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Introduction

Transitioning towards sustainable diets is imperative to avoid the worst effects of climate change, environmental degradation and malnutrition. Sustainable diets are especially important to develop and promote in emerging countries that are likely to experience both the worst consequences of climate change and the burden of an ongoing shift towards unhealthy diets. Unhealthy diets are typically highly processed, have a high calorie content and include many animal products. In light of these pressures, researchers have started to pay greater attention to investigating malnutrition and the environmental footprint of diets. The Sustainable and Healthy Food Systems (SHEFS) project, the policy research initiative of which is led by the Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London, looks to advance sustainable diets in developing countries. SHEFS is a global research program funded by the Wellcome Trust (running from 2017 to 2021) with three country case study sites: the United Kingdom, South Africa and India. Through case research, the project aims to identify food system policy options with the potential to improve population health and reduce environmental impacts.

As a Food Policy MSc student at City, University of London, I had the exciting opportunity to contribute to the SHEFS project by exploring the potential of food hampers for advancing sustainable diets in South Africa, conducting research in Cape Town. Hampers (often referred to as “combos”) are bundles of dry goods comprising items considered staple foods, bought at a discount price from both formal and informal stores and are often sold at month end. A hamper typically contains cake wheat flour, super maize meal, white sugar, cooking oil, and white parboiled rice, sold in packets of 10 kilograms and 2 liters for oil. Fruit and vegetable (FV) hampers can also be found in certain stores, comprising carrots, potatoes, butternut and onions.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation (SLF), who have identified the role of food hampers sold in spazas in previous research, generously hosted me for a couple of weeks in July 2018. The SLF shared their knowledge and experience of Cape Town townships with me. Over the course of two weeks, I visited a total of 37 formal supermarkets and wholesalers around Cape Town and the

Cape Flats (see Figure 1 for distribution of shops), looking for hampers, with the great help of Anthony Muteti from the SLF. The aim of the research was to identify where hampers are being sold, what they contain, and how and by whom they are being purchased. Ten interviews were conducted with store managers, in order to gain greater insight into how the content of the hamper was decided upon and priced. This initial scoping work then led to an analysis of the nutritional and environmental profile of hampers, in order to address the overriding research question of whether current hampers

contribute to advancing healthy and sustainable diets.

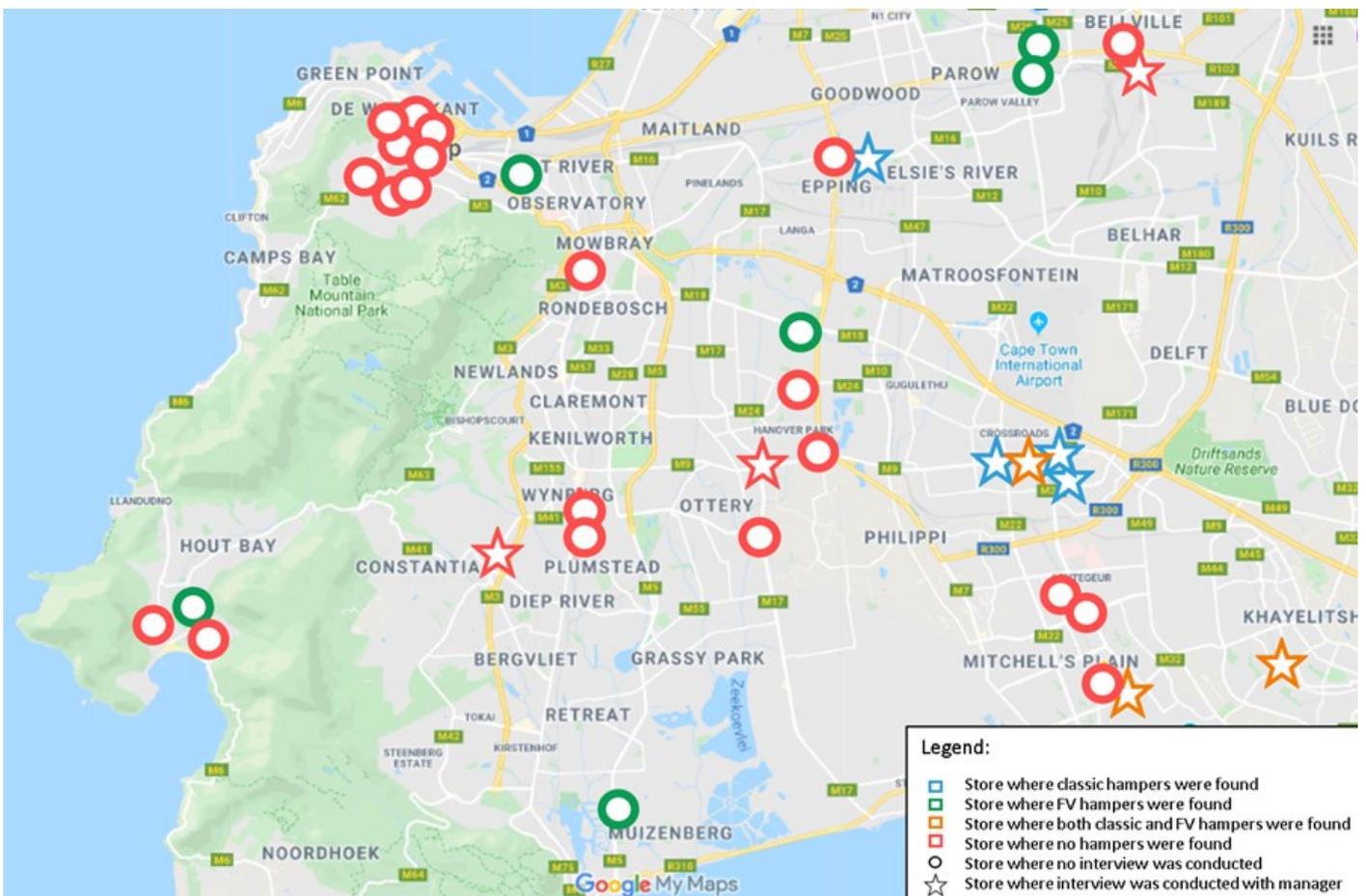
Nutrition Transition in South Africa & Cape town

Like other emerging countries, South Africa is seeing rapid changes in its population's diet and the emergence of new diet-related illnesses alongside persistent food insecurity. This phenomenon is characteristic of the 'nutrition transition', along which the 'triple burden of malnutrition' appears, which is the coexistence of overnutrition, undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies (Popkin et al., 2012). There is ample evidence of a triple burden of malnutrition in South Africa. Hun-

FIGURE 1

Map of formal stores visited during fieldwork in Cape Town

order to address the overriding research question of whether current hampers



ger is prevalent in a quarter of the population and food insecurity is becoming an increasingly urban problem and needs to be addressed urgently. At the same time, South Africans are quickly adopting a 'Westernised diet', characterised by an increased consumption of energy-dense processed and industrial foods containing high quantities of sugar, salt and fat, and are shifting away from unrefined grains and starchy roots, legumes, vegetables and fruits. According to the 2012 National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey, 50% of women and 30% of men were found to be overweight or obese, and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular disease (CVD), diabetes, and diet-related cancers are on the rise, particularly in urban areas.

Cape Town is no exception in terms of urban food insecurity. According to a survey of 1060 households conducted in 2008 in three of the city's low-income areas (Ocean View, Philippi and Khayelitsha), 80% of households were moderately or severely food insecure

and only 10% of households in Khayelitsha and Philippi could be classified as being 'food secure' (Battersby, 2011).

An important strategy low-income households use to cope with food insecurity is to purchase food in bulk from supermarkets. This bulk shop happens at month-end, when social grants have been received. Whereas the large monthly shop is usually undertaken at supermarkets, daily and weekly shopping is done in informal shops to complement the bulk supply when - and if - income permits. Given the high reliance of poor households on monthly hampers, I sought to investigate which foods households are buying in bulk and what implications this has in terms of nutrition and environmental footprint.

Research Findings

A total of fourteen hampers were found across 7 of the 37 supermarkets and wholesalers (some stores offer more than one hamper)

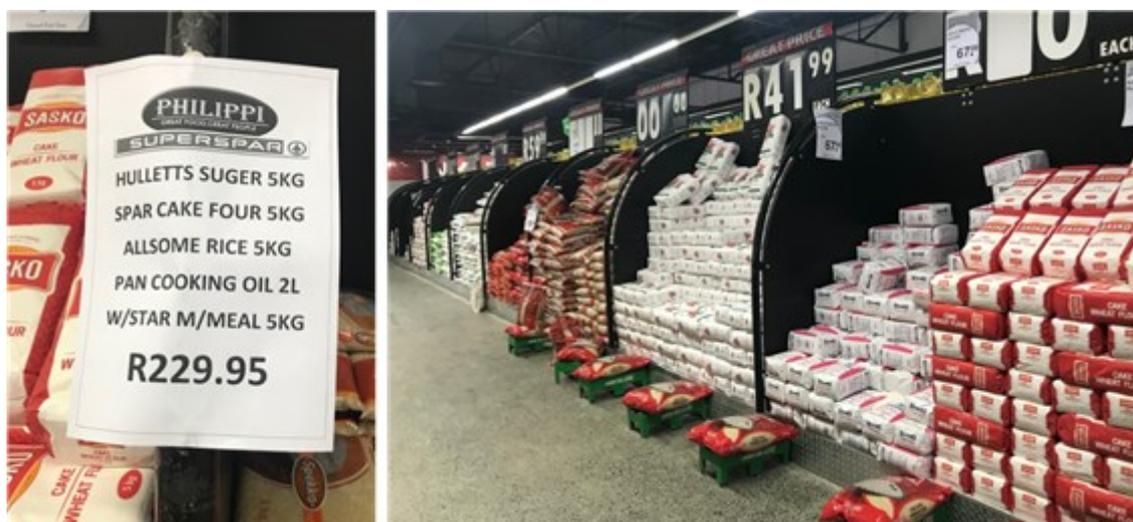


FIGURE 2

Pictures of a hamper in Philippi Super Spar (Source: Author's own)

per), all of which were situated in the region of the Cape Flats (Figure 1). Typically, hampers are not packaged together; in most cases, items are shelved individually, placed in such a way that they catch the customers' eye, while a sign nearby indicates the price, items and brands that equate to a full hamper, as seen in Figures 2 and 3.

Fruit and vegetable hampers (figure 4) are less commonly found but are an indication of the potential of bulk buying healthy foods.

FIGURE 3

Figure 3 below indicates a hamper "combo" at J&K Wholesaler (Source: Author's own)



FIGURE 4

Fruit and vegetable hampers at Pick 'n Pay (Source: Author's own)

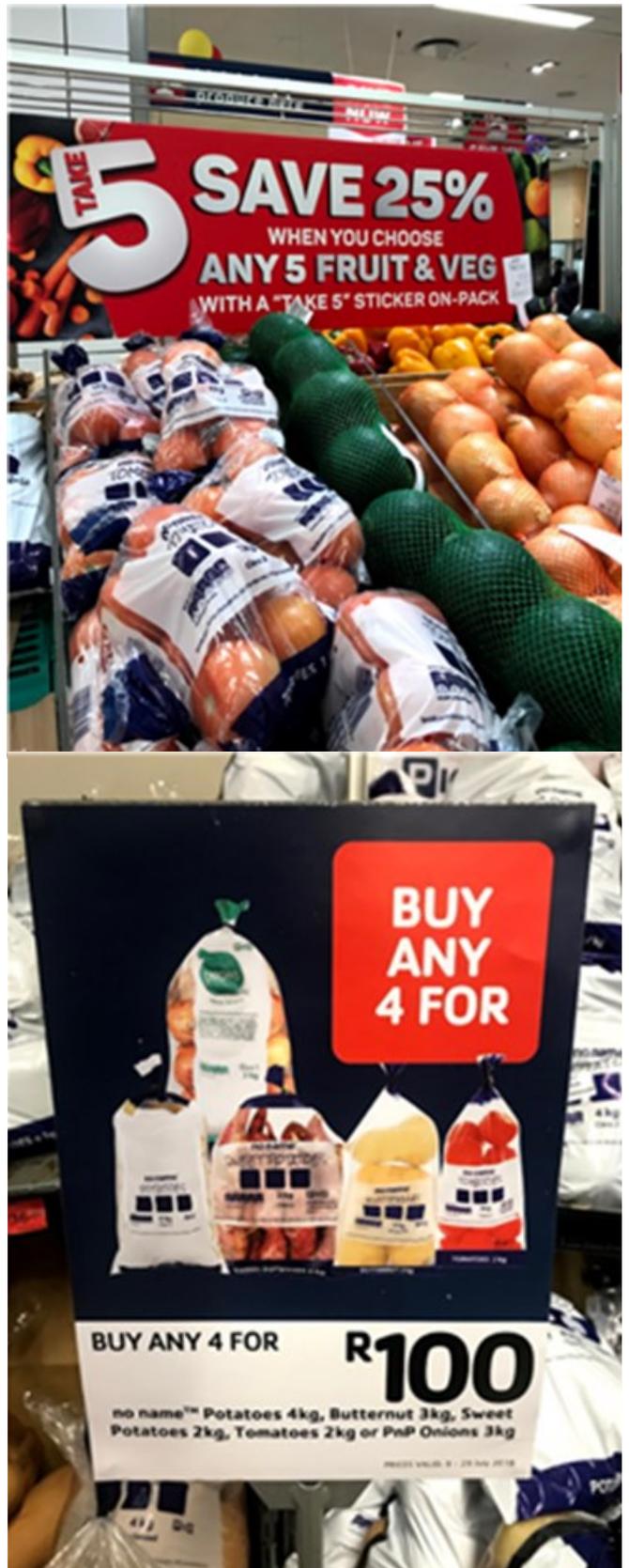




FIGURE 5

Spaza hampers
(Source: Author's own)

Hampers can also be found in spaza shops. As Figure 5 shows, these are generally packaged in a bag for more convenient pickup and transportation. Some spaza shop hampers include a wider variety of products, on top of the five staples, including for example canned beans, pilchards, mayonnaise and coffee cream.

The brand of the individual products included in the hamper was found to be an important factor in consumers' purchasing decision. Three interviewees talked about the importance of 'brand loyalty' and said customers purchased their hampers because they contained brands that they 'liked' or even 'loved'. *Whitestar* maize meal (see Figure 6) and *Spekko* rice, in particular, emerged as the most popular brands and were the brands most frequently included in the hampers. Both of these products are produced by *Pioneer Foods*.



FIGURE 6

10kg packs of *Whitestar* maize meal
(Source: Author's own)

Nutrition

The EAT-Lancet commission's healthy reference diet is composed of five food groups (grains, vegetables, fruit, protein and dairy) in addition to small amounts of added fats and sugars. Of the five recommended food groups, hampers only provide grains, in addition to sugar and fat. Although hampers were described by many interviewees as containing 'all the necessities', they do not include any major source of protein, nor do they include the fruit, vegetables or dairy required for a healthy diet. These need to be purchased separately (either in the form of fruit and vegetable hampers) or on a more regular basis, as many low-income households face constraints to storing fresh produce without refrigeration. A hamper may well represent the bulk of a household's diet. If a household is unable to afford to complement the hamper with additional sources of protein, fruit vegetables and dairy, it is evident that its diet is far from reaching the healthy recommended reference diet.

The interviews conducted with store managers showed their lack of concern about the health impact of the hampers sold in the store. When managers were asked if there is an opportunity to swap in healthier foods, interviewees dismissed the question and explained that this was not the point of hampers. Moreover, one manager said that customers find them 'healthy enough for them' and that 'their ancestors, parents and generations before them lived on the same thing and lived long healthy lives'. Interviews show that cer-

tain store managers use low-priced hampers as 'draw cards' to attract customers inside their stores, as they note extremely high competition among retailers operating on low margins. However, when comparing the prices of hampers to the total price of the same items sold individually, the research found that certain hampers bring very little savings to customers. In a few cases, it seemed hampers did not provide any savings at all, which may be the result of mistakes in pricing and/or labelling. It is interesting to compare the contents of hampers, deemed as the "basic necessities" by a number of store managers, to the "basic foodstuffs" that are exempt of Value-Added Tax (VAT). When first introduced in 1991, the intention of the VAT-free exemption on certain 'basic foodstuffs' was to make food more affordable for low-income households.

At the time of the field study in July 2018, the list of 'basic foodstuffs' exempt of VAT included only three of the five hamper staples: cooking oil, maize meal and rice. Cake wheat flour and sugar were not VAT-free. However, on 1 April 2019, in an attempt to compensate for the increase in the VAT rate from 14% to 15% in 2018, white bread flour and cake wheat flour were added to the list of VAT-free foods stuffs. This, despite being refined carbohydrates, which are not necessarily the healthiest food option. Whilst reducing rates of food insecurity should absolutely remain a key priority for South Africa, this should be done by rendering healthy and nutritious food more affordable, instead of refined carbohydrates, the increased consumption of which is leading to other forms of malnutrition. In short, there needs

to be better coherence between health and finance policies to tackle the triple burden of malnutrition.

To evaluate the potential of hampers to advance sustainable diets, we looked at the environmental impacts of the production of hamper staples. In most hampers, the maize, sugar and wheat are produced in the country, and come from highly industrial agriculture characterized by monocropping, GMOs (for maize and sugar), the need for irrigation and the high use of chemical fertilizers (particularly for sugar). This production system impacts negatively on soil and water, which are already under stress due to the arid climate. The high levels of CO₂ and N₂O emissions associated with industrial agriculture are also directly contributing to climate change, which in turn, will have a significant effect on African agricultural systems. The rice and (soybean) cooking oil are mostly imported from Asia, with the emissions from transport adding to the overall environmental footprint of these hampers.

Implications

Deep changes need to be made within food systems, locally and globally, to address the enormous sustainability and health challenges. If hampers are to contribute towards sustainable diets and make healthier foods ac-

cessible to low-income households facing high rates of food insecurity and malnutrition, the hamper system must change. As a start, we need to challenge the retailers' and consumers' current understanding of what foods constitute 'the basic necessities'. It would also require introducing locally produced nutrient rich foods from sustainable agriculture including indigenous cereals and pulses like sorghum, cowpea, lentils and other types of beans. Vegetables, fresh and/or dry fruit, fish (canned, dried or smoked) could also help increase the diversity of diets. The key role of individual store managers in the assembling and selling of hampers, within a corporate-dominated supply chain, is important to recognise, as they may have the agency to start an initial alternative 'sustainable and healthy' hamper offering to customers.

Further research is needed to develop knowledge on the role of hampers in township food systems. In particular, a comparison of the consumption of hamper staples with other foods, as well as a deep evaluation of hamper consumers' diets, to understand whether hampers are being complemented with other nutritious foods, or how this can be achieved. In order to build on the research presented in this paper, an evaluation of possible substitute foods for hamper staples, which would provide better nutrition

and have a lower environmental impact is required. These considerations need to be balanced with finding products that provide an attractive hamper to low-income urban households by taking into account price, brand loyalty and also culture. Next, research could further help identify the possibilities for working with food retailers, in order to incentivise them to leverage their power and essential role in improving consumers' diets. Only by paying careful attention to variables including price, convenience and brand loyalty can we hope to not only improve the access of households to food, but to improve their access to high quality sustainable foods.

Acknowledgements

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Further Reading

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