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HOW TO CITE:

Drimie S. The essential role of interdisciplinary approaches in addressing hunger and social justice: The 2024 International Social Justice Conference and Summit in Cape Town. *S Afr J Sci.* 2025;121(3/4), Art. #20624. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/20624>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

KEYWORDS:

affordable and nutritious foods

PUBLISHED:

7 March 2025



The essential role of interdisciplinary approaches in addressing hunger and social justice: The 2024 International Social Justice Conference and Summit in Cape Town

Significance:

- Food insecurity in South Africa represents a critical social justice issue in which hunger has become ‘normalised’ along racial lines due to historical inequities, demonstrating how food access intersects with systemic racism and inequality.
- Legal frameworks and rights-based approaches, like the Equal Education legal case during COVID-19, show how social justice interventions can protect vulnerable populations’ right to food, particularly for marginalised children and communities.
- Evidence from successful cases like Brazil’s Zero Hunger Campaign and South Africa’s Equal Education case shows that interdisciplinary interventions – combining legal, educational, health, and social protection measures – are more effective than single-domain approaches in addressing food insecurity.

The 2024 International Social Justice Conference¹ and Summit² in Cape Town highlighted a critical issue in addressing food insecurity: the need to move beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and adopt interdisciplinary approaches. Adopting approaches that combine rigorous interdisciplinary research with effective research-policy linkages and social learning is essential for tackling the complex challenges of food insecurity in South Africa and beyond.

Overview

The Conference revealed how hunger intersects with multiple systems and social issues, exemplifying the “knot of multiple stressors” that characterise food insecurity. Despite South Africa being an upper-middle-income country with national food self-sufficiency and comprehensive social protection systems, it has made limited progress in addressing various dimensions of food insecurity at household and individual levels over the past three decades. This ‘paradox’ suggests that technical solutions within individual domains – whether legal, agricultural or economic – are insufficient when operating in isolation.³

The Conference highlighted that this paradox stems from hunger being a multidimensional systems issue with economic, social and environmental determinants that transcend the mere availability or production of food. As Chris Nisson, Chairperson of the South African Human Rights Commission, emphasised, the right to food has six components built into it in both international and domestic law, including:

*availability (of food at national level); access (at household level); in a sustainable way (accessibility and availability extend to present and future generations); of quantity and quality; free from adverse substances; and possess adequate amount of requisite nutrients for human dietary needs; and culturally adequate food.*⁴

Single-sector interventions have consistently proven inadequate in addressing the multifaceted challenge of food security. Historical efforts have often been hampered by three limited approaches: the vertically sectoral approach, which operates in isolation through singular departmental lenses; the technological treatment approach, which favours technocratic solutions that address symptoms rather than root causes; and the short-view approach, predominantly favoured by donors in recent decades, which includes measures like food aid that, whilst providing immediate relief, may fail to create sustainable change and can even produce unintended negative consequences.⁵ These single-issue solutions have fallen well short of addressing what is, fundamentally, a complex social challenge.

The Conference and Summit reiterated repeatedly: food security challenges cannot be addressed through disciplinary or single-sector approaches alone.

An ongoing research study presented at the Conference by Stephen Devereux suggests that one explanation for this failure might be the ‘normalisation’ of hunger – a social process by which conditions that should be considered abnormal and unacceptable become accepted and tolerated as normal.⁶ In South Africa, this normalisation has taken on a distinctly racial character, with hunger being closely correlated with poverty and race due to the country’s history of colonialism, slavery and apartheid. This complex social process cannot be addressed through single-discipline approaches, as it involves historical, psychological, sociological, economic, and political dimensions that must be considered together. Hunger, while biologically universal, is socially determined through race, class, and status intersections.⁷

Evidence for interdisciplinary success

The Conference and Summit showcased successful examples of cross-boundary interventions, notably Judge Sulet Potterill’s discussion of the Equal Education case, which demonstrated how legal intervention, in conjunction with educational and public health perspectives, successfully protected children’s nutritional rights during the



COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ This case exemplified how cross-disciplinary approaches can achieve what single-domain interventions cannot.

Brazil's Zero Hunger Campaign was another powerful example. By integrating political commitment, social protection, agricultural support, and public health measures, Brazil reduced child stunting from 20% to 7% between 1989 and 2019.⁹ This aligns with the need for approaches that span disciplines and sectors while engaging stakeholders in joint learning processes.

The role of academic institutions in fostering interdisciplinarity

The proceedings highlighted academic institutions' unique position in facilitating inter- and transdisciplinary approaches. This resonates with a vision of academic institutions serving as bridges between different knowledge domains and sectors.

The Conference itself modelled this approach by bringing together academic institutions, government departments, international organisations, civil society organisations, private sector representatives, legal professionals, public health experts, and environmental scientists.¹⁰ This diverse participation enabled what Nomakwezi Mzilikazi of Rhodes University advocated for: moving beyond "becoming experts at admiring the problem" toward developing integrated solutions.¹¹

The importance of translating academic research into practical solutions was exemplified by the Department of Science and Innovation–National Research Foundation Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS) held at the University of Western Cape¹², which works closely with a range of other academic institutions and partners across sectors. Another was Stellenbosch University's Food Lab, which was discussed in a paper by Kennedy Dzama¹³.

These demonstrate how academic institutions can serve as bridges between different knowledge domains and sectors.

Moving forward: Implementing interdisciplinary action

The Conference produced a framework for strengthening interdisciplinary approaches through institutionalised cross-sector collaboration, integrated monitoring systems, and regular stakeholder dialogue.⁴ These recommendations acknowledge that addressing hunger requires more than the sum of individual disciplinary contributions. This reflects a need for systemic approaches that combine rigorous disciplinary and interdisciplinary research with effective approaches to research-policy linkages and social learning.

Just as Brazil's success in reducing hunger required a coordinated suite of interventions that declared hunger socially unacceptable while simultaneously implementing practical solutions, South Africa's challenge requires a similar multi-faceted approach. Hunger and social injustice can only be effectively challenged through combinations of interventions that address both material conditions and social perceptions, including legal frameworks that enforce the right to food; economic measures that ensure adequate social grants; public health initiatives that monitor and address nutritional outcomes; educational programmes that challenge accepted narratives about hunger; and social justice frameworks that address historical inequities.

Conclusion

The 2024 International Social Justice Conference and Summit demonstrated that addressing hunger requires more than the sum of individual disciplinary contributions. The evidence presented suggests that effective solutions emerge from the synthesis of multiple perspectives and approaches. This interdisciplinary imperative is not merely theoretical but practical and urgent. The Conference's resolution, which will inform the

2025 United Nations World Summit for Social Development, reflects this understanding by calling for integrated approaches to food security that combine sustainable agriculture, social protection and economic development within a comprehensive framework of social justice.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks is directed to Desmond Thompson who directed me to various media releases he prepared for the Summit and Conference on behalf of Stellenbosch University, and to Professor Thuli Madonsela for inviting me to attend and speak at the Conference.

Declarations

I have no competing interests to declare. I have no AI or LLM use to declare.

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