. Mam' Qwathi continued:

> Getting key players on board, such as funders, has been challenging to support the vision…I was facing difficulties in securing the necessary support for my community development initiative…Until I approached the Mqanduli Kingdom, I was unsure where to turn. I believed that their support could provide the credibility and resources needed to make the project viable. When I presented my proposal to the kingdom, I was assured that they would see the value in my initiative and support me. My proposal was considered favourably by the council, including the King, and as a result, I took over the community development project within the Kingdom.

Although she had grown up nearby, she was an outsider, and she approached the kingdom with a deep sense of respect and a desire to collaborate rather than impose her ideas. "I knew that I had to tread carefully," she recalled. "This was not my home; I wanted to honor the community's values and traditions." Mam' Qwathi needed to navigate the complexities of traditional structures while building trust and collaboration with the community, understanding that trust would be crucial for her initiative's success. She began to learn about how things were done in the kingdom and gained insight into community struggles. She spent time in the community, observing and listening, gradually

building relationships with local residents. She then organized informal gatherings, inviting community members to share their stories and concerns. "I wanted to hear from them, to understand what they needed," she explained.

Most people living near the kingdom rely on government grants, but not all people receive such assistance. Mam' Qwathi's initiative was not about creating jobs per se; rather, it aimed to empower community members to contribute to the gardens, deciding for themselves how much they work, and how much produce they sell. The project in her mind was "more than just employment; it's about giving people the opportunity to be their own bosses and determine their own income."

Recognizing the need for support, she formed a partnership with the Mqanduli Kingdom and the local municipality, launching a community initiative that allowed people of all ages to participate in community gardens and earn income based on their contributions. Through her nonprofit organization, Sizabantu Foundation (pseudonym), Mam' Qwathi secured land for the community gardens, and by aligning with the kingdom, she was able to collaborate with 42 chiefs in greater King Williams Town, and so expand the project. Before [first author]'s arrival, some 20 people of all ages and genders were working in the garden; due to inadequate funds for stipends for them all, only 15 people were working when fieldwork commenced:

> I have always been passionate about bringing change to poor communities, especially here in the Eastern Cape, my home province. We have a high rate of poverty compared to other provinces, and our people are hungry. We cannot expect people to survive on a monthly government grant of R350 (US $18). The only solution is to create sustainable employment for our people and fight poverty in our communities. That's why I'm pushing for community garden initiatives and selling produce in local markets. Everyone, young or old, who works in these community gardens has a share in what they produce; they essentially become their own employers.

Following Mam' Qwathi's involvement in the community gardens and in collaboration with local chiefs and business stakeholders, the kingdom has been instrumental in driving economic development across the region through other community gardens, youth empowerment initiatives, and agricultural training. This expanded involvement has created new opportunities and fostered a sense of hope among many families. As the community garden grows, it has become a symbol of collective progress and community-led initiatives. Community members explain that they now have something to look forward to. As one participant noted, "Now I wake up knowing that there is something we are building together. It gives us hope. At the same time, the initiative's limitations lie in its scale and sustainability, as it cannot fully address systemic poverty nor meet the broader needs of the community or of other communities experiencing similar economic hardship.

CASE study 2: Lorentzville

In Lorentzville, Johannesburg, urban neglect is palpable. The streets are littered with waste, and the neighborhood is characterized by makeshift shacks and rundown buildings. The area is home to a diverse mix of South Africans and migrants from neighboring countries, many of whom are undocumented. Residents face numerous daily challenges, including a lack of access to affordable and varied food, water, energy, and shelter. Most live in overcrowded conditions, often sharing small spaces with multiple families, and because they are undocumented, they lack access to formal housing, healthcare, and social services. According to Gauteng City-Region Observatory estimates, >15,000 people are homeless in Johannesburg, with concentrated pockets in inner-city suburbs such as Lorentzville (GCRO, 2023).

Unemployment in Lorentzville reflects broader trends in Gauteng province. The number of unemployed people in Gauteng increased by 63,000 despite initiatives like the Nasi iSpani programme, which aimed to create job opportunities (Democratic Alliance, 2024). In Lorentzville, unemployment disproportionately affects migrants because they lack work permits and therefore are excluded from formal employment. Many resort to precarious informal jobs such as recycling, street vending, or domestic work, which provide inconsistent and low incomes. South African-born residents, particularly youth, also face high unemployment rates and limited economic opportunities. Economic competition between South African-born residents and migrants has contributed to tension in the community; migrants, often willing to work for lower wages due to limited alternatives, are sometimes viewed as undercutting South African citizens. This fosters resentment and mistrust, and hinders collective efforts to address shared hardships. For instance, initiatives aimed at pooling resources or forming cooperatives often falter due to perceptions of unequal contributions or benefits among participants. These tensions are further inflamed by stereotypes and xenophobic sentiments.

Widespread food shortages in Lorentzville are driven by high unemployment rates, rising living costs, and inadequate social support. Many residents struggle to afford even basic staples, leading to frequent periods of food insecurity. Goods sold by food vendors in the area are often priced beyond the reach of households, and many therefore rely on overstretched charitable organizations or soup kitchens. Lack of access to essential resources deeply impacts residents, as one resident shared: "Not having access to basic resources affects our dignity. Going to the neighbor and asking for food feels like losing our self-respect." Jordan, a middle-aged resident, added, "It's hard not to have food. As a man, I can't go next door and ask for food. My dignity as a man is the only thing I have left to protect. Not being able to provide for my family kills me every day." This sense of diminished dignity has led some men to send their children to collect food from soup kitchens, as they find the act of personally seeking assistance to be embarrassing, shameful, and emasculating. Tiro explained, "I send my children to the soup kitchen along with my friends. We do not go there ourselves; something about begging for food strips away your dignity." For undocumented migrants, daily survival was compounded by fears of police raids, deportation, and xenophobic violence, which restricted their mobility and willingness to seek formal assistance.

Women in the area shared their struggles with food shortages and the burden it placed on them as primary caregivers. Many women face the dual challenge of finding food for their families and shielding their children from the stigma associated with food insecurity. One mother, Nompumelelo, explained, "I wake up early to queue for food parcels, but they're never enough for everyone. It's heartbreaking to see my children go to bed hungry." Another woman shared how food insecurity disrupts her ability to seek work: "When there's no food at home, I can't leave my children alone to look for work; they depend on me to find something for them to eat, even if it's just tea and bread." For women, the challenge of feeding their families often exacerbates the emotional toll of poverty, leaving them feeling isolated and overwhelmed.

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified existing socioeconomic disparities, leaving many South Africans struggling to secure basic needs like food. Community-led initiatives became lifelines for those most affected. One such story is that of Jay (pseudonym), a trained HIV advocate working with LOVE ALLIANCE, an organization dedicated to raising awareness about HIV. While walking through Victoria Yards – a vibrant urban space in Lorentzville known for its blend of creative studios, small businesses, and community projects – Jay noticed a growing line of people waiting for food. Across the street, the headquarters of a franchise specializing in Mozambican-style fried chicken had set up a soup distribution initiative for individuals experiencing homelessness. Observing the overwhelming need, Jay quickly realized that the queue included not only those without homes but also others struggling due to pandemic-related hardships.

Jay began volunteering, spreading the word about the initiative, and engaging with local households, as he explained: "(The headquarters) hired me and 10 others to survey Lorentzville and neighboring communities, gathering data on how many people lacked food access. This

was to help them increase their food supply as part of their Corporate Social Investment (CSI) project focused on hunger." Jay explained that each restaurant independently forms partnerships with local charities, tailoring their support to the specific needs of their communities. "They intentionally avoid red tape," Jay explained. "They enable each branch to quickly respond to community needs through a flexible regional fund."

Through this outreach, Jay estimated that one in five people in the area were experiencing hunger, primarily due to job losses caused by the pandemic and constraints to informal income generation due to lockdowns (Manderson and Levine, 2020) and a continued contracted economy even when lockdown restrictions eased. The demand for donated food increased, but food distribution efforts faced challenges. The long queues posed health risks, violating COVID-19 protocols, which brought the soup kitchens to the attention of the Metro Police. In response, Nando's consulted with Jay and other volunteers to find a solution. Jay recommended involving Makers Valley, a community hub within Victoria Yards that supports local initiatives aimed at empowering youth and keeping them away from drugs, alcohol, and crime. With Makers Valley on board, the food kitchens were moved into the hub, where social distancing could be maintained.

In 2021, when the hard lockdown had ended, the franchise wound down the soup kitchens in Lorentzville and shifted its focus to other communities, such as Hillbrow and Yeoville, as part of its evolving CSI strategy (Matshedisho and Wafer, 2015). However, Makers Valley, with Jay at the helm, continued the initiative. Lynda, a middle-aged woman from the Netherlands, living humbly if not in poverty in Lorentzville, became particularly involved. To meet the increasing demand for food, Makers Valley secured food parcels from Harvest SA, a non-profit organization that redistributes surplus food from farms, retailers, and manufacturers to address hunger and reduce food waste in South Africa. When the soup kitchen was handed over to Jay and Lynda, they formed The People's Pantry (TPP), registering it as a Non-Profit Organization (NPO) and obtaining Public Benefit Organization (PBO) status with the South African Revenue Service (SARS), so gaining tax exemption. Registering TPP as an NPO allowed the initiative to formalize its operations quickly, as the process is more straightforward through the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CPIC) than registering an NGO through the Department of Social Development. TPP began providing emergency food support through food parcels and running weekly community kitchens to alleviate hunger in Lorentzville.

Women in the area shared their struggle to ask for help, especially as many are migrants with no family or close friends to rely on. Local NGOs like TPP play a critical role in supporting them. Lizella explained, "It's very hard when you don't have family around. When you're stranded, you're stranded alone, with children hungry and no income. We try to make money in different ways, but it's hard." For some families, access to the community kitchen was their only hope. However, as one resident noted, the soup kitchen operated only once a week, forcing families to find other means for the remaining six days. Yet it remains (at time of writing) a lifeline for some families, as one resident, Objoma, explained: "It's hard to survive here. Waiting every Tuesday for a cooked meal feels like forever. On Fridays, we recycle just to make sure we get food parcels, which might last us two days." Many residents relying on TPP are migrants with no family or support networks.

Lynda noted: "At times when potential donors visit Victoria Yards and see that I am a white Dutch woman from the Netherlands, they assume I have some sort of advantage. This perception can be a disadvantage to TPP, as it sometimes results in fewer donations." Lynda often allowed Jay to take the lead in negotiations to navigate these challenges. As a local resident, Jay had a deep understanding of the community's dynamics and challenges, which helped bridge the gap between the organization and the neighborhood. Jay leveraged his connections within the community to engage donors interested in partnering with TPP and other local initiatives. He explained, "If you're not from this community, you can't tell our story the way we can. Some donors prefer someone who has lived here, someone involved in community work, who understands the needs and how TPP is addressing them." Jay's ties made him a key figure, as he explained: "I know the challenges here in Lorentzville. My role was to bridge the understanding between what we offer and what the community needs."

The TPP's key donations were from Harvest SA, as mentioned above. This company supplies food items that are about to expire, including frozen items like sausages, fish, and frozen vegetables, along with canned meat, cheese, and other dairy products. Harvest SA distributes food across various nonprofit organizations in South Africa, including TPP, making it a vital partner in sustaining the TPP community kitchen. Although less consistent, other donations also contributed to the kitchen's operations. Desire, who leads one of the eight community kitchens, shared: "TPP has been a lifeline for us, providing food parcels each week. Even though it's only once a week, we are grateful. When I started my soup kitchen, I had no one donating food until I reached out to TPP for a partnership."

Another kitchen operates within a Pentecostal church near the TPP soup kitchen and partners with TPP. This kitchen serves more people and operates more than once a day. Even without TPP's food supply, the church's kitchen can continue to run, with support from other NGOs and donations from church members. The beneficiaries of this kitchen are exclusively church members. Mam'Fundisi, the 34-year-old pastor's wife from KwaZulu-Natal, married to a Nigerian man, expressed her gratitude: "We are blessed to have so much support for our kitchen. We are grateful to TPP and everyone else who donates. My husband and I also contribute to keep it going because we don't want the children of God to go hungry while attending church." The other community kitchens rely on TPP to distribute food parcels and have no other food suppliers. Some women volunteer in these community kitchens, so they are able to take any remaining food to their children at home. Nelly, a long-time Lorentzville resident raising three children, and Najma, a recent migrant mother of two, both volunteer at community kitchens… Nelly explained her motivation: "We do not have any means of helping in the community kitchen is fulfilling, even though we don't have enough food to cook in the community kitchen." Najma said: "I help in the kitchen because I want to take the remaining food home and reserve some food for my children while helping out in the community kitchen."

Accessing food through the soup kitchen involves long queues and rationing. Participants reported that food was distributed on a "first come, first served" basis, and many were turned away once supplies ran out. While no formal application was required, the unpredictability of supply created further stress for households.

Discussion

Community initiatives in Lorentzville and Mqanduli emerge in response to the everyday effects of structural violence, including unreliable service delivery and inadequate access to water, electricity, and waste management. The two cases we have presented highlight the role of 'outsiders' in bridging gaps between marginalized populations and local institutions. In Lorentzville, a food franchising company initially facilitated resource access, and the initiative was sustained by an outside individual; in Mqanduli, traditional authority figures played a key role in mediating resources and opportunities. Systemic failures have perpetuated cycles of poverty and exclusion, compelling residents to develop local solutions to meet their basic needs. These community-driven efforts align with Farmer's (2004) concept of structural violence, where institutional systems systematically disadvantage marginalized groups. In both settings, the contours of structural violence intersect with race, class, gender, and, notably, citizenship in Lorentzville and proximity to traditional authorities in Mqanduli.

The persistence of inequality in South Africa, rooted in apartheid's legacy, continues to manifest in the concentration of wealth, land, and opportunities among a privileged minority. Despite constitutional promises of equitable access to essential services (Francis and Webster,

2019; Michelman, 2011), communities like Lorentzville and Mqanduli remain largely excluded. Racial and class divides continue to shape disparities in housing, education, healthcare, and utilities, failing to disrupt entrenched poverty. Personal narratives highlight the tangible impact of these exclusions. Jay's grassroots efforts with TPP in Lorentzville and Mam' Qwathi's leadership in the Mqanduli Community Garden illustrate how collective action can be mobilized in impoverished communities to respond to systemic neglect. These initiatives not only address immediate challenges but also respond to socio-economic structures that sustain inequality. The gendered dimensions of these struggles are particularly pronounced, as women and youth disproportionately bear the burdens of exclusion.

While singular figures played catalytic roles, both initiatives depended on collective action. In Lorentzville, dozens of volunteers sustained weekly kitchens, and in Mqanduli, community members collectively tended the gardens. These practices illustrate the social fabric of resilience that extends beyond individual leaders.

In Mqanduli, traditional leadership plays a dual role as a cultural custodian and a mediator of resource allocation, offering a sense of identity and cohesion while reinforcing entrenched hierarchies (Mahole, 2018). Proximity to traditional leaders often dictates access to resources (Grube, 2015), exacerbating inequalities for marginalized groups, particularly women, who remain underrepresented in decision-making (Duma, 2019; Moyo and Francis, 2010). Oomen's (2006) study of traditional leadership in Sekhukhune, South Africa, captures these tensions, with participants acknowledging the marginalization of women and youth while also highlighting instances where women fought for greater involvement. Similar perspectives emerged in Mqanduli, where participants described how access to opportunities remained contingent on relationships with traditional leaders. Ntsebeza (2003; 2004) critiques these dynamics within the context of land reform, arguing that post-apartheid policies have failed to dismantle patriarchal structures that prioritize male authority. In Mqanduli, traditional leaders retain significant control over land allocation, marginalizing women and youth and limiting economic opportunities for those outside established power circles. Traditional leaders act as "cultural custodians," safeguarding collective identity, rituals, and communal cohesion. This role strengthens social belonging even as it reproduces patriarchal hierarchies.

Amid these challenges, Mam' Qwathi's leadership represents a counter-narrative. Her role in the Mqanduli Community Garden challenges patriarchal governance norms by advocating for women's land access and promoting sustainable farming. In doing so, she not only addresses food insecurity but also disrupts generational cycles of inequality, reinforcing Ntsebeza's (2004) argument that land reform must go beyond redistribution to ensure equitable access and resource allocation. This resonates with Langa's (2013) argument that rural women's labor, though often invisible, is central to sustaining local economies and should be recognized as a form of empowerment.

The community-led initiatives of impoverished communities are evident in both rural Mqanduli and urban Lorentzville. In Mqanduli, traditional leadership's influence intersects with communal survival strategies, such as borrowing resources and relying on extended family networks. These practices reflect both the strengths and limitations of rural social systems, supportive yet hierarchical. In contrast, Lorentzville's urban challenges stem from municipal neglect, with grassroots initiatives like TPP addressing food insecurity through collective action. However, urban residents often navigate hardship individually, given the stigma surrounding dependency, unlike the communal practices observed in Mqanduli. Gender dynamics complicate these issues. Men in Lorentzville experience a sense of emasculation tied to food insecurity, while women disproportionately shoulder caregiving and resource acquisition burdens (Adebayo et al., 2022; Mukwidigwi and Naidu, 2024). Despite contextual differences, both communities demonstrate the role of grassroots initiatives in addressing local challenges. Whether through Mam' Qwathi's rural farming efforts or Jay's urban food security coordination, these stories illustrate the transformative potential of community-driven solutions. However, these initiatives can only achieve lasting impact if integrated with broader policy reforms addressing systemic inequities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Tafira, 2015; Ntsebeza, 2005).

These dynamics directly affect wellbeing. In Lorentzville, men described feelings of emasculation and loss of dignity, while women bore the emotional and physical toll of caregiving in contexts of scarcity. In Mqanduli, wellbeing was tied to access to land and proximity to traditional authorities, with exclusion producing deep frustration and despair. In both cases, structural violence shaped wellbeing outcomes as much as material deprivation.

Food insecurity, as a manifestation of structural violence, disproportionately affects women in impoverished communities, who bear the greatest burden of managing scarcity. Studies by Tatebayashi et al. (2019) emphasize the role of food-sharing networks in mitigating food insecurity, findings echoed in this study where participants reported borrowing food and water from neighbors. Mguni et al. (2020) similarly highlight practices such as sharing cooking facilities and fuel, reinforcing the significance of communal survival strategies. Solidarity among residents, neighbors, and social groups emerges as a crucial coping mechanism in times of scarcity (Mguni et al., 2020). Yet, like soup kitchens, these grassroots strategies remain reactive rather than transformative, offering immediate relief without addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity.

Initiatives like the Mqanduli Community Garden and TPP demonstrate how marginalized groups exercise agency in addressing food insecurity despite systemic neglect. However, without institutional support, these efforts function primarily as survival mechanisms rather than sustainable solutions. Addressing food insecurity requires long-term strategies such as equitable resource allocation, market access, and land reform. By integrating grassroots efforts with formal governance systems, initiatives like Mam' Qwathi's and Jay's can evolve from temporary relief mechanisms into transformative models for inclusive development.

This study is geographically limited to Lorentzville and Mqanduli, and its findings cannot be generalized across South Africa. However, its strength lies in its community-driven approach, providing insights into food insecurity and socio-economic challenges from the perspectives of those directly affected. By examining the intersections of food insecurity, gender, and poverty, this research highlights context-specific solutions and ensures relevance through collaboration with local organizations.

Experiences from other African contexts suggest that while grassroots initiatives provide immediate relief, without structural reforms, they often remain fragile and unsustainable. For example, community-led food distribution in Zimbabwe and urban farming initiatives in Nairobi both struggled once donor funding ended, highlighting the importance of integrating grassroots knowledge into state-supported frameworks (Makoni et al., 2024; Muli et al., 2020).

Future research should expand geographically to capture regional variations in food insecurity, while longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impacts of community-based interventions. Further exploration of gender empowerment, the effects of climate change on food security, and education as a tool for poverty alleviation would deepen our understanding and inform targeted strategies for addressing structural inequalities.

In South Africa, debates over equitable land reform remain unresolved, while Malawi's fertilizer subsidy program and Kenya's urban agriculture initiatives illustrate both the promise and limitations of state-supported food security strategies (Muli et al., 2020; Nyirongo and Khataza, 2025). Such comparative cases demonstrate that long-term transformation requires both institutional commitment and sustained grassroots participation.

Conclusion

Grassroots initiatives in Lorentzville and Mqanduli play a crucial role in addressing food insecurity. However, their efforts remain insufficient in countering the structural violence that sustains these vulnerabilities. The People's Pantry in Lorentzville and the Mqanduli Community Garden illustrate how communities mobilize resources to meet immediate needs, yet their impact is constrained by systemic barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, economic exclusion, and gendered inequalities. These case studies highlight the need for structural interventions that go beyond short-term relief and work toward long-term transformation and equity. Sustainable change requires policy shifts that integrate community-led solutions with institutional support, ensuring that grassroots efforts are not merely crisis responses but integral components of broader development strategies. Similar dynamics of fragile NGO support and community-led survival strategies are observed across the Global South, from Latin America's soup kitchens to community gardens in East Africa, underscoring that these are not isolated cases but part of a broader struggle for food justice.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between grassroots action and systemic exclusion, demonstrating how food insecurity is shaped by socio-economic and political structures. By highlighting the constraints faced by these community-led initiatives, we emphasize the need for multi-sectoral collaboration, gender-sensitive policies, and economic inclusion efforts that address the root causes of vulnerability. Through an intersectional lens, we reveal how geographic and social disparities shape the nature of exclusion, with urban communities facing challenges related to housing, documentation, and welfare access, while rural communities grapple with land tenure restrictions and patriarchal governance structures. Without systemic support and inclusive policy reforms, grassroots efforts will continue to function as temporary survival mechanisms rather than as catalysts for sustainable development. However, political inaction and competing interests prevent meaningful policy implementation, leaving marginalized communities unable to realize their socio-economic rights. Addressing these challenges requires an integrated development approach that tackles both structural and governance-related barriers (Montesanti, 2015; Ndhlovu, 2024).

Incorporating grassroots insights into national and regional policymaking is essential for addressing food insecurity, social exclusion, and gender-based inequalities. Community organizations and local networks possess deep contextual knowledge and firsthand experience with the challenges that policies aim to address. Their involvement in policy development, consultation processes, and program implementation ensures that interventions are not only theoretically sound but also practically effective. By creating formal mechanisms for engagement, such as participatory policymaking forums, advisory councils, and partnerships with local leadership, governments and development agencies can co-create strategies that reflect the lived realities of marginalized communities. Integrating community-driven knowledge into policy frameworks will ensure more relevant, sustainable, and equitable outcomes, ultimately positioning grassroots initiatives as key actors in the pursuit of systemic change.

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Ethics statement

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Medical) at the University of the Witwatersrand. The study was approved under Ethics Clearance Number M220760. All procedures performed in the study complied with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Lucy Khofi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Eileen Moyer:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Andries Bezuidenhout:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Lenore Manderson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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