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Perceptions of Poverty: A Study of Food Secure and Food Insecure Households in an Urban Area in South Africa

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Abstract

The concept “food security”, together with the understanding of poverty, has evolved since the World Food Conference in 1974, and the debate surrounding food insecurity has shifted to the household level. Recent studies claimed food insecurity as increasingly urban. The literature on theories of poverty focuses primarily on the conservative view based on the explanation that poverty is caused from an individual perspective or, blaming the victim. In this context the literature on the perceptions of the causes of poverty holds that individuals are themselves to blame for their poverty situation (Individualistic); or poverty can be explained as a consequence of economics, politics and cultural factors in society (Structural); or that poverty is the result of illness or bad luck (Fatalistic). This study compares the perceptions of the causes of poverty, of food secure and food insecure households. A quantitative research method was deployed, and 580 questionnaires were administered to a stratified random sample of two low-income neighbourhoods in Southern Gauteng, South Africa. Using the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), households were analysed in terms of their food security status. Three causes, namely individualistic, structural and fatalistic perceptions of the causes of poverty were derived through factor analysis. The study found significant differences with regard to the perceptions of poverty between food secure and food insecure households. In this regard food secure households view individualistic reasons as the root cause of poverty, whereas food insecure households view society and fatalistic causes, the causes of poverty.

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1. Introduction

The concept “food security”, together with the understanding of poverty, has evolved since the World Food Conference in 1974, and the debate surrounding food insecurity has shifted to the household level (Maxwell, 1996). Several researchers in the 1990’s predicted that the focus of poverty, and specifically food security, would probably shift to urban areas (Ravallion, 2002; De Haan, 1997; Moser, 1996; UNICEF, 1994). Several studies highlighted that poverty status of households in urban areas may be a key driver to food security on the household level. This implicated that access to food and expenditure on food in poor areas would depend on whether households in urban areas would have enough income to purchase food (Adato & Basset, 2012; Tsoka & Reichert, 2011; Hoyos & Meveden, 2009; Migotto, Gero & Kathleen, 2006; Behrman & Deoler, 1988). In order to eradicate poverty and to ensure sustainable economic growth, the key developmental goal of all governments around the world has been to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty, ensuring access to basic needs such as clean water, access to food, and medical treatment (World Bank, 2007). In this regard food security status of a household indicates also the poverty status of the respective household. This implies that to fully understand the food security status of a household, a better understanding of the poverty status of a household may be necessary, to develop solutions for specific communities. In this regard people may perceive poverty and also the causes of poverty differently. The need to understand what the poor think or perceive to be the causes of poverty may explain the effort or lack thereof on their part in addressing their food insecurity situation.

Central to this study is to get a better understanding of how households perceive the root causes of poverty and food insecurity. Some of the well documented perceptions in the literature include individualistic, structural and fatalistic causes for poverty (Bullock, 1999; Ditch, 1984; Feagin, 1972). The paper therefore explores perceptions of the causes of poverty among households in low income urban neighborhoods, in South Africa. In this regard households were divided into food secure and food insecure households, where food insecure households were regarded as poorer households. This study therefore aimed at examining the perceptions of food secure and food insecure households on the causes of poverty.

In this study food insecurity is used as a measure of poverty, and therefore households are divided into food secure and food insecure households. Perceptions on poverty of food secure and food insecure household heads are measured. An understanding of perceptions on poverty may help to develop policies to eradicate food insecurity and poverty specifically in urban areas. Knowledge of the perceptions on the root causes of poverty may help policy makers to develop specific policies to help eradicate food insecurity and poverty in general. Hence, the purpose of this study is to get an understanding of the perceptions on poverty of low income urban household heads.

The outline of the study is as follows: Section 2 discusses the relevant literature to poverty, perceptions on poverty and food insecurity. Section 3 discusses the purpose of the study. Section 4 discusses the background to the study area Section 5 discusses the research methodology, measuring instrument and sampling. Section 6 presents the findings with regard to the perceptions on poverty by food secure and food insecure households. Section 7 draws a conclusion and makes some recommendations to policy makers.

2. Perceptions on Poverty and Food Insecurity

In 1990 the World Bank state with Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that the world must halve the degree of poverty by 2015. However, the number of people in Sub-Saharan Africa who live below the poverty line of 1 US \$ per day increased since 1990 (Foeken & Owuor, 2008; Armstrong, Lekezwa & Siebrits, 2008). South Africa in this regard was no exception where people living in poverty has not changed significantly. In fact households in poverty sunk deeper into poverty (Bhorat, Van der Westhuizen and Cassim, 2009; Schwabe, 2004;). Food security can be considered as a critical problem facing policy makers in sub-Sahara Africa (Drimie & Casale, 2009; Maunder & Wiggins, 2007). This suggests that food insecurity may pose new challenges to urban planners. Research predicted that the focus on poverty, specifically food security, would probably shift to urban areas (De Haan, 1997; Moser, 1996; UNICEF, 1994), while food insecurity will most likely occur in low-income areas (Mello *et al*, 2010; Nord & Parker, 2010; Furness *et al*, 2004). This may be the result of demographic and economic challenges associated with urbanization (Ravallion, 2002).

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