



**Michail Rassool**

RECENTLY, a human rights activist friend related the story of an unemployed single mother of four living in a shack in Samora Machel, an informal settlement between Philippi and Mitchells Plain. Almost daily, she puts a little pot of water on a tiny two-ring gas stove and just stands there stirring, to create in her young children the impression that they are about to enjoy a meal.

She does so, the friend explained, because she feels it somehow makes their hunger a little more bearable.

Another single mother in Philippi, with whom my friend also worked, told her nine-year-old son to leave their shack and fend for himself on the streets because she could not afford to feed and care for both him and his baby sister.

Such stories are not uncommon in poverty-stricken areas – as many social workers and development activists working in these areas, particularly with families and street children, attest.

They are a part of life in a country where, 16 years ago, millions of poor people cast their votes for the first time, hoping for a new dispensation which would change their lives for the better.

Families such as these exist at the very bottom of the human food chain and their situation is made worse by various major local food distributors who have colluded in price-fixing, artificially pushing up the price often beyond the means of the poor. Price-fixing had become so invidious that the Competition Commission had to intervene.

Rights advocates, consumers, small businesses and supermarket chains largely see the record R1 billion penalty the commission imposed on Pioneer Foods as a victory for greater food security.

However, as recent grassroots demonstrations (protests waged by township-dwellers against lack of services as well as public sector wage disputes) indicate, many of the poor believe they are even worse off than they were under the previous regime.

Just before World Food Day on October 16, a hard-hitting, petition-based campaign was launched worldwide – 1billionhungry.org – to promote the plight of the poor globally. Most are rural-based living in

developing countries, including South Africa.

The petition, handed over to the UN on World Food Day, was accompanied by posters and billboards that showed malnourished children in cities across the world. As part of the campaign, civil society groups the world over were encouraged to devise proactive means to address hunger and malnutrition.

Campaigners say several factors are responsible for such widespread hunger – poverty, natural disasters, and lack of access among women to training, credit or land.

Conflict is another factor. So is lack of access among the poor to land or solid agricultural infrastructure to produce viable crops or keep livestock, as well as steady work that would otherwise allow them access to food.

The organisation I work for, Catholic Welfare and Development (CWD), has run intervention programmes in health and nutrition, economic development, youth empowerment, early childhood development, and more for over 40 years.

At the end of this month, CWD launches its pre-Christmas Buckets of Love campaign in which, with a donation of R120, members of the public can buy a plastic bucket filled with basic food items such as rice, sugar, mealie meal, samp and beans, soya, mixed vegetables, corned meat, meatballs, pilchards and peanut butter.

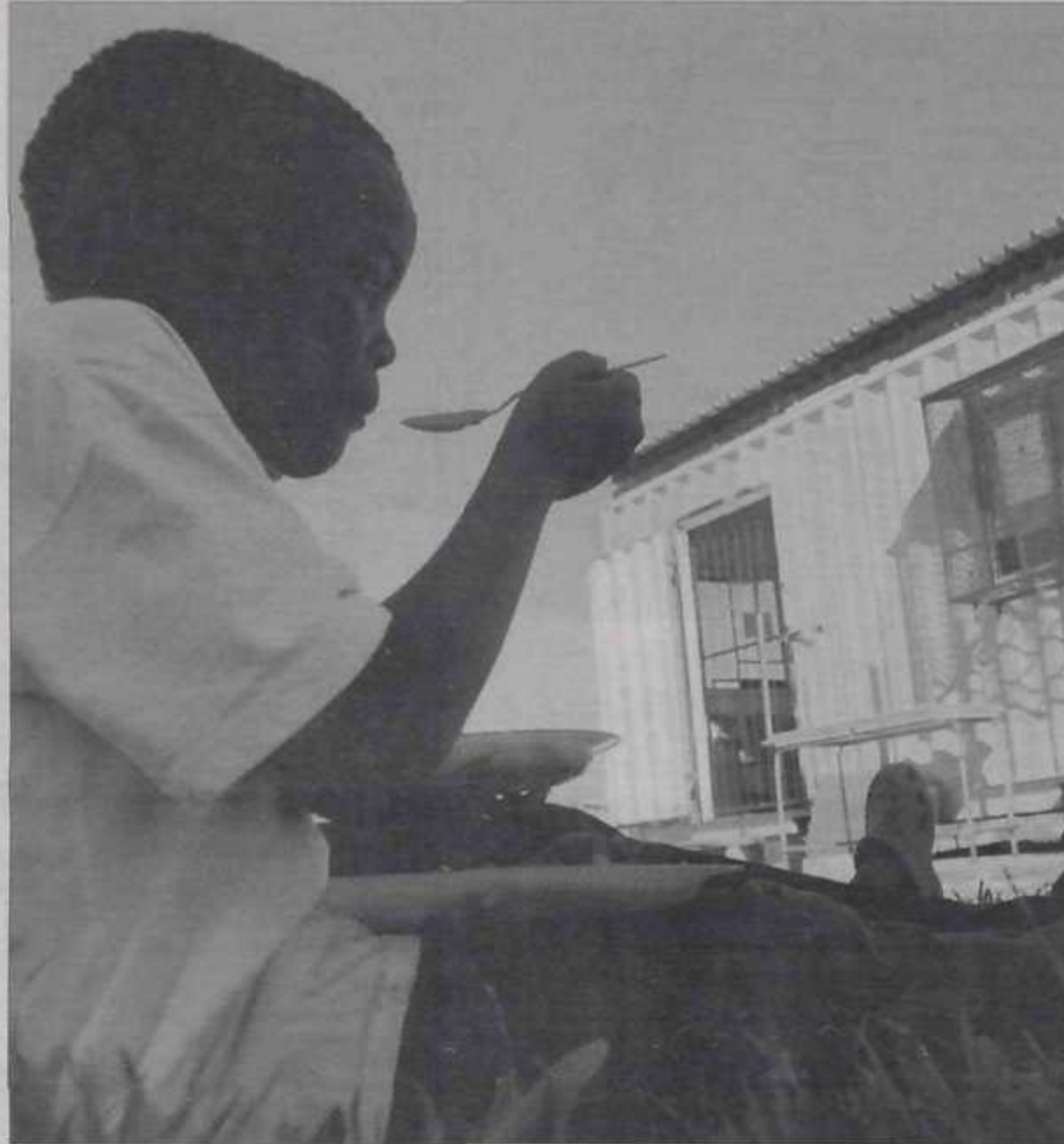
Also included are treats such as biscuits, tea and sweets. This is enough to feed a poor family of four for about a week over Christmas.

People, both locally and abroad, are encouraged to embrace the spirit of giving in a more meaningful way, purchasing a few buckets that are intended to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate.

These are distributed mainly from CWD's nine community development centres in various areas of Cape Town and other areas where hunger and privation are commonplace.

Although it is essentially short-term, the campaign does draw attention to the problem of hunger in the most impoverished communities of Cape Town.

According to the Human Sciences Research Council, 57 percent of individuals living in South Africa



**EMPTY BELLIES:** The most basic need, food, is something denied to most South African children, says the writer.

live below the poverty line, with Limpopo and the Eastern Cape being the provinces most affected.

Department of Education figures show that more than 5 million schoolchildren do not have ready access to nutritional food, which affects their capacity to concentrate and to learn.

Signs also indicate that a strengthening rand, which has rallied over the last year, and an

improving economy, accompanied by significant drops in inflation rates and agricultural crop prices, do not automatically translate into higher employment levels, a rise in living conditions or greater access to food and services.

The Labour Force Survey released by Stats SA at the end of October showed significant job losses in the last quarter, with more and more people becoming too dis-

couraged to seek work.

This has placed unemployment levels at around 40 percent (an unofficial estimate).

In his medium-term budget policy statement late last month, Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan said that while South Africa's economy was expected to grow by 3 percent this year, this was still too slow to tackle soaring unemployment. He said achieving five million jobs over 10

years needed growth of over 6 percent a year.

The "26th Regional Conference for Africa" in Luanda, Angola, in May, heard that a dramatic rise in food prices during 2007/2008 and the global economic downturn led to worsening poverty and food insecurity levels in low-income countries.

In Africa, where more than 50 percent of household income is spent on food, many households were put at risk of starvation.

Especially significant, the conference heard, was that recent declines in international market prices were poorly transmitted to local African markets, where prices still remained high due partly to structural deficiencies within Africa's agriculture sector, including poor productive capacity and weak market development. So rising food costs pose a direct threat to Africa's poor.

High levels of hunger still exist in South Africa long after the advent of democracy, with all its promises of sweeping change.

Is there enough political commitment at different levels of government to deal with this ongoing problem, and to reduce poverty levels?

After all, food insecurity still persists in the country despite a growing economy, with more than 34 percent of households living on less than R16 a day, which greatly impacts on their access to food.

Although the government has introduced several programmes to reduce hunger, malnutrition, food insecurity and child hunger continue. The 2008 General Household Survey indicated that 3.3 million children were living in households where child hunger was reported.

Angelo Timmers, manager of CWD's health and nutrition focus area, told me that his programme, between April 2009 and March 2010, fed approximately 1 340 400 people, particularly from its 53 War Against Malnutrition, Tuberculosis and Hunger (Warmth) kitchens (many of which have since exited the organisation and have become independent).

This, Timmers says, is a significant indicator of how Warmth, a project as old as CWD itself, impacts on decreasing food security in Cape Town.

Increased demands on the kitchens owing to challenges ushered in by a volatile economy and

the world financial crisis of two years ago, also meant that demand often outweighed supply.

Another long-standing CWD strategy to promote food security is establishing food gardens that are owned by communities themselves, a common staple of organisations located squarely in communities among the poor.

In line with the organisation's strategy of developing projects to the point where the affected people are able to sustain them on their own, several of these have become independent. Many still serve the communities they were established to serve, whether as a source of much-needed nourishment or income through sales of vegetable products.

1billionhungry.org campaigners say that lack of food is not the problem.

"Enough food is produced in the world today for everyone to be properly nourished and lead a healthy and productive life," one campaign blurb pointed out.

The hunger situation in Africa, in particular, is exacerbated by neonatal deaths, malaria, diarrhoea and pneumonia, which are cited as among the leading causes of death in children aged five and younger.

In South Africa, Aids-related deaths were identified as the biggest cause of child mortality (57 percent of child deaths in 2007 alone) by Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi in July.

At a UN summit in September, at which the eight millennium development goals of 192 UN member states (intended to halve world poverty by 2015) were reviewed, one of these – to reduce the mortality of children under the age of five by two-thirds – was said to be seriously lagging behind.

South Africa's take on child mortality, expressed in a report at the conference, was pilloried by rights activists attending the summit as largely flawed.

After all, a hungry nation cannot thrive or develop to its full capacity and take its place among leading nations of the world, however much those at senior leadership level may feel that it can.

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