

South African riots and food security: Why there's an urgent need to restore stability

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When South Africa's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, [addressed the nation](#) on July 12 amid violence and destruction of property in parts of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces, he warned of several risks if the situation was not resolved swiftly. One of them was food security.



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A lot has been written about the [acts of criminality](#) and the disregard for the rule of law that's swept parts of the country. Attention has also been given to the [underlying factors](#) that make the South African society so fragile. These include rising unemployment, inequality, corruption and poor service delivery.

In light of the ongoing state of turbulence it's important to take a closer look at food security issues.

South Africa is generally a [secure food country](#) at a national level. On top of this it is a net exporter of agricultural and processed food products. Last year agricultural exports reached the second-highest level on record of [US\\$10.2 billion](#) following a favourable production season.

But food security is about more than just having sufficient supplies. It also requires food accessibility, affordability, nutrition and stability over time.

This is where the challenge lies.

Continued disruption will affect supplies given the specifics of South Africa's food supply chains. KwaZulu-Natal, the epicentre of rioting and looting, is a major producer of various agricultural products such as sugar, milk and poultry products. The province also serves as an entry for imported food products, including wheat, rice, poultry products, and palm oils. Gauteng, the other province also most affected, is one of the major food processing hubs.

However, South Africa's food supply chains are not concentrated in one particular province. The biggest risk in the short term is the free movement of goods, including food and agricultural produce on the roads, specifically to and from the Durban port, the entry and exit point for agricultural imports and exports.

The other risk relates to increased income poverty because of the destruction of businesses.

Food production and consumption

In the same year as record production figures, the country experienced an increase in hunger, as identified in the [National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey \(NIDS-CRAM\)](#). But this wasn't necessarily an issue of food shortage or a rapid increase in food prices. It was mostly because people were out of work and had reduced means to buy food.

In 2021, South Africa again enjoyed another season of an [abundant harvest](#) following favourable summer rainfalls. This means that there are unlikely to be food shortages this year, but rather ample supplies for local consumption and export markets. This will be true for major grains, fruits, meat and various products.

Still, this doesn't mean everyone in the country is food secure. Or that prices won't rise rapidly.

There are long-standing challenges with income poverty in South Africa and the extent to which the poorest people are able to afford nutritious food. Still, food prices have only risen negligibly. South Africa's consumer food price inflation was at 6.8% year on year in May 2021, from 6.7% year on year in April, according to [data](#) from Statistics South Africa. This is not an alarmist rate as we have seen double-digit inflation rates in years of drought such as 2016, where consumer food price inflation averaged 10.8% year on year.

The [expectation](#) is that consumer food price inflation could in fact soften in the second half of 2021.

Therefore, Ramaphosa's emphasis on the risks to food security in his address on July 12 was primarily focused on KwaZulu-Natal. The main challenge is a disruption due to the looting spree, forcing companies to avoid volatile areas so as not to expose their property and employees to danger. It is far from clear how long the unrest in KwaZulu-Natal will last.

Menacingly, no one can tell with certainty if waves of protest will not spill over to other provinces in ways that disrupt business and supply chains and affect livelihoods. If the wave of violent protests continues unabated, it could pose a risk to food security, with the poorest people most affected as their employment and livelihoods will suffer. Small businesses in particular might be forced to close given the scale of the [continuing](#) violence.

But South Africans in other parts of the country that have not seen outbreaks of looting and violence should not panic about possible food shortages.

Production patterns

KwaZulu-Natal has been the most affected by the violence. But the province isn't the epicentre of agriculture in the country.

It isn't an anchor to the South African food system. Provinces in central South Africa – the Free State, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, North West and Limpopo – hold far more key positions. This is because of their abundant agricultural production and food processing capacity.

Maize meal and wheat flour – both staple to most South African diets – are primarily produced in the Free State, Mpumalanga, North West and the Western Cape. These provinces account for [over 60% of production of each of these grains](#), and process [over 50% of](#) them.

KwaZulu-Natal processes roughly [8% of the 11.5 million tonnes of maize](#) consumed in South Africa each year. In wheat, KwaZulu-Natal processes [roughly 21% of the annual consumption](#). The numbers vary per product, but the point here is that food supply chains are not concentrated in one particular province.

There is no risk of food shortage currently from other anchor provinces. But the risk comes when there is no fuel for transport within the country, [given the force majeure that the refinery in Durban has declared](#). It is South Africa's largest refinery, accounting for 35% of the country's refining capacity.

I highlight this because a large share of South Africa's food is transported by road.

In the case of trade, the current disruptions weigh even more heavily on businesses and farmers in agriculture. On average, [75% of the country's grains are transported by road annually](#). These are largely exported through the Durban harbour. The same is true for imported food products such as rice, wheat and palm oil, among other products. The volumes are also large for horticulture, specifically citrus, a leading exportable agricultural product in South Africa.

The [burning of trucks on the roads](#) and the blocked routes to the ports will prove costly to businesses and harm South Africa's reputation as a global supplier in various value chains. This will also negatively affect the province's food supply chains.

This needs urgent intervention, especially as agricultural products are perishable and the country is entering an export period for citrus in a year of a [record harvest](#).

As South African authorities grapple with achieving stability, there needs to be a deeper introspection about ensuring that the country creates an environment conducive for businesses to thrive. And that it addresses the social ills that underlie instability and disregard for the rule of law.

In the near term, South Africans should not panic about the food system. But authorities will need to act swiftly and assertively to restore stability.

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