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Transforming South Africa's unjust food system: an argument for decolonization

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual article argues for the need to reframe approaches to the South African food crisis in terms of decolonizing the food system. The point of departure is that the South African food system produces starkly unequal access to nutritious food, negative health outcomes, environmental destruction and a breakdown in social relations. The harms of this system disproportionately affect the poor, Black people and women. The historical roots of this unjust food system lie in colonialism, capitalism and apartheid, yet this coloniality continues in its modern global industrial incarnation. The colonial, capitalist values underpinning the food system have been normalized and have become hegemonic. This leaves little space for imagining – or fighting for – more just alternatives. Yet the framework of decolonization has the potential to create such a space to begin to challenge the hegemony of the current (neo)colonial/capitalist food system and replace the profit motive with the values of reciprocity, collectivity and inter-connectedness that underpinned pre-colonial food systems.

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1. Introduction

The South African food system produces starkly unequal access to nutritious foods, negative health outcomes (stunting, malnutrition, obesity and non-communicable diseases), environmental destruction, and a breakdown in social relations of reciprocity (Cock 2016; Ledger 2016). These harms disproportionately affect the poor, Black people, and women, in both urban and rural areas.

The deep injustices of the current South African food system have their origins in colonization and the imposition of capitalism. The food system – understood as the system that determines which foods are produced, how they are grown and how they are distributed and accessed – reflects the racialized power relations established during the colonial period, as well as the capitalist notion of food as a commodity produced for profit (Wylie 2001).

Tackling the injustices of the food system will require a decolonial approach. Traditional food security approaches tried to date include government support for urban agriculture and provision of emergency food parcels, charitable programs such as soup kitchens, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects such as school

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gardens or distribution of meals (Ruysenaar 2009; de Schutter 2012). These have not made a significant difference, because they only address the symptoms of hunger, without challenging the structural injustices of the food system. Beyond food interventions, the system of social grants has contributed to improved food access in many households, but likewise leaves the injustices of the food system intact.

This conceptual paper argues for the need to reframe food-related discussions (and interventions) in terms of decolonizing the food system. This represents a new approach to addressing the root causes of food injustice in South Africa, taking into account both the historical causes as well as ongoing structural factors that produce hunger, poor health and environmental devastation. The paper draws its framework from the international literature on food justice, Indigenous food sovereignty and decoloniality. It then combines historical research, as well as material from fieldwork with farmers and unemployed consumers in Johannesburg,[1] to demonstrate the relevance of the decolonial framework to the South African context. Thus, in terms of the South African literature on the food crisis, this is the first paper to take a decolonial approach. In terms of the food studies literature, this paper's preliminary examination of South Africa's food history and contemporary food crisis using the frameworks of food justice, decoloniality and Indigenous food sovereignty will enrich discussions on these frameworks, given the unique history of settler colonialism and apartheid in South Africa as compared to places where there has been more research on these topics (such as the United States or Aotearoa/New Zealand).

The next section lays out the conceptual framework of food justice, Indigenous food sovereignty and coloniality. Then, in Section 3, the paper provides some basic data on the injustices of the South African food system. In Section 4, it provides a brief sketch of the historical context of colonization and the imposition of a capitalist food system, and how these continue to shape the food system today. In Section 5, the paper addresses some of the obstacles to food system transformation, before proposing decolonization as a potential way forward in Section 6. Finally, the paper concludes with a brief discussion of the state of debates on decolonization in South Africa today, and how those might be expanded to include the food system.

2. Conceptual framework

This article utilizes three conceptual tools to think through the transformation of the South African food system. The first is food justice, which can be understood as "ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly" (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). As an analytical lens, food justice recognizes the structural racism and economic injustice of the food system, while as a movement, it seeks to ensure that marginalized communities have equal access to healthy food as well as control over decision-making regarding their food systems (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). The concept recognizes that race and class inequalities lead low-income communities and communities of color[2] to suffer disproportionately from the effects of poor food access, with higher levels of food insecurity, malnutrition as well as obesity and associated non-communicable diseases, than their more affluent, white counterparts (Macias 2008; Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009, 160–61). Although the concept of food justice was developed in the United States, it is

equally relevant in South Africa, where centuries of settler colonialism and decades of apartheid have created one of the most unequal societies in the world, reflected in a highly inequitable and unjust food system.

Food justice goes beyond the more commonly used concept of food security, defined as existing "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO 1996). While the concept of food security is useful for understanding the numbers of people who do not have access to sufficient food, and even for disaggregating that data to understand which groups are most affected, it is silent with regard to how food is produced, by whom, and who controls the food system (Schanbacher 2010). It does not address the structural racism or economic injustice of the food system, as food justice does.

A second concept used in this paper is food sovereignty – defined as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" – which goes beyond food security in several respects ("Nyéléni Declaration on Food Sovereignty 2007). It is a rights based framework, which addresses not only access to food but also power relations in food and agriculture systems. Further, in order to make peoples' decision-making rights meaningful, food sovereignty calls for "new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations ("Nyéléni Declaration on Food Sovereignty 2007). In other words, the project of food sovereignty extends beyond transformation of the food system to include a broader social transformation (Jarosz 2014, 176), in the recognition that under the current neoliberal capitalist world order, the desired food system transformation may not be possible.

Indigenous scholars and activists around the world have further developed a specifically Indigenous concept of food sovereignty, which incorporates not only rights, but also the responsibilities that Indigenous peoples have toward their environment, grounded in relations of reciprocity and respect (Coté 2016). In addition, while the question of where the sovereignty lies in food sovereignty has sparked debate (Iles and de Wit 2014; Clark 2015), Indigenous food sovereignty insists on the self-determination of Indigenous peoples. The Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Canada developed four principles underpinning Indigenous food sovereignty. The first, sacred or divine sovereignty, recognizes that food is a gift from the Creator and thus emphasizes the long-standing sacred responsibilities of Indigenous peoples to nurture interdependent relationships with the land, plants and animals that provide them with food. The second principle, participation, refers to the day-to-day practice of maintaining such relationships. The third, self-determination, refers to autonomy and decision-making powers, while the fourth, legislation and policy, calls for changes in colonial governance that will make space for Indigenous values and practices (Morrison 2011, 100–101).

Much of the literature on Indigenous food sovereignty comes from settler colonies (such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, or Peru) where Indigenous peoples are in the minority and do not hold sovereignty or administrative control over their (former) territories. In South Africa, there has been democratic, majority rule since 1994, yet the structures and power relations of colonialism remain

entrenched in many aspects of life, including the food system. For this reason, I employ a third concept, coloniality, along with its other side, decoloniality. Coloniality "refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (Maldonado-Torres 2007). Rather than viewing the current era as post-colonial, based on the handover of political power by former colonial rulers, this concept recognizes that the patterns of capitalist, racial, patriarchal power put in place under colonialism continue to inform international relations as well as all aspects of life in formerly colonized territories. A further distinction must be drawn between *colonization*, as an event or episode in which foreign rule is imposed, and *colonialism*, which is a wider process of transformation of social, economic and other relations between the colonizer and the colonized, and which may outlast the formal political period of colonization (Ekeh, 1983 cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015).

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni has drawn attention to the tradition of African thinking on decoloniality, drawing on *Ngũgĩ* wa Thiong'o's concept of dismemberment to make sense of the physical, cultural and epistemological fragmentation that colonialism entailed. Following from this, "Decoloniality can be understood as an overarching project of re-membering aimed at addressing problems of colonization of the mind, alienation and fragmentation … a restorative recovery project" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 32). This concept is highly applicable in the South African context, where centuries of colonial rule, followed by white minority rule under apartheid, have perpetuated the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 33).

The coloniality of power refers to the ongoing domination by Euro-American countries (and increasingly, their private corporations) in a globalized, racialized world-system, with regard to the international division of labor and the accumulation of capital (Quijano 2000). The coloniality of knowledge refers to the privileging of Eurocentric knowledge systems and ways of knowing over any other knowledges – in particular, the Eurocentric rationality and dualism (separation between mind and body, "man" and nature) resulting from Descartes "*Cogito ergo sum*" (I think therefore I am) (Grosfoguel 2007). Finally, the coloniality of being refers to the way Eurocentrism affected colonized peoples' agency, self-image and intersubjective relations (Maldonado-Torres 2007). Or as Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko (2002) succinctly put it, "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."

3. Context: South Africa's unjust food system

Over twenty-five years into democracy, the patriarchal, capitalist and environmentally exploitative systems put in place under colonialism and apartheid have created an extremely unjust food system, which is causing hunger, malnutrition and diet-related diseases for the majority of the population while generating billions of Rand in profits for a few large national and multinational corporations. The harms of this food system are disproportionately suffered by poor Black South Africans, especially women, children and the elderly, a clear indication of food injustice.

A food system can be understood as "an interdependent web of activities that include the production, processing, distribution, wholesaling, retailing, consumption, and

disposal of food" (Sumner 2011, cited by Sumner, McMurtry, and Renglich 2014, 48). In South Africa, the food system is highly concentrated, with only a few actors dominating at each stage from the supply of agricultural inputs through production, processing, distribution and finally food retail (Greenberg 2016). The Competition Commission has found high levels of concentration in the food and agro-processing sector, and has investigated cartels, anti-competitive practices and barriers to entry in other food-related sectors (Buthelezi, Mtani, and Mncube 2018). As a result of this concentration, small-scale producers, processors and retailers struggle to compete (Njisane 2019), while workers at each stage of the chain – from farm workers to grocery cashiers – tend to be highly exploited (Greenberg 2015).

South Africa's industrial food system (the result of colonial and apartheid policies to be discussed in the next section) is characterized by large-scale farms using chemical inputs and high-tech machinery to produce monoculture crops that are then processed into unhealthy foods. The production aspect of this system produces pollution, carbon emissions and soil erosion, while using high levels of energy and water (Greenberg 2015). These environmental harms are not evenly distributed – farm workers are some of the lowest paid laborers in South Africa, and women seasonal farmworkers often suffer exposure to toxic pesticides while working, without receiving proper health and safety information, washing facilities or protective clothing (Devereux 2020; Dalvie 2010). While large-scale farms are able to sell to the major supermarkets, as well as exporting their products, small-scale farmers struggle to access markets for their produce (Ledger 2016).

In terms of food processing and storage, a few large firms dominate this aspect of the food system as well (Greenberg 2015). In several different sectors, firms have been found to be engaged in uncompetitive practices, collusion or price-fixing. For example, the Competition Commission found three large firms – Pioneer Foods, Tiger Brands and Premier Foods – guilty of colluding on bread prices, which negatively affected poor consumers (Steyn 2013; Berkowitz 2013). The Competition Commission has also tackled cartels in the wheat, maize and poultry sectors (Njisane 2019).

The food retail sector is likewise characterized by concentration and unfair practices. A recent enquiry by the Competition Commission into the grocery retail sector found that the large grocery retailers exclude smaller independent stores through unfair property lease agreements, and that their excessive buyer power also disadvantages small-scale producers seeking to market their products (Njisane 2019).

With regard to consumption, the majority of South Africans cannot afford a healthy diet. The estimated cost of a healthy diet for a household with four members was R3234.69 in October 2022, while the monthly salary for a worker earning the minimum wage would be R 3895.92, which supported an average of 3.9 people (Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity 2022). Clearly, with housing, transport, electricity and other necessary expenses, the minimum wage is insufficient to purchase a healthy diet. Another indication that South Africans cannot afford nutritious foods is the food poverty line,[3] set at the absurdly low level of R663 per month in 2022. At this level, 13.8 million South Africans (25.2% of the population) live below the food poverty line. The reference basket used to calculate the food poverty line includes only four vegetables (cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes and onions) and no fruit at all – a clear indication that it does not represent a nutritious diet. A third indication is the value of the child support grant, currently R480

per child per month. A basic nutritious diet for a child costs approximately R825.31 per month. In other words, leaving aside all other expenses such as school fees, stationery or clothing, the child support grant still provides less than 60% of the cost of a healthy diet (Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity 2022). The Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP), which developed a "thrifty healthy food basket" for a reference family of two working adults and two children, estimates that 50% of South African households cannot afford the R2479 cost of this basket (BFAP 2020).

With limited food budgets, low-income South Africans subsist on unhealthy diets, high in sugar and processed starch (bread and maize meal) but low in essential nutrients. The effects of these unhealthy diets are seen in high levels of stunting amongst South African children (36% in the lowest income quintile), a sign of childhood malnutrition that carries lifelong consequences for physical and cognitive development (Statistics South Africa 2017). At the same time, levels of obesity are rising amongst both adults and children. The simultaneous presence of overweight and micronutrient deficiencies in the same individuals indicates a situation of "hidden hunger." Further, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease are on the rise in South Africa, partly as a result of unhealthy diets (Department of Health n.d.).

As with other harms in the food system, malnutrition and hunger disproportionately affect low-income Black South Africans. For example, while the unemployment rate is 4.4 times higher for Black South Africans, levels of hunger in Black-headed households are 8.3 times higher than white-headed households (Statistics South Africa 2022b, 2019). Looking at the same statistics in terms of gender, women and men have similar rates of unemployment, but female-headed households with young children are 1.3 times more likely to experience hunger than male-headed households (Statistics South Africa 2019, 2022b).

Beyond the inability to afford nutritious foods, most South Africans are also subjected to dangerous agro-chemicals and genetically modified (GM) foods, without the freedom to choose. Research on commonly consumed maize and soy products in South Africa found glyphosate residues on 67% of them (Viljoen, Koortzen, and Tantuan 2021); in addition to other health risks, glyphosate was recently designated a probable carcinogen by the World Health Organization (Herbst 2019). The major brands of bread and maize meal, two major components of low-income South Africans' diets, have been found to contain GM ingredients, leaving low-income consumers with no access to non-GM staple foods (African Centre for Biosafety 2014). Wealthier South Africans can opt out of these products by selecting more expensive, organic options at specialist shops.

The South African food system unequally distributes benefits and harms along lines of race, class and gender. The majority of benefits go to the shareholders of national and international food manufacturers and retailers, which generate profits in the billions of Rand while millions of South Africans cannot afford sufficient, nutritious food. This is a gross injustice, as well as a violation of South Africans' right to access sufficient food, guaranteed in section 27 of the Constitution (and section 28 for children). The origins of this unjust system, which I will refer to as the (neo)colonial/capitalist food system, lie in the patterns of domination and exploitation introduced under colonialism, which remain largely intact today.

4. Coloniality of the food system

From Jan van Riebeeck's establishment of the Company's Garden in 1652 as a food replenishment stop for Dutch East India Company (VOC) ships plying the spice route, to the British scorched-earth destruction of crops and cattle kraals in their wars against the amaXhosa in the Eastern Cape, food has always been an integral and explicit part of the colonial project in what is now South Africa (Karsten 1951; Cock 2018; Legassick 2010). The process of colonization involved forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their land, alienation from their traditional foodways and eventually forced incorporation into the cash economy and wage labor through taxes (Wylie 2001). The migrant labor system disrupted traditional food production and preparation practices by separating families – with men going away to work in mines and on farms, women and children were left to handle all food-related tasks on limited and often poor-quality land in the reserves (Smit 2001). From the beginning of colonization, the pattern of dispossession and exploitation of Black labor was established, which continues into the present.

Colonists imported and then cultivated flora and fauna from Europe and other colonies for food and other purposes, displacing indigenous flora and fauna and transforming the landscape from the one that had provided food to the original inhabitants (Ma Rhea 2017). Dutch and other European settlers were allocated tracts of land to farm cereals such as wheat, barley and maize, fruit orchards, vineyards and other European, American and Asian foods to supply VOC ships, to feed the settlement and later for export to Europe (Fleischer 2011).

The transformation of the landscape through the clearing of indigenous plants in order to cultivate imported ones was facilitated by policies that favored European farmers and the crops they grew. In the case of wheat, for example, the colonial government imposed controls on wheat and flour imports in 1826 to protect local farmers. Subsequent policies controlled prices to increase consumption, and provided subsidies to farmers to offset input costs (Stanwix 2012; Vink 2012). Sugar plantations were established early in KwaZulu Natal, with the hopes of producing enough for export (Bleek 1965, 35). With the Native Land Act of 1913, the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936 and the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1937, Black farmers lost access to most of the country's arable land, to sharecropping and tenancy opportunities and to markets for their produce. The apartheid government's "agricultural betterment" schemes forcibly relocated many Black communities, disrupting social relationships as well as negatively affecting agricultural production (de Wet and Patrick 1983). Through these and other segregationist laws, white farmers were assured of dominance of the agricultural sector while Black farmers were left with only marginal lands in the "reserves," with many forced to become wage laborers on the mines or white commercial farms (Vink 2012).

Beyond introducing new foods at the expense of indigenous ones, colonization also disrupted traditional, communal food production practices and the values that underpinned them, such as reciprocity and kinship with the natural world. First, and most dramatically, this happened through displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Together with the imposition of taxes, this forced households into the cash economy, through production for the market and/or wage labor on white farms, in mines or in cities (Wylie 2001). In addition, with production for the market instead of for home consumption, many Black farmers shifted from growing traditional grains such as

sorghum to maize, which had a higher market value and was easier to produce (McCann 2005). In some places, the cooperative work of sorghum production – exemplified by the cooperative work parties or *ilima* – were replaced by more individualistic maize farming (Tavuyanago, Mutami, and Mbenene 2010). Colonial shifts in labor and diet were thus also linked to the deterioration of cultural practices around cooperative food production, food sharing and the values of reciprocity that underpinned them. Similarly, labor migration left far fewer people to farm the land or celebrate traditional agricultural rituals such as the first fruits ceremony, traditionally an important community ritual that expressed gratitude for the harvest and cemented social relations (Krige 1931; Quin 1959, 22).

From the beginning, Europeans tended to express contempt for indigenous foods, an aspect of cultural racism that continues to plague the South African food system (Wylie 2001). For example, in the early 19th century Lichtenstein (1815, 193–94) wrote of an Indigenous group in the Karoo who ate serpents, lizards, ants and grasshoppers, as well as succulent plants for water, that "they might almost be supposed to have neither taste, smell, or feeling; no disgust is ever evinced by them at even the most nauseous kind of food, at least what would to us be the most nauseous . . . " He goes on to judge that "there is not perhaps any class of savages upon the earth that lead lives so near those of the brutes . . . and who are consequently so little capable of cultivation" (Lichtenstein 1815, 194). Criticizing the foods of Indigenous people was a common trope used in much of the writing of early sailors, colonists and others to indicate the "savagery" of the natives as compared to the "civilized" Europeans.

This form of contempt, of viewing European foods and eating habits as superior, was shared by missionaries, settlers and administrators, who sought to change the food cultivation and eating habits of Indigenous peoples when they came into regular contact with them (Janer 2007; Kuhnlein and Receveur 1996; Mosley 2004). With migration to urban areas, Black South Africans often lost access to traditional, wild-harvested foods. At the same time they encountered new, "European" foods, and in the case of many migrants, such as mine workers and domestic servants, their white employers provided meals as part of their remuneration (Hellmann 1936). Later, with the industrialization of the food system, food manufacturers advertised their products as "modern" and appealing, compared to the old-fashioned, backward foods people had consumed in rural areas (Cloete and Idsardi 2013; Modi 2003). In addition, urban working hours and transport requirements led to changes in time for, and allocation of, household food tasks, which led to a shift toward convenience foods (Rogerson 1986; A. Viljoen, Botha, and Boonzaaier 2005). As a result, many urban residents have come to see traditional foods as poverty foods and aspire to eat meat and fast food, which have higher social status (Kroll 2017).

The current (neo)colonial/capitalist food system in South Africa, dominated by a few national and transnational corporations, reflects the Eurocentric, capitalist and patriarchal patterns of domination put in place during colonialism. As one of the leading decolonial thinkers, Walter Mignolo (2007, 160) pointed out, the corporate control of the food supply "is one of the most terrifying aspects of today's uncontrolled capitalism . . . and as such one of the most salient aspects of the reproduction of coloniality of power." The power of multinational, oligopolistic seed and input companies like Bayer (Monsanto) or food manufacturers like Nestlé is not so different from that of the Dutch

East India Company three hundred years ago. Thus the need for a decolonial approach to the food crisis.

5. Obstacles to food system transformation

The most fundamental obstacle to overcoming food injustice is the fact that it has become so normalized that people do not see it as unjust. The hegemony of the (neo) colonial/capitalist food system prevents people from seeing the taken-for-granted assumptions about food as a commodity that underpin it. This acceptance of food as a commodity and a source of corporate profits was apparent when I interviewed a food gardener in Alexandra township, Johannesburg, who lived on a government pension of R1410 per month. When asked if big companies like Shoprite (the country's largest supermarket chain) should help people who are hungry, she replied: "Yeah, I think they must help, but *if they've got money*. Because also *they must get something* and then they can manage to help people" (Interview 2015.02.26, emphasis added). This was said about a company that made several billion Rand in profit, and had one of the highest CEO to worker pay gaps of any South African company (Business Tech 2017). A similar acceptance of the industrial food system is apparent in the many government and NGO support programs for urban agriculture and agro-processing, which focus on entrepreneurship and incorporation of small-scale producers and processors into the existing system, rather than seeking to challenge that system (Greenberg 2016; Philip 2010).

Linked to the acceptance of food as a commodity, is a pervasive blaming of victims of hunger. Instead of recognizing the structural conditions that leave half of the South African population food insecure, the dominant narrative portrays those who are hungry as lazy. For example, when I asked who is to blame for hunger, one gardener told me:

> *It's from their self. It's not the government. Because it's the one who's supposed to wake up and find some job, anything, to try. Like us we are not working. We are working here in the garden, we are volunteering. We don't get paid, we don't have stipend. We don't have nothing, but we're trying to make, to plant a vegetable to sell to get that little money to buy a mealie meal and to get spinach to eat. We are trying to survive. But other people they don't try anything, they just stay at home.* (Interview 2015.02.23).

Almost every low-income food gardener I interviewed told me some version of this narrative – blaming the victims of hunger rather than recognizing the structural impediments to accessing food or the income that would enable people to buy it. Seeing social problems as individual failures of entrepreneurship is a classic aspect of neoliberal mentalities (Brown 2006).

A second aspect of the unjust food system that has been completely normalized is the unhealthy diet of the majority of South Africans, which is high in sugar and processed starch (maize meal and bread) but low in fresh fruits and vegetables. When I conducted food diary exercises with urban farmers, it was clear that most participants' diets were lacking in nutrients and low in dietary diversity. Some were even deficient in calories. Yet when asked if they would change their diets if they won the lottery, the majority said they would not. Most were used to, and happy with, the kinds of foods they currently eat, even though these are not adequate for optimal health. The participants' low levels of fruit and vegetable consumption were considered completely normal and not viewed as a problem.

In Johannesburg, the transition toward relatively unhealthy diets low in diversity began with the earliest waves of labor migration to the city (Hellmann 1936), so these diets have become quite taken-for-granted as the norm. Further, as discussed earlier, traditional/indigenous foods are often disdained as "poor peoples' foods" while highly processed foods are seen as modern and desirable. This challenge is not unique to South Africa. Based on work in Haiti, Steckley points out that "we need to consider how colonial legacies, and processes of globalization and Westernization in many contexts can influence food preferences in ways that perpetuate social inequality and undermine healthy and pro-poor food systems" (Steckley 2016, 27).

A third challenge is the fact that most South Africans are unaware they have a right to food, contained in section 27 of the Constitution. The South African Human Rights Commission has found low levels of awareness with regard to the right to food, as well as to the extent of malnutrition (South African Human Rights Commission n.d.). When I asked urban farmers about this, almost none had heard of it. Even when I attempted to explain, people struggled to understand. As one put it: "A right to eat, but where will we get the food to eat? You'll go to Spar [supermarket] and say, 'I want to eat,' yet you don't have money to buy food" (interview 2015.02.25). This comment captures the challenge of mobilizing people to demand a right that they don't know they have, and which they can't imagine in practical terms.

The hegemony of the current colonial/capitalist food system has made other alternatives "unthinkable" for most people. People must first see the injustice of the system, and then they must be able to imagine alternatives (McMichael 2010). One suggested path to transformation suggests that part of the value in alternative food practices (such as urban agriculture cooperatives or community kitchens) lies in their ability to make new configurations of people and things possible, ultimately "to make the un-thought thinkable" (Carolan 2013, 423). In this argument, Carolan suggests that alternative imaginaries *follow* alternative practices, rather than the other way around. This suggests a need for alternative food production and distribution practices that can lead people to question the current (neo)colonial/capitalist system. The next section considers whether framing these alternative practices as part of a process of decolonization might help to create space to imagine a more just and sustainable food system based on more traditional values such as reciprocity, gratitude and inter-connection, rather than on profits.

6. Decolonizing food systems

More than twenty-five years into democracy, South Africa's current food system continues to reflect the highly unequal patterns of power and exploitation from the colonial era, both in terms of domestic inequalities and in terms of South Africa's place in the global food system. Creating a more just, healthy and sustainable food system requires radical transformation, not just tinkering. In light of recent calls for decolonization in other spheres of South African life, and movements by Indigenous peoples in other places to decolonize their food systems, it is worth exploring decolonization as a framework for transformation.

Studies from different parts of the world have shown how colonization had serious health consequences by cutting Indigenous peoples off from their traditional foods, (Coté 2016; Whyte 2016; Kuhnlein and Receveur 1996). Research also indicates that returning

to traditional food practices can promote health and healing, in addition to regenerating the environment and strengthening indigenous cultural identities (Mundel and Chapman 2010; LaDuke 1994; Kimmerer 2013).

Indigenous movements in the Americas have called for Indigenous food sovereignty, and for the necessary step of decolonization of the food system (Grey and Patel 2015). Both of these concepts move beyond simply addressing what foods are produced, how and by whom, to call for a shift in the fundamental values, or cosmovision, underpinning the entire food system. As one Indigenous North American scholar explained, this "entails decreasing dependence on the globalized food system and revitalizing indigenous food systems and practices through reaffirmation of spiritual, emotional and physical relationships to the lands, waters, plants, and all living things that have sustained Indigenous communities and cultures" (Coté 2016). In other words, instead of a profit-motivated food system, the production, distribution and consumption of food would be rooted in communal/commons-based systems and in the concept of reciprocity, not only between humans but also between humans and the natural world (Figueroa-Helland, Thomas, and Aguilera 2018).

In Canada, for example, the *O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree* nation (OPCN) is advancing Indigenous food sovereignty through traditional food harvesting and production practices. In the OPCN tradition, food is more than a commodity; it is "a set of relationships" between people and the natural world (Kamal et al. 2015, 566). Community members have established a program, "food from the land" (*Ithinto Mechisowin*, IMP) to promote access to healthy, culturally appropriate foods. IMP also empowers Cree youth and strengthens their cultural identity through outdoor food harvesting activities and Elders teaching them Cree values and principles (Kamal et al. 2015, 567). Through the promotion of traditional foods and traditional food practices, IMP promotes decolonization and strengthens the Indigenous notion of food not as a commodity but as "the bond between people, health and land" (Kamal et al. 2015, 570).

Similarly, Indigenous people in the United States view the land not a resource to be exploited or property to be owned, but rather as "a community of respected non-human persons to whom we humans have a responsibility" (Kimmerer 2013, 338). In Peru, the philosophy of *Allin Kawsay* or good living carries four key values relevant to decolonizing the food system: *ayni* (reciprocity), *ayllu* (collectivity), *yanantin and masintin* (equilibrium) and *chaninchay* (solidarity) (Huambachano 2018, 10). Likewise in New Zealand/Aotearoa, there are four key values underpinning the Maori relationship to food: *Koha* (gift/reciprocity), *Tikanga* (ethical values), *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship), and *Wairuatanga* (spirituality) (Huambachano 2018, 11; see also Hutchings et al. 2012). In these and many other examples of Indigenous peoples' struggles to decolonize their food systems and promote Indigenous food sovereignty, we see underlying values of interconnection, responsibility and stewardship that are fundamentally at odds with the individualism, profit orientation and exploitation underpinning the (neo)colonial/capitalist food system.

In South Africa, traditional food systems were underpinned by similar notions of reciprocity, collectivity and spirituality. Customs such as the collective work party (*ilima* in Zulu and Xhosa; *letšema* in Tswana), still practiced in some rural areas but much less than in the past, involved community members coming together to assist each other at crucial parts of the agricultural cycle, such as planting or harvesting (Quin 1959;

McAllister 2005; Tavuyanago, Mutami, and Mbenene 2010). As "Gogo Qho," an older farmer in rural KwaZulu-Natal, recounts it, she was raised in a community in which people saved and shared seeds and worked together in a system based on cooperation and self-sufficiency. Gogo Qho was raised with a worldview in which all living things are connected, in which people could understand from birds where to find honey or when to expect the arrival of pests, and knew which wild plants to gather for food, medicine, fuel and other uses (Interview, 2019.09.04).

Food was also linked to ritual, as in the case of first fruits ceremonies or harvest ceremonies, which involved expressing gratitude for the bounty of the land (Krige 1931; Gluckmann 1935). One participant in a recent first fruits ceremony in neighboring Zimbabwe explained that after partaking of the new harvest, the remaining seeds were left behind at the site: "The elders said, these [seeds] don't become just plants, . . . they become part of our community, because they link us, we who are alive, to those who have gone, those who are our soil, our ancestors. . . . the elders say, the plants are not plants, they become part of the family" (Gundidza 2021).

While the notion of decolonizing the food system is relatively new to South Africa, there are individuals and organizations promoting indigenous foods and traditional ways of producing and preparing them. Organizations such as Earthlore Foundation are promoting the revival of seed saving, ancestral crop varieties and broader indigenous knowledge systems and ecological governance mechanisms (Earthlore Foundation n.d.). Some farmers likewise promote indigenous foods for their taste, cultural relevance and healthfulness, along with more environmentally sustainable traditional farming practices (Silandela and Sithole 2019; Ngcoya and Kumarakulasingam 2017). South African chefs too, are moving away from an exclusive focus on European cuisines to incorporate more indigenous ingredients and traditional dishes into their repertoires (Govender-Ypma 2018; Mqwebu 2019). Yet for the most part, the reengagement with traditional farming practices and indigenous ingredients remains a fringe phenomenon, and even then, rarely underpinned by the traditional values or worldview that connected people to each other and to their natural environment in the past. Most of these activities are not calls for decolonization and radical transformation of the food system.

7. Conclusion

The crisis of the South African food system in many ways reflects the crisis of the global industrial food system, which similarly produces hunger, obesity, non-communicable diseases, environmental devastation and other harms. The ongoing coloniality of the food system is a global phenomenon, with a small number of corporations (mostly headquartered in the United States or Europe) dominating most aspects of the food value chain. These corporations generate huge profits through the production and sale of unhealthy foods, while millions of people around the world cannot afford nutritious diets.

Decolonization is increasingly a global call, from Indigenous peoples around the world. These calls recognize not only the global challenge, but also the local specificities of plants, animals, geography, climate and history that contributed to the unique food systems of each place and culture. Thus while South Africa's food crisis is linked to a global food crisis, it also reflects the country's unique history of

colonialism and apartheid. The first step, for decolonization of the food system, must be a recognition of its ongoing coloniality alongside attempts to revalorize traditional and indigenous food systems. This will require significantly more research on the history of South Africa's food system and the impacts of colonialism and apartheid.

In South Africa, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student movements called attention to the need to decolonize universities. Students and their allies called for decolonization of the curriculum, ways of teaching and learning, as well as the personnel and physical infrastructure of the universities (Chinguno et al. 2017). Academics have begun to consider what decolonization of the university, and their respective fields, might look like (Omarjee 2018; Miller et al. 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012; Madlingozi 2018). Further, decolonial scholars are advancing new research methodologies that center the previously marginalized voices of Indigenous women who hold traditional knowledge, for example, of plants for food and medicine (Bam 2021).

While the concept of decolonizing the food system has not yet gained prominence in South Africa, the existence of a debate around decolonization in other spheres of life suggests that the concept resonates. In light of the deep injustices of the current (neo) colonial/capitalist food system, a decolonial framework is needed to open up space for discussion of alternatives that draw from the indigenous wisdom of the past to create a more just and sustainable future.

Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of the fieldwork with urban farmers, see Kesselman, Ngcoya and Casale (2021). For the work with urban consumers, see Kesselman (2022).
2. The term "communities of color" is generally used in the food justice literature from the United States to refer to nonwhite, minority populations such as African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic people and Native Americans. In South Africa, the term "Black" is often used to refer to all historically-marginalized groups, though these were broken down into Black, Colored and Indian under apartheid race laws.
3. The food poverty line is the amount of money that an individual would need to be able to purchase the minimum required daily calorie/energy intake to survive. This is also referred to as the "extreme" poverty line (Statistics South Africa 2022a).

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